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A view through the looking glass: co-creation and innovation for student voice and wellbeing in distance education

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Abstract This paper showcases innovative co-creation practice undertaken by a Student Voice and Wellbeing Group (SVWG) created in the School of Education, Childhood, Youth and Sport, Open University (OU). Ways of doing, seeing, being and believing student voice are discussed alongside the inception of the SVWG, sharing the *whys* and *how's* of its strategic approach and the depth and breadth of its student members' participation. Underpinning this work is the concept that student voice and wellbeing are inextricably connected and are everyone's responsibility (Mander, 2021). The impactful student-staff partnership established through this model illustrates an authentic and dialogic practice that centres students as the drivers, rather than the passengers, for enacting change. As an artefact of innovative practice, the authors showcase a newly published bilingual digital student wellbeing handbook. This example is of interest to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) seeking innovative models for promoting marginalised voices through co-production. The authors' reflections and recommendations invite policymakers to re-evaluate existing student voice and wellbeing strategies and practices.

Key words co-creation; co-production; student voice; mental health; wellbeing; distance education

Introduction

This innovative practice paper addresses the persistent challenges of educational inequalities across the higher education (HE) sector in the UK and internationally. It introduces the concept of student voice and wellbeing as a joint venture in staff-student partnerships to close the awarding gap for students at risk of marginalisation, including disabled and neurominorityⁱ student groups. The formation of a Student Voice and Wellbeing group (SVWG) is situated through the lens of developing a

community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Traditional levels of student participation are challenged by demonstrating how high levels of participation can positively impact student mental health and wellbeing. As an artefact of our co-production, we showcase an innovative co-created student wellbeing handbook, providing recommendations for other HEIs wishing to reconceptualise their student voice, and mental health and wellbeing delivery.

Context: challenges and opportunities

The formation and ongoing development of a SVWG provides strategy and resources to address persistent issues of inequity in higher education. As the largest university in the UK, and one of the largest HEIs in Europe, The Open University (OU) is a global leader in the provision of distance learning (The Open University, 2022c). The aims and principles of the OU are to be open to people, places and methods; to embrace innovation which promotes inclusion and widens participation. Unlike many other HEI providers in the UK and internationally, the OUs 'open admissions' policy is non-selective, attracting around a third of students with one or fewer A Levels, and therefore bringing equality of opportunity for, and a higher proportion of, traditionally under-represented groups. However, the retention and progression of traditionally under-represented groups is a key issue that continues to impact 'degree awarding gaps'. The degree awarding gap relates to the difference in the proportion of students identified as traditionally under-represented student groups in HE achieving a 'good' degree – a first or 2:1 award – compared to non-identified student groups (Office for Students, 2021).

The SVWG initiative harnesses staff-student partnerships to assist in closing degree awarding gaps for marginalised students. The SVWG is a significant initiative for the OU, whose values promote social justice through a distance learning environment, which attracts a diverse student demography (The Open University, 2022b). Diverse student groups in the OU, and who are supported by the university closing the awarding gap strategy – the Access and Participation Plan – include minority ethnic student groups; mature students; disabled students; care leavers; students emanating from low socio-economic backgrounds and status; carers; students with low educational

qualifications and students in secure environments (The Open University, 2022d). The intersection of some of these characteristics for students can widen the awarding gap. Improved outcomes of such partnerships for students include a greater sense of belonging within their institution and increased confidence levels, subsequently found to promote empowerment (Matthews *et al.*, 2019), and this enhances the student experience and enables student success.

Participation theory (Arnstein, 1969) underpins the formative and ongoing work of the SVWG. As Figure 1 illustrates, Arnstein (1969) conceptualises citizen – and for the SVWG, student – empowerment in a metaphorical ladder, with each ascending rung representing increasing levels of student agency. HEIs may limit student decision-making to the lower rungs of non-participation through consultation activities which generate one-way dialogue. A more democratic approach adopted by the SVWG, and conducive to student success, is to position students at the highest levels of participation – the citizen power rungs 6, 7 and 8 – where partnerships devolve power to students. In this way, students are positioned as drivers rather than passengers. Examples of ways in which students can be drivers of university activities include co-creating curriculum, co-producing university-wide strategies and participation in staff recruitment. Student voice, therefore, shapes university teaching and learning with the potential to improve student success because teaching and learning is tailored to students' needs.

