

Who owns the student voice? A study of students' perceptions of student voice in higher education

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Introduction

As Student Fellows studying at the University of Winchester, we are attracted to the concept of students working with staff as 'co-creators' (Bovill *et al*, 2011; Campbell *et al*, 2009). This theory of student-staff partnership is at the heart of and developed by the Student Fellows Scheme (SFS), directed by the University in conjunction with Winchester Student Union. This provides an effective working partnership to liberate both the academic and the student to research a mutually-intriguing aspect of the Winchester student experience.

Empowered by the opportunities that arose from the SFS, this project intended to:

- evaluate students' perceptions of student voice at the University of Winchester;
- assess and remove boundaries to engaging with student voice activities;
- establish who owns the student voice: students or staff?

This project has been developed and progressed in a student-staff partnership encompassing two students (from separate faculties and cohorts) and two members of staff. The initial proposal was suggested by staff supervisors, but was advanced by the Student Fellows in order to capture the true essence of student voice. The ethos of both the project and partnership was to create a positive influence in order to facilitate change - by the students, for the students.

This investigation into student voice incorporated a mixed-method approach to appreciate and include a wide range of student experiences of student voice. The inspiration for research was initially provided by preceding focus groups, which developed a flexible structure for the project, tailored to students' pre-existing perceptions. The findings from this study will guide recommendations to be made to the University of Winchester and Winchester Student Union, in order to promote engagement with student voice activities.

Literature Review

Student voice promotes discussion and reflection, based on the students' experiences that should lead first and foremost to action that benefits the student population (Fielding, 2004). However, student voice should not be viewed as an activity that 'ticks a box' on the institutional engagement policy (Corso and Quaglio, 2014): it has the potential to be an instrument for positive change.

In the higher education (HE) community, students are increasingly labelled as consumers of a product for which they have paid (Williams, 2010). It would therefore appear that it is in institutions' best interests to place their students' experiences at the forefront of their priorities. This is echoed in the White Paper of 2011, which states that, under coalition reforms, HE establishments should make improving student experience their core goal (BIS, 2011).

Asmar (1999) suggests that student feedback about teaching and learning is lacking: more often than not, discussions between staff and students debate the curriculum content. BERA's 2013 report on personalisation and student voice likewise makes the point that many establishments operate student councils and student engagement on an institutional level, but rarely create opportunities for students to work with staff to develop pedagogy. However, Barnes *et al* (2010) explore case studies of staff-student discussions and partnerships with the aim of curriculum development, showcasing emerging practice around the country.

Despite the importance of keeping students central to the system (BIS, 2011), student voice remains an underdeveloped area of research in HE, with Trowler (2010), BERA (2013) and Kandiko and Mawer (2013) concluding that the concept needs further development. This provided the grounds for this research and, through participating in the SFS, student voice is activated to encourage others to engage their voice. As Seale (2009:3) suggests, research in student voice in higher education is in 'stark contrast' to research in schools and colleges.

Ethics

This project underwent scrutiny by the University of Winchester to ascertain sound ethical procedures. All participants had every aspect of the research made clear to them before giving their consent to take part by signing a consent form (UoW, 2014). Participants cannot be traced or identified through the results of the research and remain anonymous throughout (BERA, 2011; UoW, 2014). Data was kept in password-protected and locked files, to which only the researchers had access, and will be deleted securely when necessary. All participants were made aware of their right to withdraw at any time before, during or after the research (Alderson, 2004).

