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Student engagement and voice in higher education: students' perceptions

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Abstract

There has been intense debate about student engagement and student voice in Higher Education Institutions in the past decade or so. Most of the discussion has been theoretical or based on a cause-and-effect research design. With the aim of gathering student perspectives on student voice and its related mechanisms, this study collected the voice of 13 students, the majority of whom were international students, from one UK university. Participants include undergraduate (n=1), postgraduate taught (n=7), and PhD (n=5) students who voluntarily agreed to have an online interview with the researcher, a PhD intern of the Student Voice team. Findings indicate that participants have an overall positive and supportive view of student voice mechanisms at this institution, although some understandings are not adequate or accurate. Participants' attitudes towards some commonly used communication channels indicate that they prioritise an interactive and dynamic tool to initiate dialogue with the university. Suggestions are put forward for managerial strategies for a sustainable and inclusive student voice mechanism.

Keywords: student engagement; student voice; higher education; university-student dialogue.

Introduction

For more than a decade, focus on student engagement has been ubiquitous in higher education research, practice, and policy making (Gourlay, 2017; Green, 2019), regarded as directly related to student attendance and retention rates at Higher Education

Institutions (Macfarlane and Tomlinson, 2017). This marketised perspective of student engagement led to the contentious analogy between student and customer (Cuthbert, 2010). Related to this customer rhetoric, neoliberal discourse of student engagement (Zepke, 2015) has been critiqued by some scholars as too narrow and limiting a perspective. In response, broader interpretations of the term arose from more eclectic ideologies, for example, the social and psychological view (Lawson and Lawson, 2013) and the holistic view which highlight, but are not restricted to, student motivation and expectations (Kahu, 2013). Frequently intertwined with student engagement, student voice is another buzzword related to student agency, autonomy, and the university-student partnership (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012; Zepke, 2018). To enable student voice to be heard, four elements are required: space, voice, audience, and influence (Lundy, 2007). In this process, distribution of information is of central importance, covering aspects such as timeliness and means of communication (Bols, 2012; Isaeva et al., 2020). In other words, dialogic rather than one-way communication, with the student being spoken *with* rather than for, could be regarded as the key element of student voice initiatives (Fielding, 2004b; Hall, 2017; Pearce and Wood, 2019). This paper focuses on students' perspectives on student voice and the relevant mechanisms of an Education School in the UK. Based on the perceptions, we established the argument that to accommodate diversity in students' preferences and expectations, Higher Education Institutions need to provide multiple, interactive, and dialogic channels to ensure the student voice is heard and responded to.

Literature review

Relevant literature concerning student engagement and student voice highlights the importance of an agentic and dialogic approach to engagement, which necessitates a dynamic two-way communication between students and the institution. Lundy's (2007) four elements of student voice – space, voice, audience, and influence – serve as the theoretical framework for the current research design.

Student engagement

Student engagement is a 'nebulous and contentious' term which is open to multiple interpretations (Macfarlane and Tomlinson, 2017, p.7). A narrow interpretation of the term is that student involvement in academic activities and their learning outcomes is indicative

of an education institution's teaching quality. This further impacts student enrolment and retention rates at the institution (Krause and Coates, 2008; Xerri, Radford and Shacklock, 2018). A broader understanding, as the widely cited definition states, is that student engagement is 'the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities' (Kuh, 2009, p.683). This definition emphasises both students' and the institution's contribution to the co-construction of student experience, development, and success (Wolf-Wendel, Ward and Kinzie, 2009; Trowler, 2010). However, the prevalent use of the term, especially for the purpose of institutional reputation building and marketisation, leaves student engagement critiqued as reflective or representative of neoliberal discourse, espousing performativity and accountability in the name of assuring education quality (Zepke, 2015; 2018). In a more inclusive and comprehensive manner, Kahu (2013) summarised different interpretations of student engagement under four categories: the behavioural, psychological, socio-cultural, and holistic perspectives. These four perspectives encompass the macro level (socio-political and cultural contexts), the meso level (institutional policy making and practice), and the micro level (students' psychological and behavioural dimensions). The holistic perspective corroborates Zepke's (2018) advocacy of a 'life-wide and lifelong understanding' of student engagement, which approaches the concept from the students' standpoint with a wider vision (p.435). More specifically, students' active and consistent engagement could enhance their learning motivation, sense of belonging, and confidence in the university-student partnership (Isaeva et al., 2020). Furthermore, student engagement is closely related to students' self-efficacy, emotions, belonging and well-being, all of which influence student development holistically and individually (Kahu and Nelson, 2018).

