



How Might We:

**Engage with Student
Voices?**

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Overview

Student Voices are a core component of the University Partnership. The Partnership epitomises our commitment to working together as a community to co-create an exceptional learning experience at Leeds. Student Voices are core to our over-arching University Strategy, which states:



Students should be equal partners if we want them to become the leaders of tomorrow.



In addition, Student Voices are also central to our Access and Student Support Strategy. For example, as a University, we are committed to ensuring that:



The student voice is embedded in all our evaluative processes across the University.



The heterogeneity and size of our student cohort requires a multi-faceted approach to student voices (note the plural – students are not homogenous, and therefore there is no one student voice). Additional activity might be adopted locally by module leaders and other staff (both academic and professional services) to ensure that students are able to authentically feedback and contribute to all aspects of their University experience.

Student Voices data can be used in a variety of ways. For example, to improve teaching activity, student experience and/or student outcomes; to identify and share best practice; for regulatory purposes; and for benchmarking purposes.

At Leeds our approach includes:

- strong student representation - there are student representatives (reps) at programme and school levels, and students elect Leeds University Union Executive Officers, who work at institutional level. Students are embedded throughout our student education governance structures
- National surveys (National Student Survey, International Student Barometer, JISC Digital Insights, Postgraduate Research Experience Survey)
- Internal Surveys (Programme Survey, Module Evaluations, Belonging)
- innovative methodologies for seeking feedback from underrepresented groups, including Listening Rooms and Reverse Mentoring (explored below)
- informal mechanisms for gathering feedback, such as student Advisory Boards
- formal meetings such as Staff/Student Forums within Schools and Faculties

It is important that student voices activity:

- has purpose and is actionable (and is acted upon institutionally or locally) and
- is followed by closing the feedback loop with students i.e. they see and potentially feel the impact of sharing their voices and experiences with the University.



Student voice

We know that students value being heard, and that the impact of student voices work can be widespread and highly effective. For example, providing discursive student voices activities can offer a useful and cathartic space for students to reflect on their experiences:

“...it was good to do it [Listening Rooms] where we are in terms of being in second year and thinking about our third year because I think it’s quite easy to get swept up in assessments and stuff. And then it’s going to be over before we know it... I feel like I’ll reflect on this a bit later, actually... I feel like it’s quite easy to forget about the bigger picture when you’re in the thick of assessments and stuff like that.”

Listening Rooms participant, 2020-21

“we also had a really fun time. It was just enjoyable, and we all got on, and it made ... it much easier to talk about things that normally, I probably wouldn’t share with people or would feel vulnerable sharing with people that I don’t know ... because of how the project was run, it actually felt cathartic to speak to people who understand how you’re feeling.”

Member of student reverse mentoring co-design team 2022 (LITE project).

Student voices opportunities can also support students to feel more included in University life by giving students the opportunity to interact with and share thoughts and feedback with their peers, as well as members of staff:

“it made me feel sort of better for knowing I’m not the only one in this position or with this background”

Listening rooms participant, 2022

‘There was definitely a feeling of camaraderie between the people that understand what it’s like to feel you’re on the fringe a little bit and not quite one of the main people.’

Member of student reverse mentoring co-design team 2022 (LITE project).

In addition to the importance of student voices work for students, there is evidence that activities such as Listening Rooms can impact institutional strategy:

“The reports from this Listening Rooms research have been taken through the governance process to inform proposals and changes. In some cases, it reinforces the needs for change in areas where there is work going on such as inclusive assessment. It’s been invaluable in adding a qualitative dimension to what can often be a very data-driven discussion”

Louise Banahene, Head of Educational Engagement

Student voices initiatives such as reverse mentoring which also engage staff voices have potential to impact on the practice of staff members when it comes to working with diverse student cohorts:

“I have learned quite a bit. Some concrete things, some less concrete things and also just the thought processes it’s triggered ... the problem with doing [student voices activities] and sticking it all in a report ... is that people when they read something like that can just dismiss it without thinking hard enough how much it applies to them ... It’s when you sit down with someone and they’re talking about what you’re doing I think that you get the advantages”

Staff mentee, School of Law reverse mentoring project 2019-20

“I think [reverse mentoring is] ... really brilliant, I think it’s an incredible learning experience. I found it incredibly thought-provoking and interesting. And I think it really kind of challenged the way that I think about the way I work ... because it was so enjoyable, it was a really nice thing to have every other week, I really looked forward to it ... I think that lots of staff members would benefit from having that chance ...”

Staff mentee, School of Law reverse mentoring project 2019-2

Involving diverse student voices in the co-design of student interventions is particularly powerful and supports in ensuring that student voices initiatives are accessible, inclusive and relevant to other students:

“being under-represented, you often feel like invisible or it’s like there’s no one like you ... the thing that’s really meaningful [about being involved in co-design] ... we can actually make a proper change ... you can do something that could really, really impact someone in future. Could mean that they have such a better experience at university because maybe they’ve had that support they needed ... It could be the difference between like someone dropping out and staying at uni.”