Methodology

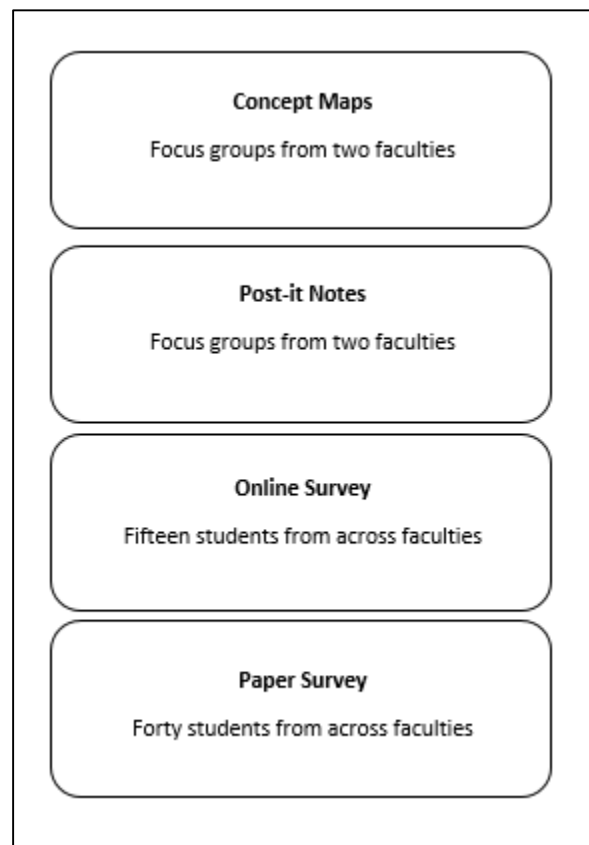


Figure 1. Flow diagram to show the methods used in this research (chronological order).

Mixed Methods

Using mixed methods in research has the potential to aid the understanding of complex social experiences (Mason, 2006). In this project, various research methods and data extrapolation techniques, including focus groups using post-it notes and both online and paper surveys, were utilised in order to gain a broad collection of students' views, which contributed to a depth of understanding that otherwise would not have been achieved (Johnson *et al*, 2007).

Collating qualitative data can lead to 'discovery-orientated' research to explore themes and perceptions (Greig and Taylor, 1999:47). Exploring by flexible lines of questioning the personal experiences of invited students proved advantageous in pursuing particular issues of interest.

In response to themes drawn from post-it notes and discussions, an online survey and concluding paper survey were conducted across a range of students and faculties. The resulting quantitative data confirmed and validated what students had previously shared about their experiences. Thus, a qualitative-quantitative, mixed-method approach achieved a holistic view of the situation (Benz and Newman, 1998).

Focus Groups

To establish a starting point for further research, three student focus group sessions using post-it notes were organised, the course leaders of Sociology and Primary Education having granted access to the groups selected. The first sample (A) consisted of twenty-four Sociology students, the second (B) of twenty-one Primary Education students and the third (C) of seventeen Primary Education students. During the sessions, the students were given a post-it note on which to write what came to mind when asked what the student voice meant to them. This qualitative data collection method proved to be a quick and effective way of capturing the students' personal perceptions and its inclusion here was inspired by its regular use by teachers and market researchers for feedback purposes. Once completed, the post-it notes enabled concise research collection and a coding of the research themes. Mauer and Proctor (2011) note that the final collected groups of similar post-it notes represent more concisely the themes (and thus goals) for the next step in the research project.

Online survey

Following completion of the focus group sessions, an online survey, aiming to reach the wider population of the university, was conducted to acquire a deeper understanding of the student voice. Choice of this method was influenced by Perkins' (2004) suggestions of the benefits of the web-based survey, which included the ability to access larger samples, the reduced cost and the direct transmission of data. These advantages positively influenced the process of analysing the data, as an online survey such as Survey Monkey, the one used, creates figures and graphs automatically; it was advertised and administered via the university intranet and on social media. Various questions were created to investigate contrasting areas of the student voice, challenging our research questions directly. This method, despite the perceived advantages of online surveys, received only fifteen respondents, only a minute proportion of the total University of Winchester population, estimated at around 6,500 students.

Concluding paper survey

The final step in the research project was to create a concluding survey, influenced by the previously-collected data. The aim was to generate a survey that could encompass quantitative data, truly to direct the project in a mixed-method approach. In order to create quantitative data that would then serve to reflect (Weathington *et al*, 2010) or even challenge the data already presented, the survey included seven closed questions. To avoid the dilemma that Mitchell and Jolley (2013) report *self*-administered questionnaires deliver, the survey was conducted as an investigator-administered questionnaire (in which the participant completes the survey in the presence of the researcher) at varying locations on the University of Winchester campus and through the convenience sampling method. Convenience sampling proved to be an appropriate technique to find the most readily available population (McCormack and Hill, 1997) of both actively engaged students and those less likely to use their student voice. The use of a concluding survey in traditional face-to-face paper-based form did serve to advance this research project. As Wright and Marsden (2010) argue, the use of mixed-mode surveys is a popular and effective approach to combat declining response rates, a predicament often experienced by researchers. Thus the combination of online and paper-based surveys did achieve a research perspective

representative of the University of Winchester student body, the concluding paper one achieving a sample size of forty.