Student voice

The two concepts, student engagement and student voice, are inextricably intertwined, as demonstrated by Elassy's (2013) interpretation of student engagement: 'the roles that students should take and the power that they have to obtain to feel that their voice is heard' (p.165). Compared with student engagement, student voice places more emphasis on student agency, highlighting the active roles they could play in governance and policy-related decision making (Zepke, 2018), as well as active citizenship building (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012). Nevertheless, the 'managerialist rhetoric' places student feedback within an existing system which hears what is meaningful to the way the 'machine' currently runs

but without the opportunity for transformational change (Young and Jerome, 2020). Such rhetoric constrains students from making a full and active commitment and renders them more likely to conform to, and accommodate, the dominant discourse (Bragg, 2007; Wisby, 2011). Essentially and conceptually, student voice as an 'agentic approach to engagement' should go beyond managerial purposes and instrumental objectives (e.g., passing courses and gaining employment) (Zepke, 2018, p.442). One way to involve students as people rather than 'bearers of results and measurable outcomes' is by promoting student-initiated dialogue with the institution (Fielding, 2004a, p.210).

As previously mentioned, Lundy's (2007) four elements of student voice are:

- Space: students have the opportunity to express their views.
- Voice: students are facilitated to express their views.
- Audience: students' opinions are listened to.
- Influence: students' views are responded to and acted on.

This means, to enable student voice to be heard and function, the following questions need to be answered: where could students express their voice? What assistance is available? Who is the listener? How could student voice effect change?

Student-university dialogue

To make student voice a bi-directional dialogue rather than a one-way system, student-initiated talk is essential (Hall, 2017). In other words, student voice initiatives should be dialogic (Pearce and Wood, 2019). In the realm of higher education, the student-university dialogue engages students as 'discussants rather than recipients' (Fielding, 2004a, p.201), making space for what students think is important, rather than merely according to an institution's agenda (Okupe and Medland, 2019). Meanwhile, the notion of 'speaking *with* rather than for' underlines the importance of having students as co-researchers who share reciprocal responsibilities with the university to construct a democratic and transformative environment (Fielding, 2004b, emphasis in original). The alacrity with which the institution provides a response to student feedback impacts the trust the students place in the feedback system (Li and De Luca, 2014). However, maintaining a student-staff dialogue is not as simple as engaging and listening to students. There needs to be engagement from

staff who need to understand the purpose and uses of student voice. For this, staff concerns about performativity and accountability may need to be addressed.

Student Voice in the form of National Surveys is powerful as it allows comparison between universities and ratings in league tables (Shah, Cheng and Fitzgerald, 2017). Due to marketisation, students have the power. Their voice can bring in consumers or drive them away. Staff can feel that they are always subject to observation and scrutiny, to the extent, as Okupe and Medland (2019) claim, that lecturers can perform for students, giving them what they want to get a good 'score' rather than doing what is pedagogically most appropriate for the learning outcomes.

