

Guidance for staff on how to capture and use the student voice to enhance academic practice

The Hearing the Student Voice project aimed to:

- equip educational and staff developers with the skills and confidence necessary to employ the student voice effectively within professional development in learning, teaching and assessment
- widen the use of this professional development strategy by building a community of practice comprising staff and educational developers within higher education.

These guidance notes seek to fulfill these aims by providing guidance to staff who wish to employ the student voice. Through a ten-step approach staff are guided to plan, implement and evaluate the involvement and impact of the student voice while ensuring that student involvement is both appropriate and protected.

The guidelines have been developed as a checklist but staff can also usefully refer to:

- the *Case studies* section
- the project case studies contained within *Appendix 4* for more information about how some of the approaches discussed in the checklist have been used
- the discussion within the *Student involvement issues* and *Wider issues* sections.

The staged process aims to encourage staff new to this activity, ensure consistency within the emerging community of practice and assist staff keen to develop their own case study for the project.

The ten steps are:

1. Establish the purpose of the professional development intervention where the voices will be heard
2. Proceed ethically to protect students' interests
3. Recruit students
4. Confirm permission from the students to use their voices (Permissions form)
5. Provide meaningful opportunities to capture the student voice
6. Evaluate the process with students (Student evaluation form)
7. Prepare the voices for the professional development session and plan the delivery
8. Evaluate the process with staff (Student evaluation form)
9. Feedback to students
10. Write up the findings (Case study form).

The ten-step approach

1. Establish the purpose of the professional development intervention where the voices will be heard.

As this project has a focus on professional development in learning, teaching and assessment it is important that you consider the professional development needs as a first step. The needs which have been addressed in the case studies developed may give you ideas. The needs which you have identified will influence the voices that would be of particular use in enhancing the professional development planned. For instance, if you have identified that there is a need for professional development focusing on formative assessment it would be appropriate for you to use voices of students who have already been on a course for a year or two, and include the voices of students on courses where you know that there are particularly strong examples of formative feedback. If the purpose of the professional development was to enhance a particular module or course, your inclusion of students directly involved would be most appropriate. When the development need has been established, using the student voice will support and enhance the activity you have planned and provide rich data for discussion.

2. Proceed ethically to protect students' interests

As universities vary in terms of processes for ethical approval of research projects and activities involving students, it is important to establish early on, prior to any data collection, what the processes are and if approval will be required for the work you are planning in your institution.

The ethical issues can be complex in some projects, in particular where students are close to those staff hearing their voices, such as their tutors, and they may be talking about specific experiences. There are many ways you can ensure anonymity of voices, and some of these have been used in the case studies such as:

- joint group letters that are read by an actor
- direct, anonymous quotes used rather than actual voices which could be identified
- questions or views generated by one student are asked by another student.

However, in some instances, such as discussions about assessment approaches and preferences where there are no particular links to individuals, it may be appropriate for you to invite students to a shared session as the ethical concerns are limited.

For further discussion see *Student involvement issues: protecting their interests*.

3. Recruit students

Once you have decided on the appropriate student population that you have an interest in, they can then be approached for involvement. If it is a specific group, then it may be possible to recruit during a face-to-face session where volunteers are requested for a particular time and place. For a wider population, such as all year one students, it may be better to recruit through individual invitation or using posters inviting applications for involvement.

It is important to encourage wide participation by explaining the need for the voices and how they will contribute to the planned development. In order for the process to be seen as useful the students need to know the outcomes of their involvement so you should commit to feeding back at the end of the intervention – and do so! (See 9 below.)

The value of participation may be enough to encourage involvement. Some students who have been involved in the project case studies recognised the value to them of participation but it may also be worth offering a small incentive, such as lunch or a book token which both shows that you value their time and recompenses them – if only modestly – for their contribution.

You may find it difficult to include students who, for one reason or another, are reluctant to come forward and volunteer – and these may be just the voices you need. You may want to consider imaginative ways to collect these student voices.

For further discussion see *Student involvement issues: participation* and *Student involvement issues: representation*.