Results

Focus Groups

Following the focus group activity, sixty-two post-it notes were received and coded to analyse the main themes and perceptions across the student population. Initially, the post-it notes were coded into three categories, labelling them as making positive, negative or neutral comments about the student voice at the university. 50% of the post-it notes responded with a positive remark, 35.5% included a negative statement and 14.5% simply replied with a neutral comment. This demonstrates a division between the students' perceptions, illustrating that the student voice may be experienced differently among a varied student population. Multiple themes were brought to the attention of the researchers, one of which was that students did not feel their voice was heard. Some of the comments expressing this were:

- 'Personally I am not heard'
- 'University doesn't pay much attention to what students have to say'
- 'Opinions are not listening to within the faculty'
- 'Student voice is a myth'

A second recurring theme was that the students were not aware of the opportunities available to activate their student voice or that they did not think the opportunities were available:

- 'Never heard of or participated'
- 'We're allowed an opinion?'
- 'We don't get a choice to speak; the lectures/staff always win'
- 'I don't see much student voice'

A third theme expressed in the post-it notes was that students did not feel changes were made in response to the student voice:

- 'Student voice is important at Winchester... but changes are not always made'
- 'Noticing changes would be good'

Despite the repeated negative themes, a final theme expressed in the post-it notes was that students felt the student voice is important and that the university encouraged it:

- 'Putting students first'
- 'The SU executive team really care about student voice and fight for our voice to be heard'
- 'A fair platform to speak'
- 'The StARs (Student Academic Representatives) work well'

Online survey

The online survey was launched in response to the qualitative data gained from the previous research. It was advertised both on the university intranet, which all students have access to, and on social media. This survey was available for three weeks, during which fifteen students from across the university responded. The majority of the participants studied Primary Education, but other programmes of study included American Studies, History, Law and Creative Writing. This reflects the population of the university, which boasts a respectable reputation for initial teacher training. A cross-section of year groups was included. The survey results prompted interesting contrasts between the visibility of student voice in compulsory and higher education.

Did you take, or have you taken, part in any student voice representative opportunities whilst at university?

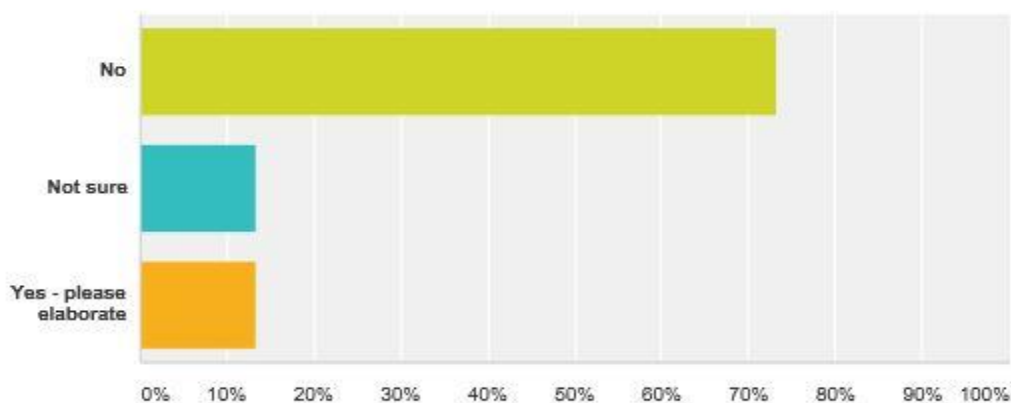


Figure 2. Percentage of students taking part in student voice representative opportunities in higher education.

Whilst at school did you take part in any student voice representative opportunities?

