Guidance to setting up and running Student Researcher Groups in colleges:
A peer evaluation approach

Anthea Rose and Lucy Mallinson

A Uni Connect partnership collaboration between

LINCHIGHER   HOP HUMBER OUTREACH PROGRAMME   inspiring choices York & North Yorkshire   Sussex Learning Network

Introduction

In recent years the importance of the student voice has grown considerably, largely due to the legally binding Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which came into effect in 1989 and decrees:

> *States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*
> (UNICEF, 1999:5)

The Article applies to all aspects of a child's life, including educational settings. Lundy (2007) suggests a four-pronged model of space, voice, audience and influence to ensure the student voice is heard and duly considered. These prongs are interlinked and aim to do more than simply pay lip service to capturing the students voice, they enable their views to be expressed, listened to and acted upon as appropriate.

Whilst all Uni Connect partnerships have sought to include student voice in the development of their programmes and activities, some have achieved this to a greater or lesser extent. With the ongoing requirement by the Office for Students (OfS) that Uni Connect programmes should be fully and properly evaluated to establish what works, coupled with a year-on-year reduction in funding for the programme and the need for schools and colleges to have the capacity to self-evaluate, it is timely to look closer at how the student voice can be better utilised in the Uni Connect context. This guide suggests how to facilitate peer evaluation in colleges using a student research programme.

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is for Uni Connect partnerships and colleges that wish to set up Student Research groups to enhance their student engagement, encourage student voice and improve the quality and impact of their student delivery. As well as setting out why student voice is important this guidance provides practical tips on how to set up and run Student Research groups and a timeline for programmes designed to run for the duration of an academic year. The following supplementary resources are available to use alongside this guidance:

- A suggested template for running initial and subsequent student workshops
- Example recruitment flyer and poster
- Example timeline for shorter programmes
- Student Researchers peer feedback questions
- Feedback guidance for students
- Focus group schedule for final Student Researcher feedback session (i.e., for the end of the project / year)
- Suggested Student Research conference programme
- Student Research conference feedback form

The above should be used as a guide only and adapted to suit individual programme needs, hence they are all available in pdf format and as word documents on the LiNCHigher Future Focus website and also those of partnerships that contributed to this guide:

Future Focus – www.thefuturefocus.co.uk
Humber Outreach Programme – www.hop-humber.co.uk
Sussex Learning Network – www.learning4lifesussex.org.uk/educating
Inspiring Choices – www.inspiring-choices.co.uk

Benefits of taking this approach to including student voice

Student Researchers can be utilised in a number of ways including:

- To evidence student voice
- To develop students' confidence and research and communication skills
- As an activity that students can write about on university, course and job applications
- As evidence for their Record of Achievement portfolio
- To help shape colleges' future strategy in the local context
- Encourages colleges to carry out self-evaluation in a sustainable manner
- Offering promotional possibilities for colleges that can be used on websites
- It can be used as part of evidence to Ofsted and end of year reports
- Evidencing student engagement in outreach and career activities

The evidence-base for this guidance document

This guide is based on learning gained from a series of pilots carried out by LiNCHigher and the Sussex Learning Network Uni Connect partnerships during the academic year of 2021-2022. The pilots involved approximately 70 school and college students in years 9, 10, 12 / Level 3 Year 1 and 13 / Level 3 Year 2. In the LiNCHigher pilot each group ideally consisted of eight students, four from each year group and of mixed gender. At least half of the student researchers were Uni Connect target learners. LiNCHigher established five student research groups in four schools with students in year 9 and 10 and one college with Year 12 and 13 students. The Sussex Learning Network ran one group in a local college with seven Year 12 students and one in a local school with 25 students in Year 10.