Recent studies concerning student engagement and student voice have mostly been based on a 'simplistic cause and effect research design' (Macfarlane and Tomlinson, 2017, p.9), or a qualitative design which seeks patterns from the data, which may lead to a situation in which the minority voice is ignored or subject to the 'big picture' (Canning, 2017). A recent qualitative interview study addressed the topic of building university-student partnership through initiating interactive dialogues (Isaeva et al., 2020). This study collected data from 27 students at an Estonian university about their views on the university-student dialogue. Findings indicate that students demonstrate an overall positive attitude towards this type of dialogue while many issues remain to be clarified and re-examined to fully engage students in this mechanism. Although this study foregrounds students' perspectives, it is still quality-assurance-oriented, basically serving the purpose of improving the quality and competitiveness of the institution, rather than asking 'if the students could define it, what might student voice look like, and why?' (Hall, 2017, p.181). One aim of the current study is to answer this question, along with other questions concerning students' attitudes and expectations of student voice mechanisms.

Methodology

Research questions

In order to interpret and approach the concept of student voice from students' perspectives, this study explores 13 university students' thoughts and perceptions, including one undergraduate (UG) student, seven postgraduate taught (PGT) students, and five PhD students. The interview questions centred on student voice and the existing

or desirable channels to make student voice heard and responded to. The definition of student voice was deliberately left open so as not to exclude any concepts of student voice which participants might have. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do students in this UK university perceive student voice?
2. What are university students' attitudes towards the existing student voice mechanisms?
3. What suggestions do students have regarding making student voice better heard and responded to?

Research context

This study was carried out in a Russell Group university in which listening and responding to the student voice plays an important part in university policy. As part of the scheme of the university's Strategy 2030 and consistent with QAA expectations, this policy reinforces the university's commitment to working in partnership with students to ensure 'students are central to governance and decision making', 'quality assurance and enhancement', and that students have opportunities to 'become active participants in their learning' and in the 'collaboration between students and staff' (Student Voice Policy). In this university-wide policy, dialogue about teaching, learning, and wider student experience is highlighted and regarded as integral to the quality assurance of the institution. Mechanisms available to facilitate this dialogue include:

- Course feedback: all courses offer at least two opportunities for students to provide feedback.
- Student–Staff Liaison Committee: programme representatives work in partnership with staff to improve the quality of the student experience.
- Student panel: participation enables students to provide feedback on specific issues and to shape service design and delivery.
- 'Have Your Say' mailbox: students may post comments about specific issues and summaries of comments are published on the university website. In addition, live student voice sessions are held by the School throughout the year to enable students to express their voice and receive an immediate response.

This study's researcher is a PhD student and an intern in the Student Voice team in the university's Education School. Three months' working experience as a PhD student engenders insider and outsider perspectives, which may contribute to the richness of data interpretation. The Student Voice project and intern supervisor is co-author of this paper as part of a student–staff collaboration to shape co-construction of Student Voice mechanisms within the institution.

Participants

Random sampling was adopted for participant recruitment in order to hear some 'serendipitous or ephemeral' voices which are no less valuable than those collected by academic and managerial departments (Canning, 2017). An invitation email for recruiting participants to an online interview (one-to-one or in group) was sent to 2993 Education School students through various channels. In total, 14 students replied to the invitation email, one expressing appreciation for the School's initiative to hear students' voices. The other 13 voluntary participants (see details in Table 1) expressed their willingness to have the interview, including one UG student, seven PGT students, and five PhD students. This low response rate indirectly reflected students' attitudes towards or lack of interest in student voice mechanisms at UG level. The majority of the respondents (85%) were international students and this figure is close to the percentage of international students in the PGT and PhD programmes – 70%. Considering the disproportionate sampling (provided it is random and there is no incentive for participant recruitment), the findings are not necessarily representative of the student body of the institution.

Table 1. Background information about participants.