Member of student reverse mentoring co-design team 2022 (LITE project).

“we were doing something, we were taking part in something, we were being listened to ... for somebody like me that when I sort of came to university, felt a little bit invisible that is really quite a big thing to feel like that. You might have a say in how something that gets rolled out, you know, used by many students and staff.”

Member of student reverse mentoring codesign team 2022 (LITE project).

Being involved in student voices initiatives can also support students to build better and more authentic working relationships with staff members through what they may learn about themselves and others in the process:

“one of the most enjoyable aspects of [reverse mentoring] was how we found mutual interests and opinions on things that perhaps we would’ve never expected to owing to our age and cultural gaps. It was refreshing to have a conversation with a person who was genuinely open-minded and willing to appreciate and acknowledge the differences and surprising similarities we shared”

Student mentor, School of Law reverse mentoring project 2019-20

“it’s probably made me feel a little bit less intimidated by [staff] ... I had talked to lecturers and staff relatively alright before but this definitely breaks it down a bit ... I do think it helped me a least bit more comfortable with this whole idea of like lecturers and staff.”

Student mentor, School of Law reverse mentoring project 2019-20

Research undertaken by QAT Student Interns in 2021 suggests that one of the main issues students experience with making their voices heard is a lack of information about how their feedback is used:

“[Students] want to be informed if the issue was taken forward and what steps will be undertaken by the lecturer/school or any other party.”

Similarly, students involved in co-designing diversity and inclusion initiatives in the University have reflected on the importance of seeing impact:

“it’s great that [this project] would actually make a change because I know that in lots of research where they want our opinions, they’re not always actually put into action, but I can see with this one that what we say is actually making a difference”

Member of student reverse mentoring co-design team 2022 (LITE project).

This is why feeding back to students and ensuring they see the impact of getting involved in opportunities to share their experiences is vital. Student voices work must not just be done for the sake of it but should have clear aims, measurable outputs and longer-term agendas.

It’s also important that we have a diverse array of student voices mechanisms at different levels institutionally to ensure that we make such opportunities as accessible and authentic as possible to as large a section of our student body as we possibly can.

There are various student voice mechanisms available such as completing things like NSS surveys and giving module feedback. For some it may involve be getting involved in innovative projects like some of those mentioned in this report. For others, it may involve taking on a rep or ambassador role within their School or the University such as becoming an Equality Diversity and Inclusion ambassador or a course or programme level rep. There is no one student voices mechanism that will work for everyone.



Reverse mentoring

Reverse mentoring is a particularly useful intervention when exploring diversity, inclusion and wellbeing related topics, experiences or challenges with students. In our higher education context, it involves students being put into the shoes of mentor and mentoring members of staff (from support colleagues, to tutors, to senior leaders) on their lived experiences as students at our University. Reverse mentoring has been used since 2019 at the University of Leeds to support development of authentic and impactful staff/student relationships. For example, there have been specific targeted reverse mentoring projects where international students mentored members of staff on their lived experiences (School of Law pilot) and broader projects, where students who identify as under-represented mentor members of staff who have the role of academic personal tutor or a senior leadership role (current LITE project; Educational Engagement project). Reverse mentoring work at Leeds has also been co-designed with students (current LITE project).

Reverse mentoring is very versatile and can potentially be useful in any relationship where there is a traditional power dynamic or hierarchy and there is a desire for the person who typically has the least power or influence to be heard more in the relationship and contribute to its development. It can support in ensuring staff are cognisant of current student experiences and understanding how this can inform/improve staff practice. It can also support students to feel valued, heard and empowered through regular and structured opportunities to share, influence and impact others based on their expert knowledge of their own lived experiences.

Listening Rooms

This method asks pairs of students – usually course mates or friends – to have a 1:1 recorded conversation using topic prompts. For the original project at Sheffield Hallam ([Heron, 2019](#)), the topic prompts were around ‘Becoming, Belonging, Confidence, Happiness, Journey, and Success’ and it was rolled out across the institution as a key tool for student voice. In November 2020, the method won The Guardian University Award for Student Experience.

On the day a researcher briefs and debriefs participants but is not present during the discussion. The method gives us the opportunity to hear genuine student voices and offers privileged access to conversations that we wouldn’t otherwise be privy to. The use of topics instead of interview style questions is critical, as it allows participants to lead the conversation, focusing on areas that are important to them rather than on what researchers assume is important.

Since January 2020, the method has been used across a broad range of projects at the University of Leeds, including with under-represented students exploring barriers to student success.