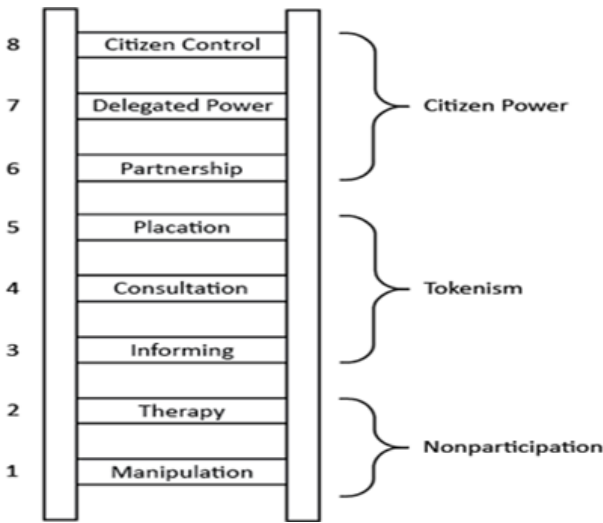


Figure 1. 'Eight Rungs on a Ladder of Citizen Participation' (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217).

However, the relinquishing of power from staff to students can be uncomfortable and impractical (Bovill *et al.*, 2016). It is best managed as a conscious uncoupling of the old to introduce the new. Co-production challenges existing ingrained ways of working – the cultural climate which informs our identity as individuals and a school – and requires investment by all stakeholders to manage necessary change. Having identified an opportunity, we raised awareness of the initiative, engaged academic staff representatives from each degree programme in the school, secured administrative support for the group and recruited students. We articulated, to all levels within the school, the changes which needed to take place and how these could benefit the university, staff and students. At its inception, this had the potential to strengthen the meaning of student voice in every aspect of our business to ensure it was integral rather than bolt-on; a key feature of successful student partnership relationships (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018). This has the potential to improve participation at all levels, including 'lower-level' consultation activities such as the esteemed National Student Survey.

Bridging student voice and mental health

The current buzzword in higher education is co-creation, defined by Hughes and Spanner (2019, p. 67) as 'creating a culture that supports good well-being' and is most readily achieved where students are partners in developing university

wellbeing strategies. The breadth and depth of student participation can therefore positively influence student mental health and wellbeing. Research informing the first University Mental Health Strategy (Hughes and Spanner, 2019) found student mental health and wellbeing could be improved by engendering a sense of belonging and engagement with universities through establishing student identity; factors closely linked with higher retention and lower dropout rates (Brown, 2016; Thorley, 2017). A more recent study revealed that the major reason for drop out from university is poor mental health, with one in three students withdrawing for this reason (Sanders, 2023). There is a close relationship between good levels of wellbeing and attainment. Student mental health and wellbeing difficulties such as stress, anxiety, depression, grief, sleeping difficulties and relationship problems are found to negatively affect higher education attainment (Thorley, 2017). Student groups, such as Black students, affected by awarding gaps are at greater risk of barriers to attainment, including poor mental health and low levels of wellbeing (Butcher, Awan and Grey, 2021). Co-creation is therefore a university-led mechanism which can positively impact the attainment gap for students experiencing mental health challenges and poor levels of wellbeing. Listening to students, proactively seeking their opinions and ensuring we act on them contributes towards positive wellbeing.

The most effective outcomes are generated through a participatory approach which demonstrates significant impact on higher education cultures and structures (Mander, 2021). The work of the SVWG responds to The Open University Student and Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing strategy (The Open University, 2021). The following section explains how the group was created, bringing the opportunity to participate at the highest institutional levels, while also promoting positive mental health and wellbeing.