The pilots found the following

- Students need to be recruited to the programme that are willing volunteers. A good level of confidence and the ability to talk to others is essential. One potential avenue of recruitment could be the Student Union or course Reps.
- Flyers, posters, social media etc works well as part of the recruitment campaign.
- The ideal number of students to work with is 8-10.
- In one college, the student researchers were most effective when they operated for a short period of time, i.e., 4-6 weeks and they were asked to focus on activities delivered within that timeframe, for example, a careers or progression week.
- The groups worked best where students were self-motivated and had a designated member of staff as a point of contact.
- It is important to have the right practitioner working with and supporting the group; ideally someone with both delivery and research/evaluation experience.
- Having a designated shared online forum for the group, such as MS Teams, was important to the student researchers. It helped students organise their time, acted as a prompt and provided them with peer and teacher support.
- Students appreciated having a question framework and the freedom to rephrase them into their own words.
- Students tend to mainly solicit peer feedback from their immediate friendship group or those on their course.
- For some college students texting the questions to peers was an effective way of gathering feedback on activities.
- In one college there was a high level of student drop-out after the first meeting. This was because students were told to attend as they had a free period in their timetable. They did not receive any information about the meeting in advance.
- Level 3 / Year 2 college students found it challenging to find the time to participate and complete the tasks, due to the pressure of exams.
- The students appreciated and valued the opportunity to feedback beyond the group to those who were in a position to put their findings into action, i.e., the local Uni Connect learning partnership.
- Whilst the student researchers were all invited to name their group to give them a coherent identity, in practice not all groups found this useful.
- Badges are a good idea – they give the student research groups an identity and something for others to talk to them about, and even aspire to. They enable the student researchers to standout from their peers and provides them with status.
- Internal college factors affected the success of the groups, for example, a sudden change of Headship or Senior Leadership priorities.

Specific findings and recommendations from the pilots

The specific findings of the programmes run by LiNCHigher and the Sussex Learning Network can be found on their respective websites (see page 2).

To be successful students need to

- ✓ Have specific, clear instructions as to which activities they are to gather peer feedback on.
- ✓ Be guided on when to gather feedback, i.e., as soon as possible after the activity takes place. Have suggestions as to where and when they can gather feedback, for example in Form or Tutor time.
- ✓ Feedback on a small number of activities, ideally no more than two per term.
- ✓ Feel empowered and confident enough to ask the feedback questions in their own way.
- ✓ Be willing volunteers.

How to select and recruit students

Students will need to have a certain level of self-confidence, be willing participants, rather than be volunteered by teachers for the role and work well with others. A good source of recruitment is through the Students' Union and course reps.

Form and Tutor group teachers need to be informed of why their students are participating in the project so that they can support them in gathering feedback at the appropriate times.

Promote the work of the partnership during induction week and offer students the opportunity to be part of the student research group. Explain the benefits of taking part and ideally hand out a flyer with key information about being a student researcher.

Invite more students to the first meeting than you actually want to allow for attrition. This meeting should be shortly after the information session whilst students are still enthusiastic.

Recruit students from different courses to ensure a range of views and interests are represented in the peer feedback.

Suggested feedback questions for Students Researchers

1. What did you enjoy most about the activity?
2. What didn't you enjoy about the activity?
3. What did you learn about the topic from taking part in the activity? (This could be anything from teamwork, a new revision skill or more about the options open to you when you leave college)
4. What career do you want to go into when you leave college and why?
5. How do you think what you learnt will help you with what you want to do after you finish your course/A-levels?
6. Why might you or your friends want to go onto university? What are the benefits of going to university?
7. How confident do you feel about making decisions about your future having taken part in the activity?
8. How much more aware are you of the options available to you after leaving college having taken part in the activity?

Note: 1-6 are the initial questions, 4, 5 and 6 are to be replaced by 7 and 8 on the second round of peer feedback.