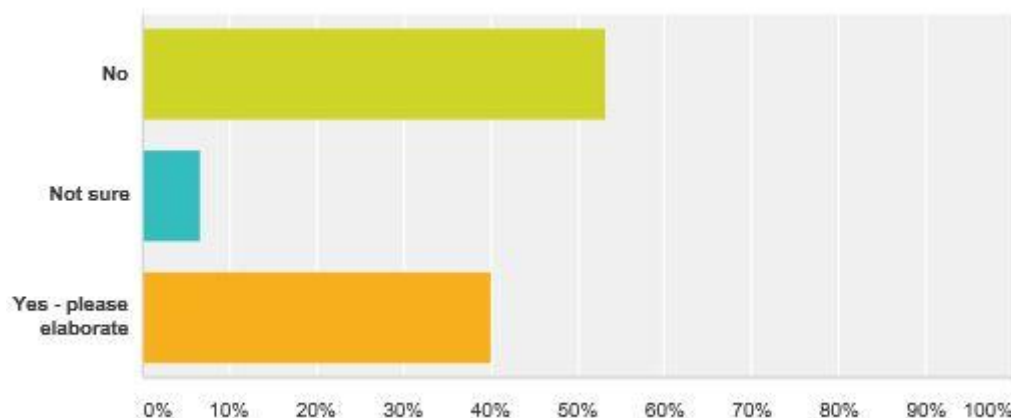


Figure 3. Percentage of students taking part in student voice representative opportunities in primary and secondary education.

Figures 2 and 3 show that the number of students taking part in student voice activities diminishes sharply between compulsory and optional education. 13% of participants have taken part in such opportunities in higher education, compared with 40% of the same participants in primary and secondary schools. This decline was attributed by the students to a number of factors, such as a lack of time and absence of opportunities.

When prompted to elaborate why they took part in activities, the students presented a number of reasons, such as being chosen to take part by a member of staff and already holding a position of responsibility.

Please indicate your response to the following statements.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not sure	Total
Student Voice is for everyone, regardless of course, year, popularity or academic grades.	46.67% 7	53.33% 8	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	15
Is it important that students and lecturers work together in partnership to improve things.	60.00% 9	33.33% 5	6.67% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	15
Is it important that students' opinions are listened to.	80.00% 12	20.00% 3	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	15
The opinions of students at the University of Winchester are listened to.	0.00% 0	66.67% 10	13.33% 2	6.67% 1	6.67% 1	6.67% 1	15
The opinions of students at the University of Winchester are acted upon.	0.00% 0	53.33% 8	26.67% 4	6.67% 1	6.67% 1	6.67% 1	15
Student voice is more visible in schools than it is Higher Education.	13.33% 2	20.00% 3	33.33% 5	20.00% 3	0.00% 0	13.33% 2	15
Student voice is more important in schools than it is Higher Education.	6.67% 1	6.67% 1	46.67% 7	26.67% 4	0.00% 0	13.33% 2	15
If I took part in student voice opportunities I would feel more engaged with my learning.	6.67% 1	20.00% 3	33.33% 5	33.33% 5	0.00% 0	6.67% 1	15

Figure 4. Levels of agreement to statements about student voice at the University of Winchester.

100% of students surveyed agreed that student voice is not an opportunity solely for a chosen few, as Figure 4 demonstrates. The whole group of participants also approved the statement that students' opinions are important and should be listened to, indicating that there is an awareness of the purpose of student voice.

The University of Winchester offers a wide range of student voice opportunities, including StARs (academic representatives), Student Revalidators (working with staff to validate courses), Student Led Teaching Awards (SLTAs) and Student Fellows (Winchester Student Union, undated).

	Yes, confidently	Yes, but not confidently	No, but I have heard of it	No, I have never heard of it
StARs	13%	47%	33%	7%
Student Revalidators	-	7%	7%	87%
SLTAs	13%	40%	47%	-
Student Fellows	13%	13%	60%	14%

Figure 5. Do students understand the range of activities on offer to them?