Building a community of practice

The SVWG was initiated during the Covid pandemic in 2020 in the School of Education, Childhood, Youth and Sport, within The Open University's Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies. The SVWG was initially created to foster awareness of, and better embed, student voice and wellbeing into areas of

teaching and learning practice across undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in the school. A key institutional driver for forming this group was to conceptualise voice with wellbeing. Students who applied to join the group similarly expressed a strong desire to reduce the stigma of mental health difficulties by amplifying their voice.

From the outset, a key challenge in establishing an authentic student-staff partnership in this distance learning context was in identifying and enabling effective channels of communication to reach and sustain collaboration with student groups. OU students in particular experience additional barriers to collaboration with their institution because many balance part-time study with work, parental and other care responsibilities. In 2021/2022, 24.4% of OU students disclosed a disability, with disability disclosures increasing year-on-year since 2010/2011, making the OU the largest provider of higher education for people with disabilities. Similarly, low socio-economic circumstances are experienced by 28% of UK OU undergraduate students who reside in the 25% most deprived areas of the country (The Open University, 2022c). These factors can impact negatively on wellbeing in a range of ways; for example, isolation may be commonly experienced. The SVWG reduces student isolation, a barrier to wellbeing for distance learners identified by Lister, Seale and Douce (2021). The intersection of marginalisation further impacts upon student wellbeing, and to mitigate for this the SVWG views awarding gaps through an inclusive lens to promote wellbeing. Therefore, the SVWG can be considered a widening participation initiative.

At its inception the group's aims and scope were purposefully loosely defined to enable organic influence from student members to authentically shape our joint enterprise (Wenger, 1998). A small team of six staff, representing each programme team in the school – with a shared interest in student voice and wellbeing through their existing teaching, research and scholarship – successfully recruited and inducted 11 student volunteers to join the group. These were students who jointly expressed their motivation to represent, advocate for, and change the experiences of their peers through their participation. Student members played a leading role in establishing their own sense of affiliation and identity-making by scoping out their role

titles and responsibilities as student ambassadors (Wenger, 1998) and in identifying key activity projects of interest.

To facilitate periods of both peripheral learning and full participation (Wenger, 1998) among all SVWG members, we adopted a blend of synchronous and asynchronous online communication through a dedicated Microsoft Teams space. We jointly populated a 'getting to know each other' Teams channel, and the mutual exchange of photographs and personal stories served to build and sustain authentic and informal modes of engagement. As the SVWG evolved from 2020–2021, student ambassadors' confidence developed to co-plan and chair our monthly meetings; co-designing and delivering wellbeing activities as part of every meeting. A joint DIY approach to trialling new tools for online collaboration, including Slido, Jamboard, Miro and others, offered important opportunities for creativity, fun and group reflections. These shared repertoires increased our collective sense of belonging to a joint enterprise and enabled staff to model ways to move from one's comfort zone in relation to first-time use of new online tools (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Each year, the group successfully applied for internal funding available to support the OU Access and Participation Plan (The Open University, 2022d). This necessitated team planning, forecasting and budgeting for individual projects. Consequently, our group shifted from a more loosely defined community of practice to that of learning community as an 'Activity System' (Arnseth, 2008; Daniels, 2006), wherein both staff and students nominated themselves to undertake discrete 'project-based activities', ascertaining key divisions of labour, jointly negotiating rules to ensure their delivery and dissemination. Activities have included:

- co-leading student voice week conferences;
- student participation in staff recruitment for the first time in the school;
- the production of a student-led video to promote student ambassadorial roles and explain the associated impact on their wellbeing;

- co-delivering staff development sessions for associate lecturers covering the themes of neurodivergence; peer-to-peer coaching;
- co-creating university-wide resources and artefacts for students and staff to promote student voice and mental health and wellbeing (including Blogs, Open Learn Articles and a Badged Open Learn Course).

These activities are representative of the highest levels of participation in Arnstein's model (1969). One project, the co-creation of a digital bilingual-student wellbeing handbook, is discussed further in the proceeding section.