4. Confirm permission from the students to use their voices

Prior to any recording or direct student involvement in professional development sessions or similar, the permission form agreed in your ethics proposal should be signed by all students involved. Many universities have a standard format. If yours does not, you could use and adapt the project Student permissions form, available to download from the project website. Once signed, these forms need to be stored safely.

5. Provide meaningful opportunities to capture the student voice

You need to provide a safe, secure and non-threatening environment with experienced and, if appropriate, neutral facilitators to ensure that students feel confident to reflect deeply and speak freely.

Recording the meeting/interview can take many forms, such as video, note taking, recording to tape or digital recording but needs to be fit for purpose.

If using technology you should ensure that it is not intrusive as it can change the atmosphere. For instance, a digital camera could be placed in position on a table top or an audio recorder could be placed out of sight.

Quality is also an issue you should consider. If you just want to include short clips of data for use in PowerPoint® slides you could make your own digital recordings which are then relatively straightforward to transfer.

If you want to create a DVD for playing to large groups in large venues you should ensure near broadcast quality by using appropriate equipment and a professional team. Consider using students for this purpose: many digital media, film or journalism students are often keen to carry out project work for their portfolios and will produce a very professional result. Involving the students in case studies during the project in this way proved to have added benefits as they often contributed ideas to the project and related well to the students being recorded.

However, whoever you use it is important that you brief them fully to ensure you get the content and finish you seek.

For further discussion see *Case studies: approaches* and *Wider issues: methods*.

6. Evaluate the process with students

Following the interviews or other form of collection of voices, you should gather feedback from the students about their involvement. The project Student evaluation form, available to download from the project website, is a useful template that can be used flexibly to suit the needs of the project. The purpose is to gather views about how the students felt about their involvement and what the value of the experience was perceived to be. This is important to support future work so that we can establish how best to encourage involvement in the future. Collect the evaluation immediately after collecting the voices: you want student recollections of their impressions of involvement before they have dimmed plus the students can be hard to trace at a future date.

7. Prepare the voices for the professional development session and plan the delivery

In many instances the voices collected will provide far more data than can be used in a professional development session and there is a need to reduce it to small chunks. The selection process will vary depending on the focus of the professional development. In order to try to find representative voices for use, it may be worth transcribing what has been said and establishing themes. Once key themes are identified then representative samples might be chosen. Where the voices are anonymous then transcriptions or letters might be recorded with student actors.

Be aware there may be concerns about the representativeness of the voices you use in the development sessions with staff so ensure that you are transparent about the students involved and the selection you made.

For further discussion see *Student involvement issues: representation*.

In the delivery of the session, the voices may be included as part of a PowerPoint® presentation, or as a DVD, or they may be included as paper-based letters. If students are not pre-recorded and are involved in the session then they will need briefing before the start about what to expect.

8. Evaluate the process with staff

Following the professional development session where the voices have been heard and used with the purpose of enhancing the learning, it is important to evaluate with those attending. The project Staff evaluation form, available to download from the project website, as with the student form, can be used for this purpose. The results should enable you to evaluate the value of the voices used in the professional development session and help inform future work involving students for this purpose.

9. Feedback to students

You should feedback to students at this stage what the outcomes or plans are relating to the issues raised in their contributions. It is important for them to know what action will be taken as a result of their contribution and, if no action is possible, to be advised why not. Students welcome this feedback and are often more engaged with their courses when they can see that their views are valued and, particularly, where they see a direct benefit of their involvement.

For further discussion see *Student involvement issues: participation*.

10. Write up the findings

Once the session has been evaluated the project Case study form, available to download from the project website, provides a useful template for writing up the findings and your perspective on the process in a concise and structured way. The use of the form encourages consistency to facilitate sharing. If there are several people in your faculty or university using the student voice you could use it as a basis to form a community of practice to discuss and share issues.

The Hearing the Student Voice project team is keen to receive evaluated case studies from the sector and can facilitate wider dissemination of your work through the project website. In the first instance please contact us (contact details on page iii) to discuss or complete and submit a Survey form, available to download from the project website.