However, Figure 5 demonstrates students' lack of knowledge about these opportunities, which may go some way to explain the decline in participation. Many of the participants who report some or little knowledge attributed this to having friends who have taken part, rather than from noting advertising around the university. Even opportunities such as StARs had some students reporting no knowledge at all. This is surprising, as every course has at least one representative from each cohort in an attempt to represent the entire population fairly. Also, with the research conducted by Student Fellows, which was explained to the students before giving consent to participate, it is interesting that 14% still claim no knowledge of the scheme.

Campbell (2001) suggests the students would be more likely to engage with student voice activities if there were personal incentives offered, such as refreshments or reimbursement for time. However, the surveyed students indicated that they would take part to improve their course for themselves and others (80%) or to improve the student experience as a whole (67%). Less than 40% demonstrated an interest in material or monetary gains.

Concluding paper survey

The final element of the research project, the concluding paper survey, provided some quantitative data that complemented the themes already presented in the previous research methods. Results from the questions were in some circumstances divided, with no clear consensus. This arguably suggests that the student experience of the student voice at the University of Winchester differs for students (see Figure 6). A clear consensus emerged, however, when asked if they thought it important for the university to listen to the student voice. Every student completing the survey recognised the importance of the student voice and, likewise, 82.5% of the sample said that the university needs to make more changes in response to the student voice. Although the concluding survey data presents contradictory themes, they highlight the common perspective that the student voice is important and that the University of Winchester should respond to it and make more changes.

	YES	NO
Do you think you have the opportunity to voice your opinions as a student at the University of Winchester?	92.5%	7.5%
Do you think your student voice is heard at the University of Winchester?	60%	40%
Have you seen any changes occur because of the student voice at the University of Winchester?	55%	45%
Do you think it is important for the University to listen to the student voice?	100%	0%
Do you think the University of Winchester does enough to give students a voice?	52.5%	47.5%
Does the University need to make more changes in response to the student voice?	82.5%	17.5%

Figure 6. Results from the concluding paper survey

Discussion and Recommendations

Who owns the student voice?

Despite the suggestion that the intention of the student voice is to benefit the entire student population (Fielding, 2004), the results from the research project highlight that the student voice is not inclusive. This resonates with the title, questioning who really owns the student voice, as it appears to be a luxury for only the minority of the student population. Our evidence suggests that a proportion of the students perceives the student voice to be exclusive, with some students describing the student voice as 'a myth'. Results from the concluding survey demonstrate that 40% of student respondents do not feel their voice is heard, representing a proportion of the student body that does not receive the benefits of the student voice. However, this is not the majority of students, and our survey suggests that 92.5% of the sample believe they have the opportunity to voice their opinions. However, the university fails to create an inclusive student voice. This is viewed as an obstacle. Rudduck and Fielding (2006) note that the student voice is not automatically inclusive, as engaging in it is a decision made by the student. They argue that, to engage in the student voice, the student has to have a level of engagement, confidence and sanctioned language, which they suggest most students lack. This is not a problem exclusive to the University of Winchester, as institutions around the country struggle to include students unwilling to engage. Attendance at the Jisc Change Agents Network Conference (Birmingham, April 2015) enabled the authors to discover that HE institutions are battling to provide an active student voice to those less engaged students. We recommend that this is something that the University of Winchester should attempt to combat, as those students not included are being failed by the current student voice opportunities. Silva (2001:98) suggests that education institutions need to assess if their 'invitation to participate looks unfamiliar, unattractive, or out of reach to many students', which reaffirms **our recommendation that HE institutions need to take the initiative and attempt to make their student voice more inclusive.** It is worth noting, however, that there will always be students who, for whatever reason, do not

want to take part in student voice activities. It is important to recognise this: no-one should be forced into participation. As our surveys demonstrated, the lack of time for students was a large factor in non-participation. This may not be attributed to laziness or lack of interest, but to commitments outside of the university. As frustrating as it can be to lack participants in a focus group or activity (as we discovered during this research!), it must be understood that there is life outside the university.