Coded name	Interview form	Gender	Program level	Language used in the interview
P1	One-to-one	Male	UG	Chinese
P2	Email	Female	PGT	English
P3	One-to-one	Female	PhD	English
P4	One-to-one	Female	PGT	Chinese
P5	One-to-one	Female	PhD	Chinese
P6	One-to-one	Female	PhD	Chinese

P7	Focus group	Female	PGT	Chinese
P8	Focus group	Female	PGT	English
P9	One-to-one	Female	PGT	English
P10	One-to-one	Female	PhD	Chinese
P11	One-to-one	Female	PGT	Chinese
P12	One-to-one	Female	PGT	English
P13	One-to-one	Female	PhD	English

Data collection and analysis

We wished to come to a shared understanding of student voice with participants and in order to achieve this it was necessary to minimise preconceptions and keep the data collection process open (Malseed, 2004). Rigidly structured data gathering tools can influence participant responses, causing the researcher to miss data that participants consider important (Jones, 2004; Holt, 2019). This research sought detail so that it might have greater impact (Barbour, 2006), and consequently used semi-structured interviews to collect data (Holt, 2019; Malseed, 2004).

In order to create a relaxing and comfortable environment for participants, 'online chat' was used in the invitation email as the form of communication. In effect, the online communication took three forms based on participants' preferences: individual (ten participants), group (two participants), and email survey (one participant who chose this option to preserve anonymity). In the interviews, students were firstly asked to raise any questions before the interview began. Since the researcher's first language is Chinese and Chinese participants accounted for 85% of the total, the interviews were conducted in English with six participants and in Chinese with seven participants, according to participants' preferences. Each interview lasted appropriately 30 minutes; the length of time needed to gain participants' essential understanding but not burdensome considering the intense academic pressure on them. With the permission of each participant, all the interviews were audio recorded. When the data were transcribed, the participants were coded to provide anonymity.

Data analysis followed the six steps of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We familiarised ourselves with the data by transcribing the interviews manually. Then transcripts were closely read to find initial codes of interest and relevance to research

questions. Through building connections among initial codes, emergent themes were identified. Subsequently, themes were reviewed and the following final themes were identified: students' perceptions of Student Voice, students' attitudes towards some common channels of communication, and students' suggestions for making voice better heard and responded to. These are used as subheadings in the Findings section.

Findings

Students' perceptions of Student Voice

Participants demonstrated an overall positive attitude towards the concept and mechanism of Student Voice (SV) as part of a Higher Education Institution's drive to improve student experience, engagement, and satisfaction. Participants interpreted SV as a system for making demands and suggestions, expressing thoughts and getting feedback, and making appeals and complaints. Participants perceived the purpose to be 'to have the full picture from students themselves of what they want' (P10), 'in a more purposeful and organised manner' (P2). Notwithstanding the positive perceptions, there emerged some narrow understandings or even misunderstanding of SV as a university-wide policy which encompasses various student feedback mechanisms (e.g., course enhancement questionnaires and student representation system). One participant mistook SV for an organisation similar to a Student Union and expressed his intention of 'running for it if there's any opportunity' (P1). Another participant narrowly interpreted SV as a channel for collecting 'student feedback on curriculum and course design' (P7). Overall, participants demonstrated their support for this overarching mechanism which was perceived to make their 'thoughts valued' (P4). One PhD student specifically stated that by participating in some surveys, she hoped to 'let them continue on that path of really checking in with students' (P10).

When asked what channels for making their voice heard participants were aware of, replies varied considerably across programmes. For postgraduate taught (PGT) students, the main channel was their personal tutor (PT), followed by a course organiser. Some workshop tutors were also seen as friendly and supportive in terms of offering help with study and life problems. For PhD students, supervisors were their first resort for assistance or guidance. The Student Union or student representatives were seen as other channels via which to raise concerns. For undergraduate (UG) students, the programme director

plays an important role in solving various problems or directing problems to a specific division of SV mechanism. In addition, some wellbeing services were mentioned by participants across programmes (e.g., Chaplaincy and Advice Place) as helpful and effective.

Regarding factors that constrain participants from making their voice heard, the most common answer given was study-related issues, among which a prominent concern was the fear of being marked down if they reported something negative about workshop tutors who were usually the marker of the course assignment. One participant recalled an unpleasant experience she encountered:

> I disliked one workshop tutor because she could give us little guidance . . . actually, the whole class disliked this tutor. We even had some conflicts with her in class . . . we thought of reporting it to the course organiser . . . but I had the fear that if my name was revealed, the tutor might mark me down . . . so we decided to bear it rather than report it. (P6)

The details of their responses suggest that participants held a concept of student voice that was about reporting problems and difficulties, rather than as a dialogue through which they could have an impact on their own experience. There was no mention of student voice as a way to identify strengths or explain what was working well.