Co-creation: the OU Student Wellbeing Handbook

The concept of creating a wellbeing handbook for new students was championed by student ambassadors in the SVWG. In response, staff facilitated a working group that met frequently over a period of six months from 2021–2022 to collaboratively achieve this project. Following a similar pattern and way of working adopted within the wider SVWG, a smaller student-staff team self-organised based on the goal of co-producing a resource for OU students to use as a companion to their study journey. At its inception, the purpose of the wellbeing handbook was to promote good levels of wellbeing by providing resources to inspire its student audience through supportive and encouraging self-care behaviours.

The resource is aligned to Mind's '5 Ways to Wellbeing': Connect, Give, Take notice, Get Active, and Learn (Mind, 2020). Student ambassadors decided upon a section to lead in designing poetry, artwork and reflective activities. Staff facilitated additional artwork contributions from other students across the OU. In presenting their reflections on co-creating the OU Handbook at the 2023 Advance HE conference, Reeve, a student ambassador, explained that:

'[We] came up with the idea of making the handbook...[Our] Teams group was highly active throughout the whole process, we made a Welsh translation so that it was accessible to bilingual students...After months of development, we were involved in getting the word out to other students through forums, tutorials and to our tutors.'

(Doehler, Fensham-Smith and Reeve, 2023)

The poetry and artwork (figure 2) below illustrate some of the student-authored artefacts featured in this resource:

'Giving'- by N. Nussey, Student in Education Studies
(Primary)

You may have heard it said, 'It's a dog-eat-dog world,'

And 'The world is yours, just take a bite.'

But I am here to say today that giving brings light to the
darkest night.

Well, I hear you say, 'I have been there, done that,

Had the T-shirt, bought the merch, got the hat.' But as our
dear friend Charles Dickens once said,

'No-one is useless in this world who lightens

The burdens of another.'

Could it be time you give spent with your brother?

Or love shed abroad, with a coffee for a stressed young
mother?

How do you know dear friend, if that one act of kindness

Was the first time in a month that the recipient had felt

The warmth of charity, compassion, and loveliness.

Yes, dear one, cast off the restraints of this old world and its
ways,

And give of your time, your love and your days. As you give
to others, it shall be given to you.' (Connolly *et al.*, 2022, p.
17)

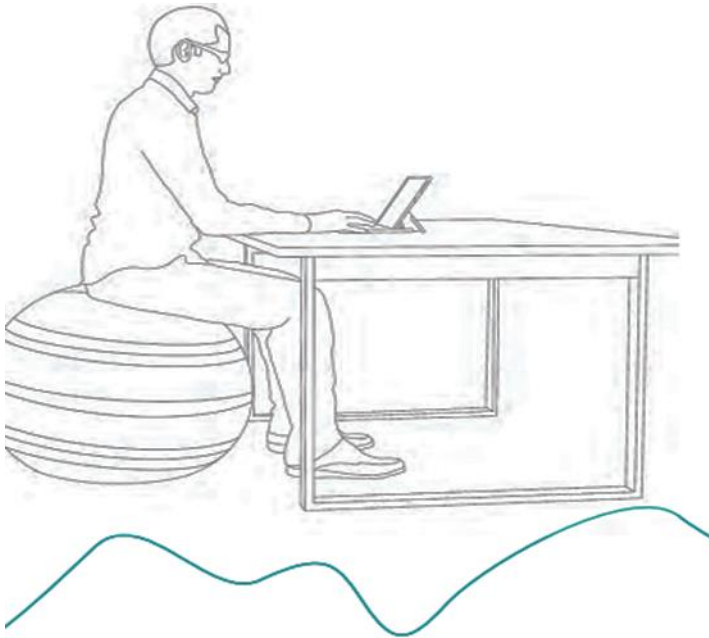


Figure 2. 'Being Active, by Y. Reeve, Student in Sport and Fitness' (Connolly *et al.*, 2022, p. 31)

Following its launch in December 2022, students and staff were heavily involved in promoting this resource through conference presentations (e.g. 'student voice week') and dissemination across undergraduate and postgraduate teams. As a result of positive student and staff feedback, the resource was made available university-wide for all students and is an integral resource for the Badged Open Online Course, 'Being an OU Student', (The Open University, 2022a).

