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# Does Evaluation Matter to Students? Scrutinizing the role of student voices in Higher Education policy and practice

FRIDAY 24TH APRIL 2004, 12PM TO 1.30PM



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## A participatory event organised with the Evaluation Collective as part of the Public Policy Challenge Project “What Matter to Students?”



12.05 - 12.10 Introduction to the Evaluation Collective (Liz Austen) (5mins+2mins)



12.10 - 12.15 The Public Policy Challenge Project (James Robson) (5mins+2mins)



12.15 - 12.25 Literature on student voices and student engagement: a whistle-top tour (Liz Austen and Julian Crockford) (10 mins+2mins)



12.25 - 12.35 What are student voices? What is the value and validity of student voices in evaluation? (Participants, open discussion) (5mins+2mins)



12.35 - 12.55 Student perspectives on student voices (Jordan Byrne) (10 mins+2mins)



13.00 - 13.15 Small Group breakout discussion on the event questions (Participants, open discussion) (15mins)



13.15 - 13.30 Feedback to the groups and close (Participants, small discussion) (15 mins)



# ETHICS NOTICE


Your responses in this event will be de-identified and reported anonymously as part of the "What Matters Students" Public Policy Challenge Project. No personal information will be shared or published.

By participating, you consent to having your anonymous and de-identified responses included in the project's analysis and reporting.

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Prof. Liz Austen, Chair of the Evaluation Collective





## WHAT MATTERS TO STUDENTS: EMBEDDING STUDENT VOICES IN EVALUATIONS TO IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES

1st of January – 31st December 2024

James Robson, Hau Ming Tse, Elizabeth  
Rahman, Liz Polding (University of  
Oxford)

In dialogue with Evaluation Collective and  
providers

OfS and TASO

- effective use of student voices in evaluating higher education access and participation activities
- Relationship with student outcomes
- how APP guidance is interpreted by HE institutions
- working with volunteer institutions to build evidence of good practice
- using a range of ethnographic and participatory research methods

# A Handbook for Student Engagement in Higher Education

Theory into Practice

# Advancing Student Engagement in Higher Education

Reflection, Critique and Challenge



Exploring Student Voices



# Positioning Student Voices

## **Evaluation of students**

- Institutional engagement data as proxy for voices (Austen 2020)

## **Evaluation by students**

- Use (and abuse Jones-Devitt & LeBihan 2017) of voices in formal/informal data gathering

## **Evaluation alongside students**

- Participatory and collaborative voices to design, implementation and conclusions (Austen & Donnelly 2023)

## **Consultation with students**

- The opportunity to voice views about drafted content (e.g. Access & Participation Plan Regulatory Guidance 1)

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# Discussion Questions 1 (open discussion)

Questions, comments and suggestions?

How, and in what ways, does evaluation matter to students? (If evaluation doesn't matter, what does and how is evaluation made to count?)

What is the value and validity of student voices in evaluation?



Student Voices: Valuable  
and Valid (?)



# Who am I?

## **Professional Experience**

5+ years providing student support across all stages of the student lifecycle at various institutions in the UK HE sector, including experience with US cohorts on study abroad programmes

## **Academic Interests**

- Interdisciplinarity
- Sense of Belonging
- Race, Equality, and Education

## **Academic Background**

University of Cambridge

- MPhil Education (Knowledge, Power, Politics)
- Topic: Black students placemaking experiences at 'elite' HEI's

University College London

- BAsC in Arts and Sciences (Cultures)
- Dissertation: Sense of Belonging as an Approach to Closing the Black-White Awarding Gap



Jordan Byrne

Research Assistant in Finance for Systemic Risks  
Student Support (residence) at a private HEI

# My experiences: as a student

As a student I have engaged in various evaluation activities led by researchers, regulatory bodies, and by professional staff within HE institutions.

As a researcher whose work overlaps with WP much of my work centres on the student's voice and their evaluations of their student experience in relation to their identity.

## As an object of research

Semi-mandatory: course and college evaluations, University surveys

Self-selecting: engagement with other researchers' studies as participant

## As a partner in evaluative research

Formal: Participatory action research, committee & working group engagement

Informal: Conversations with senior staff

## In my research

Designed and conducted my own research study about WP and HE

Informal: ongoing critical reflection of evaluative exercises using students



# Voices as representation

Why are students choosing to use their voices as a source of representation?  
Are institutions choosing how the students voices will be represented?  
How do researchers ensure that they are eliciting representations accurately?

## BURDENS

- Opportunity-cost
- Voices as activism (psychological stress)
- Student investment
- Unclear feedback

## BARRIERS

- Time
- Remuneration
- Purpose
- Concerns over confidentiality

## OPPORTUNITIES

- To acknowledge and pay for the student voice
- To use the student voice to enact \*real\* change



Students face the burden of representing the views of a group

Some engage in evaluation activities as a form of activism

There is a potential for the student voice to be distorted in analysis

Findings are often used to support university policies and activities

(Fielding, 2004)

## **Thinking about value...**

**Are we asking students for their voices due to genuine interest in their experiences? Or are we asking because targets and policies dictate the data we need to gather?**

# Seeing the student voice as 'valid'

Let's get a little interdisciplinary here...

## Law: Expert Opinion

In English law, the general rule is that witnesses should only testify in relation to matters within their knowledge.

In US law, a witness qualified as an expert by knowledge, skill, experience, training or education may testify and provide an opinion.

## Situated Knowledge

What is known to be objective scientific knowledge?

Is there epistemic superiority?

WP and APP evaluative work addresses traditionally disempowered communities...

Is their knowledge production accepted?



## **Thinking about validity...**

**Do we see students as experts in their experience? Are you selecting the right research design/questions? What is the impact of the evaluation activity?**



# THANK YOU!

Want to connect?

Find me on LinkedIn at [www.linkedin.com/in/jorambbyr](http://www.linkedin.com/in/jorambbyr)

## Discussion questions 2 (small discussion)



What benefits have you encountered in engaging student voices?



What are some of the challenges you have experienced in engaging a range of student voices?



What kinds of evidence are student voices?

- Are they a data type and if so, what type of data are they?
- Quantitative, qualitative or both?
- To what extent do different methods for engaging student voices change the ways in which their voices are counted (as evidence)?
- Is there a hierarchy of 'student voices' evidence?

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## SECTOR SURVEY

What Matters to  
Students: Student  
Voices in Access and  
Participation Policy  
and Practice



<https://forms.office.com/e/ET69x8eRYS?origin=lprLink>

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*Thank you for joining us today*