Students' attitudes towards some common channels of communication

Student representatives (reps) as part of the university-wide student representation system are available for students across programmes. However, the majority of participants expressed their limited knowledge of, and interaction with, their representatives. One participant gave the reason that 'they [reps] lack a network to organise students' (P12). Corroborating this comment, one participant who used to be a rep admitted that 'there were not many things to do' (P13). A PGT student gave some detailed explanations for her unwillingness to approach reps:

> I don't want to tell my thoughts to reps because I don't know them. I would find someone who knows me to confide in. This is something personal, and I will not easily disclose it to someone I don't know, maybe due to the lack of

trust. (P11)

In contrast, one PhD student said she would reach out to reps for help for the reason that 'they are colleagues and cohort, so it's easier to share with them . . . and they're sort of going through (the problems) as well' (P10).

Attitudes towards email as a means of alerting students to SV opportunities varied dramatically, but one common point was made by most participants: there are too many emails. One student (not one of the participants) responded to the invitation email calling for participants with this comment: 'There are so many surveys. My god. What do they all even mean?' Aligned with this opinion, one PhD student provided detailed feedback:

> We just ended with emails all the time. Personal, research, different things we are involved with. It is so easy to get lost, or just you see an email from the university but you don't actually open it or read it at all. . . . it can be quite overwhelming considering the amount of email I get sometimes. (P10)

In contrast with the complaint about the overwhelming amount of email, some participants regarded email as 'the fastest, most effective and time-saving method', and senders could remain anonymous if they wanted to report something sensitive (P2). Among all the emails, Weekly Roundup, the School's main channel for informing students about SV opportunities, seemed to receive least attention. A PhD student said: 'I just don't have the time to really read it closely or engage with it' (P10). A PGT student gave some reasons:

> It's even less attractive than a paper newspaper. I won't read it through. . . . I don't think it's relevant to me. I'm just an international student, staying here for one year. How could it have anything to do with me? (P7)

Consistent with the conceptualisation of SV as a way to get problems solved, participants spoke of whom they approached for support. For PGT students, the PT was regarded as the 'first choice' (P8) and 'the most general way' (P11) to gain 'neutral and timely' support (P4), and they thought their PTs may direct the problem to 'other channels of support' (P6).

Nonetheless, PTs were not always available because they were 'taking responsibility for a

lot of other things' (P12), and thus 'unable to reply to emails in time' (P2). Due to their tight schedule, some PTs organised group chats rather than one-to-one sessions, which made tutees 'unwilling to express their inner voice in front of many people' (P11).

Students' suggestions for making student voice better heard and responded to

Participants' suggestions on how to make student voice better heard and responded to could be categorised into two groups. First, one-to-one format was the most desirable. The channel of response was not as important as the one-to-one form of communication, be it email, Teams, text message, or phone call, as long as the reply was direct and therefore impactful. Second, giving a timely response was regarded as essential. Students would be dissatisfied if they received delayed responses or saw no action taken. Several participants mentioned that publicity of student voice-related services, preferably during induction, was essential and needed further improvement. Several participants made the suggestion that there should be synchronous channels for students to have 'online chats' (P6) or 'live sessions' (P7) to make their voice heard and responded to promptly and more effectively. One gave such details:

> I prefer what we're doing right now, one-to-one talk. I think sometimes if we write
> something, our meaning tends to be less explicit than if we just talk and see each
> other, with body language, eye contact and facial expression. That will convey or
> deliver more information. It could better solve the problem. (P12)

Different voices emerged on this topic. One participant expressed her hope for a channel where students could be 'anonymous and feel safe to give any feedback' (P9).