Connolly, a student ambassador, highlighted the benefit and impact of co-creating the wellbeing handbook:

'Originally, the handbook was going to be shared across the WELS Faculty...and now that it is University-wide is such a huge benefit as it means it is reaching more students, and it's a benefit to the University.' (Mander *et al.*, 2023)

Group reflections

Reflecting on their co-production experience, student ambassadors recognised the necessity to be courageous in trying new activities, and that the benefits of co-production far outweighed our initial apprehensions when progressing from the comfort and familiarity of lower levels of participation. They appreciated the growth mindset required to constantly evolve into their student ambassador roles, and how *breaking the mould*

in relation to personal growth did, and continues to, enhance their overall student experience (Mander *et al.*, 2023).

However, the journey towards co-production was not linear. Staff were required to continuously re-examine their aspirations to effectively respond to the evolving needs, interests and priorities of student ambassadors. The trusting relationships established by this partnership model necessitated, and continue to demand, reflective practice and evolution to ensure authenticity in the equality of the staff-student partnership. This mirrored the challenges of power, discussed by Bovill *et al.* (2016). The capacity to change and evolve has been essential to sustaining the effectiveness and health of the joint enterprise of this community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Summary and recommendations for the sector

The integration of student voice with mental health and wellbeing strategies within the SVWG is a novel practice within The Open University. Its success is reliant upon the shared expertise of both students and staff, and goodwill and willingness to invest time and effort into the group. Success is also dependent upon the groups' abilities to change the hearts and minds of senior institutional leaders regarding new and innovative ways of delivering student voice strategy. The work of the SVWG in engaging and sustaining student participation demonstrates how identified barriers to student partnerships, such as disability and low socio-economic circumstances, can be bridged. This innovative practice paper exemplifies how re-conceptualising existing student voice activities can generate more creative and fulfilling ways of meeting national and institutional objectives of mental health and wellbeing policies and strategies. Drawing upon our collective learning and the relative success of this initiative, our recommendations for the sector are to:

- be open to re-conceptualise existing institutional initiatives involving which connect student voice, mental health and wellbeing strategies to maximise output and outcomes;
- harness necessary vision and cultivate enthusiasm to progress student voice and wellbeing initiatives.

Determine the scale of these initiatives, school, faculty or whole institution. Consider whether an organic, bottom-up approach, or a lead from the top-down approach, would work for your institution. Reflect on how this decision was made because the cultural context of higher education institutions determines the scope for high levels of student participation;

- identify staff who can lead initiatives and provide relevant training and support;
- develop effective asynchronous student-friendly communication systems to provide a community of practice for students. The best communication systems are student-centred so do seek student opinion to shape new systems;
- invest in rewards for students which both recognises and formalises their contribution. For example, develop a digital badge award for student participation. Source a budget to reward students at the suggested minimum living wage for their participation;
- create opportunities to showcase initiatives within and across your institution, and more widely for the international HEI sector.

A key objective of this paper was to de-stigmatise mental health difficulties in the higher education sector and instead position marginalised students as equal partners. In doing so, this brings the potential to de-problematise students who experience poor mental health. The innovative practice of the SVWG demonstrates how student voice can be harnessed to achieve these objectives. Readers can, virtually, meet student ambassadors and learn more about the work of the group in the [Open University Student Voice and Wellbeing group webpage](#).

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the OU student ambassadors and staff who have collectively supported the ongoing work of the SVWG. Thanks also to the wider group of OU students who made and

published vibrant poetry and artwork for the OU Student Wellbeing Handbook.

ⁱ We use the term 'neurominority' here to refer to the identity-first language that student ambassadors of the SVWG use to describe aspects of learning and thinking associated with expressions of neurodivergence: e.g. ADHD and Autism (Rosqvist, Chown and Stenning, 2020). While there are no agreed definitions, here we wish to use the term to represent the ways of learning, including sensory perceptions, that some members of the SVWG identify with.

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