Closing the feedback loop

Another alarming aspect of the Winchester student voice highlighted by our research is that the students often are not aware of the opportunities available to activate their voice; nor do they become aware of any changes made in response. During the post-it note focus group sessions, many of the participants expressed their concern about what happened to changes recommended by the student voice: to quote one student in focus group B, 'changes are not always made'. Results from the online survey also demonstrate that the students were not aware of the opportunities or the roles inside the university. The theme was confirmed by our concluding survey, as 45% of the responding students had not seen changes occur because of the student voice and 82.5% thought that the university needs to make more changes in response to the student voice. This demonstrates student scepticism about the changes triggered by the student voice and highlights the need for improved communication between the university and the students' union and the students. **We suggest that more time needs to be devoted to closing the feedback loop, to engage students with changes and with student voice opportunities.**

Watson (2003) notes that, if students do not see the action taken in response to their feedback or voice, they become sceptical and as a result are less likely to get involved. Likewise, Symons (2009) argues it is just as important to show students their voice is being listened to as it is to collect the student feedback to articulate the student voice. As a result, steps need to be taken by the university to close the feedback loop, which Scott (2000) describes as the final and critical step of creating the student voice. It could be considered that current modes of communication and attempts at closing the feedback loop are failing, despite the university's using posters, intranet ads and even tv screens placed around campus to display notes about changes made in response to the student voice. In order to close the feedback loop and make the student voice more compelling and efficient, changes need to be made. One method proposed by academics to close the feedback loop is the use of a forum, which Symons (2009) reports can be used to discuss future strategies for change, together with a published written response, distributed to students and faculties, to announce changes made. However, this method is not unique and arguably not far from what the university already does. Bohms (2011) suggests instead that using innovative new technologies is a more effective way to improve turn-around time and to close the feedback loop, and advocates using online devices to capture student feedback and highlight changes. To apply this to the University of Winchester context, there is an app which is already in use. This has the potential to be a powerful tool if it were to incorporate the student voice by, for example, alerting the students of changes or asking them to provide instant feedback.

Working in student-staff partnerships

This particular partnership was created as a result of student and staff participation in the Student Fellow Scheme at the University of Winchester.

“The [student] experience will be most enriching when it is based on a partnership between staff and students” (BIS, 2011:33). Working on this research project established a beneficial professional relationship between staff and students, allowing the staff insights into the student perspective and vice versa. Each party brought different skills and attributes which were used conjunctively to provide a more holistic view of the topic. This also increased the students’ academic understanding, over and above that gained from the student voice experience itself.

BERA (2013) noted that some students may feel that they are at the bottom of an academic hierarchy, where staff are subconsciously ‘in charge’. This was not the case in this partnership. The student researchers took responsibility for the change they wanted to see at the university and the staff partners acted as mentors and guides, giving advice and questioning decisions throughout, so as to maximise benefits from the findings. The SFS was developed to empower students, by allowing them to work on educational development projects with staff and, in this case, the student-staff partnerships achieved relationship equality and effectively enhanced the students’ research. We found this relationship supportive and useful, as our staff partners were genuinely involved in what we were researching and shared their own interests and experiences with us. **Creating more student-staff partnerships will help to overcome deficiencies in the current student voice and we recommend that HE institutions take those partnerships seriously in order to empower students.**

Conclusion

The University of Winchester, at first glance, is a university offering a host of opportunities for students to engage their voice, particularly with the ground-breaking SFS emerging from the partnership between the university and the student union. However, the students of Winchester perceive the student voice differently and often negatively. Nonetheless, this research indicates where changes could be effectively made in response to these perceptions, so as to accommodate the developing student voice.

The research guiding the project was characterised by low levels of response, undermining how representative the results are, but epitomises how students are often apathetic, especially when the student voice is concerned. This, coinciding with the claim that there is a lack of an effective feedback loop, is creating sceptical students who are less likely to get involved. The University of Winchester needs to assess the current situation in order first to create a more inclusive and inviting student voice and then to generate a more engaged student body. This is particularly important and necessary, not only so that the student voice can improve the institution, but also so that the institution can offer the best opportunities and experiences for its students.

This research project has been special, creating a unique insight into the student voice as the researchers are students themselves, working in an effective student-staff partnership. Peer-level research within the student body has overcome the possible accessibility challenges faced by those with higher authority and has been developed in ways so far

unexplored in student voice literature. The recommendations here were reached by careful consideration of the students' perceptions, rather than by application and evaluation of what academics considered the best measures, and the research therefore really captures the essence of the student voice.

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