In summary, students' perceptions of SV were generally positive although their understanding of it was relatively limited and partial, which reinforces the necessity of improving the publicity of SV policy and related feedback mechanisms. Although students across programmes showed slightly different preferences for communication channels to express their voice, the suggestions they made for further improvement of this system favoured an interactive and individualised communication platform where students could initiate a student-university dialogue whenever needed.

Discussion

Distribution of information

Partly related to Hall's (2017) question, 'If the students could define it, what might student voice look like, and why?' (p.181), this study provides some students' interpretations of SV and their speculated rationale for it. Overall, participants regarded SV as a systematic and purposeful mechanism whereby students could report problems, make appeals, and give suggestions. The general understanding demonstrates a certain degree of awareness of governance and citizenship building (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012; Zepke, 2018). However, the findings reveal that some participants presented narrow or mistaken interpretations of SV. These misconceptions indicate a need to ensure that students are better informed of the aims and functions of SV. This finding corroborates that of another qualitative study which showed that clarification of some institutional arrangements, contextual features, and students' roles and responsibilities was a precondition for constructing an effective university-student dialogue (Isaeva et al., 2020). The present study also shows that there is a particular need to identify and address misconceptions that deter students from expressing their voice, as for those participants who decided to 'bear' their dissatisfaction rather than risk being marked down even though they knew the marking was 'anonymised'. This suggests that SV mechanisms in the School are not yet co-constructed between staff and students. If student voice were an open and genuine dialogue between students and staff (Young and Jerome, 2020), both would have a shared understanding of the purpose, rationale, and methods of SV mechanisms within their institution.

Another important issue was the amount of information distributed to students. The majority of participants reported that too many emails could only overwhelm them and make them 'get lost' (P10). In such cases, they would most probably ignore them. Interlinked with the issue of quantity, the timing of information dissemination is also of great importance. Participants believed that those disseminating information should take student context into consideration when deciding when to do so. This study itself was a victim of poor timing, due to reasons beyond our control such as the difficulty recruiting UG participants for this study evidenced. As revealed by the only UG participant, they had finished the academic year when the invitation email was sent out, which might explain why only two UG students (of 1292 invited) responded, and only one of these actually participated in the study. Okupe and Medland (2019) advocate staff and students co-constructing an evaluative process at the start of each programme. This requires teachers

and students to be 'self-aware, reflective, and adaptive' (Okupe and Medland, 2019, p.273), and this approach may help address some of the dissatisfaction and misconceptions raised by participants of the current study.

Form of communication

Although the university has been implementing the Student Voice Policy to engage students and enhance their experience, some initiatives are not taken up or fully appreciated by students. A case in point is the weekly news roundup, collated to reduce the number of emails students receive. Most participants admitted that they rarely read it because there was too much information in it, some of which seemed irrelevant to them. This phenomenon could be explained by the notion that one-way communication has its limitations regarding engaging students and promoting interaction (Isaeva et al., 2020). In other words, bi-directional dialogue (Hall, 2017) or dialogic communication (Pearce and Wood, 2019) is essential for active student engagement and effective university-student partnership. This certainly explains why students did not attend the live student voice sessions held by the School in Welcome Week and throughout the year to provide opportunities for students to express their voice and receive an immediate response. Participants actually suggested the School do this very thing. However, the challenge remains: if students are not reading communications, how does the School let them know about these live opportunities. This finding again foregrounds the importance of constructing a dialogic student voice mechanism.

A preference for a diverse range of communication tools is evident among participants in the present study. While most participants complained about the huge amount of email, one participant valued the use of email, choosing to participate in the research by email rather than interview to preserve anonymity. Another example of diverse opinions on communication channels was participants' different attitudes towards student reps. Some, especially PGT students, demonstrated awareness of a student representation system but knew little about their reps, including who they were. This finding mirrors that of another study conducted with nine reps from different universities: 'reps are positioned differently to other students' (Young and Jerome, 2020, p.702). Therefore, to what extent reps can represent student voice is a question worth further discussion. However, for PhD students, reps might be more helpful considering that they mainly turn to supervisors only for academic purposes. These divergent views on channels of communication indicate that

using 'various ways to communicate different types of information' is a workable solution (Isaeva et al., 2020, p.93).