Advisory Boards

Student Advisory Boards are a more informal mechanism for capturing student voices. Boards bring together a small group of students who offer sustained input into decision making, often in relation to a specific area or project. They are particularly valuable as a tool to amplify the voices of students from specific communities or equality groups, or as a way to ensure that student expertise is informing organisational decisions outside of the standard structures of meetings and representation. Boards are usually recruited for and supported administratively by staff members, but ideally will be chaired by a student. This may be used in addition to or as an alternative to staff/student forums, noted above, typically chaired by students and led by student reps from within a School or Faculty to report student experiences back to School or Faculty leadership teams to be acted upon. Similarly, such boards may be within Schools or Faculties or may be linked to particular student identities in the University more broadly, such as the Mature Students’ Advisory Board.

Outside of a board structure, there are many spaces in which student voices and input on key topics may be valuable and roles can be created for this. For example, in the School of Law, six students hold the paid role of ‘Student Welcome Induction and Transitions Assistant’ and have supported the School in developing and delivering its welcome, induction and transition activity to students more broadly.

Points to note

It's important that students time is valued and respected when it comes to their involvement in student voices initiatives, noting in particular that initiatives such as reverse mentoring and listening rooms can trigger quite emotive and personal discussions. The standard recommended by the Leeds Institute for Teaching Excellence is a £10 voucher per hour of student time committed although some groups provide more e.g., the Plus Programme offer students a £10 voucher per 30 mins of their time given to student voices work. It is also good practice to provide students with refreshments if you are asking them to take part in something in person for an hour or more. If students are being asked to do work which goes beyond being a research participant or given their feedback or opinions, for example, designing sessions or workshops for delivery to other students, it may be more appropriate for them to be recruited to a job role and paid in accordance with University pay scales. Remember if your student voices work may involve sensitive or emotive topics, you should also signpost students to support should they need for example from student support officers in their Schools or from the Leeds University Union (LUU) team.

You might also consider how you can embed student voices in your work at the earliest stage possible for example, through hiring students as research assistants or working with students as partners in a co-design or co-creation team to ensure project ideas speak to the priorities of a diverse range of students.

If you are planning to engage with student voices work and gather data from students, please make sure you consult with your Faculty ethics committee and complete an ethical review form in good time, as necessary.





How to support staff development on this area

It takes time to build up expertise in student voices work and there is an important benefit to trying things out first e.g., doing a pilot project, to see what works and what doesn't. For colleagues who are interested in pedagogical research, this is particularly valuable as it allows you to build up an evidence base which may support future, larger scale work e.g., applying for a LITE fellowship or for external funding to support a pedagogic research idea. Joining and engaging with the LITE and TIPS communities is a great way to become engaged with student voices work going on across our campus, as well as the range of external higher education organisations and societies outside of the University such as Advance HE and RAISE.

How to integrate a technology into your practice

If you want to encourage students to reflect meaningfully when taking part in student voices initiatives, PebblePad can be a very useful tool. This has been used by colleagues for student and staff reverse mentoring reflections and also for co-design work with students in the context of reverse mentoring. Many Schools are also using PebblePad for the purposes of academic personal tutoring so also using it in student voices work is another way to encourage students to engage with the technology and become more comfortable with it. Like an online journal, PebblePad can be used to prompt students to think about how they experienced a particular intervention or activity and how it made them feel, using basic reflective cycle questions (e.g. Gibbs). This private space for individual reflection can often be more freeing and accessible for students versus, for example, being interviewed one-to-one by a staff member or researcher.

Anonymous Padlets can also be a great way to gather student voices and feedback on an ad hoc basis e.g. part way through a project or module or to gather feedback on an intervention that doesn't have its own University or modular level feedback mechanism such as dissertation supervision. Ad hoc surveys using technology like Microsoft Forms can also be helpful ways to gather more informal student feedback, for example, on experiences of welcome, induction and transition activities or academic personal tutoring. For those leading modules, informal mid-module evaluations can be a useful means to gather student feedback. Guidance, including a template MS Forms, is available on the mid module evaluation page.

However, it's important to bear in mind how many surveys students are being asked to complete and what students get out of providing their feedback. Incentives such as vouchers can be beneficial but remember the above point too about closing the feedback loop and not just collecting student voices data for the sake of it, even if you are giving vouchers or other incentives. You should also be aware of what surveys your students are already doing. For example, the University invites all students to evaluate their modules at the end of delivery. Module leaders receive access to these results and are also required to write a response to students called the 'Student Report' (in most schools this is done using the software Explorance Blue). Consequently, it would not be appropriate or helpful to circulate a MS Forms survey asking similar questions at the end of module periods.

References

[The Leeds Partnership and Student Voice](#)

[LUU Representation](#)

[Guidance on responding to student feedback](#)

[Listening Rooms Toolkit](#)

[LITE project \(reverse mentoring\)](#)

[Reverse mentoring paper \(School of Law project\)](#)

[Student co-design creative publication \(stemming from reverse mentoring LITE project\) \(download PDF and scroll to p.145\)](#)

['Evaluate to improve: useful approaches to student evaluation'](#)

[Quality Assurance Association Advice and Guidance on Student Engagement](#)

[QAA Scotland: Responding to Student Voice](#)

[PebblePad case studies at the University of Leeds](#)