One of the concerns raised about Student Voice is that mechanisms to collect this, particularly questionnaires, risk producing 'a monolithic, coherent and homogenous student voice, resulting in a misguided conceptualisation of the students' experience' (Okupe and Medland, 2019, p.262). Thus it is essential that the diversity of student needs and perspectives is taken into consideration when devising student voice mechanisms. Students need multiple ways for them to share their voices, so that the mechanism does not exclude or marginalise any voices and so that the needs and feedback of particular groups such as mature students, ethnic minorities, or students with additional support needs can be identified and responded to (Young and Jerome, 2020). Similarly, as our findings reveal, it is ineffective to have such diversity of SV channels, if students do not know about them. Thus, universities also need to find a range of ways to communicate with students about the student voice mechanisms. One way to increase engagement and raise student awareness of these, is to have systematic, regular and timely reports back to students on the key themes, actions and responses arising from their feedback (Li and De Luca, 2014; Shah, Cheng and Fitzgerald, 2017).

Strengths and limitations of the study

Limitations of the current study include the disproportionate number of participants across programme levels. Due in part to random sampling, UG students are under-represented compared to postgraduates, and therefore the voice of this group of students is minimal, but provides an impetus for future research. It is also worth mentioning that a large proportion of the participants were international students, which was roughly proportional to the actual percentage of international students in the PGT and PhD programmes. We were not looking for international students' perceptions in particular when designing the study. The unexpected results in a sense add to very limited literature on the topic of international students and SV. We make no claims to the representativeness of the participants, but instead aim for the study to open the conversation so more research can be done to verify whether similar sentiments are experienced across the sector.

Although arising from a staff student partnership, this project has not explored staff perspectives which, if SV is seen as a partnership and dialogic process, are essential to

the creation of a sustainable, meaningful, and inclusive SV process in which both staff and students are engaged. Whilst this is a small-scale study from mostly PG students in a faculty of one UK University, we believe that its findings might be utilised to inform relevant policy making across institutions.

Conclusion

The impact of this study lies in the revelation of students' perspectives regarding the interpretation of Student Voice, how they want their voice to be heard, and what they expect from the institution to improve SV mechanisms. The findings indicate that participants held a generally positive orientation towards SV, recognising the institution's good intention and efforts to collect students' opinions, expectations, and problems. However, some participants demonstrated a narrow or erroneous understanding of SV, which illustrates the importance of effective, accessible information distribution, including the explanation of SV and its related mechanisms (Isaeva et al., 2020). Exemplifying the diversity of student voices and underlining the need to capture this diversity, participants gave some common responses in some areas, but differed in others. One shared opinion was the complaint about too many emails, among which, ironically, was the weekly news roundup intended to reduce emails to students and ignored by most participants. This common feedback again highlights the significance of appropriate quantity and means of information distribution. Specifically, an overabundance of information may overwhelm students, and one-way communication may not engage students as intended. Conversely, dialogic and live communication was suggested by participants as more effective and efficient. These areas require organisational attention for managerial improvement. Moreover, varied attitudes towards student reps and personal tutors indicate that the availability of multiple and complementary communication channels is essential to meet differing student preferences in communication styles and orientations (Isaeva et al., 2020).

One of the main implications of this study is that institutions could enhance SV mechanisms through establishing multiple communication paths to offer an interactive and dialogic channel between students and the institution, without excluding or marginalising any voices. Individuality in SV practice, research, and analysis should be highlighted to avoid interpretation of student silence as passivity or unwillingness to engage. The findings

of this study will reinforce to policy makers and staff seeking to engage with student voice that timing, and avoiding information overload, can considerably influence student engagement which in turn determines students' willingness and ability to make their voice heard.

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