Do	Don't
✓ Provide the college with a detailed brief of what the initiative involves and the skills and attributes the students will require.	✗ Give the students too many activities to gather feedback on at any one time.
✓ Ensure the project brief is effectively communicated to all those involved from the start.	✗ Ask them to gather feedback on activities that were a long time ago or not substantial / memorable.
✓ Go to the student session with a list of the activities they have had / will be having.	✗ Expect to get all the students you ask for, in the right combination. Often you get who is available on the day.
✓ Explain clearly to the students what they are being asked to do and why.	✗ Expect the students to know why they are in the initial workshop session.
✓ Encourage students to use the question framework as a guide and to use their own wording as appropriate.	✗ Expect everyone to have been productive.
✓ Get buy-in from key members of staff i.e., the Careers Lead, and ensure appropriate support is in place.	✗ Expect everyone to turn up for follow-up sessions.
✓ Have at least two facilitators at each feedback session.	✗ Expect the feedback to be neatly packaged / summed up in a PowerPoint or a word document; it if is then this is a bonus.
✓ Actively include the Careers Lead (or designated member of staff) in sessions where possible.	✗ Rush your time with the students, it is recommended that the first sessions runs for approximately 90 minutes with follow-up sessions lasting about one hour.
✓ Encourage colleges to set up a shared forum such as a designated group in MS Teams.	✗ Involve Level 3/Year 2 college students, unless they participated previously, i.e., in Year 1.
✓ Colleges should concentrate on working with first year level 3 students.	✗ Require students to participate.
✓ Provide the students with appropriate incentives such as freebies, vouchers or college reward points.	
✓ Encourage students to meet as a group in between sessions, with or without their teacher.	
✓ Use student feedback, or even lack of feedback, as talking points to gain a deeper understanding of the issues and concerns students are facing relating their future.	
✓ Refresh peer feedback questions around future careers paths and aspirations to avoid duplication of answers and to maintain student interest.	
✓ Book follow-up visits at the time of the initial workshop visit.	
✓ Arrange a day when students can share their findings more widely, i.e., to their local partnership, ideally with students from other participating colleges.	
✓ Draw on student ideas and listen to them.	
✓ Be appreciative of their efforts.	

Things to be aware of that could affect the success of the project

- Internal changes to the college – including staff absence.
- External factors, such as Covid-19.
- When activities are delivered – they may not always be within an appropriate timescale for the evaluation i.e., they maybe be delivered too late in the summer term.
- Opportunities, time / space, when the students can gather peer feedback.
- The dynamics of the group.
- The quality of the peer feedback.

Timeline and step by step guide to setting up student researcher groups

The following timeline to setting up student research groups is only a guide, and much will depend on local circumstances, i.e., when the delivery of activities is scheduled to take place. It will also depend on how long groups run for. This guidance is aimed at those looking to work with student researchers for one academic year, however, regardless of length, the process is the same and the following can be adapted for shorter programmes.

STUDENT RESEARCHER TIMETABLE														
ACTIVITY	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J
Stage 1 - approach colleges	■	■	■	■										
Approach colleges about setting up	■	■	■	■										
Be clear about what you want to do and when	■	■	■	■										
Why you want to do it	■	■	■	■										
Benefits to college and students	■	■	■	■										
Which students you want	■	■	■	■										
Book at least 2 co-ordinators for each future session	■	■	■	■										
Stage 2 - initial training workshops				■	■									
Run information sessions during induction week, ask for students to volunteer				■	■									
Run intial student training workshops as soon as possible after the information session, allow 90 mins				■	■									
Ensure students know aims and objectives				■	■									
Provide training in research skills to gather peer feedback				■	■									
Decide which activities they will gather feedback on				■	■									
Book in follow-up sessions-allow 1 hr				■	■									
Stage 3 - revisit college - January								■						
January college visit								■						
Initial peer feedback on activities								■						
Iron out any teething problems								■						
Provide students with refreshed questions								■						
Agree next set of activities to focus on								■						
Stage 4 - revisit college - April											■			
As above											■			
Stage 5 - arrange student conference													■	
Arrange student research conference													■	
Plan conference for students to present findings													■	
Build in time for students to feedback on how to recruit/plan/etc													■	

Workshop templates and a suggested agenda for the student research conference can be found in the supplementary resources available with this guidance document on collaborating partners' websites.

Further reading and references

Home - Office for Students How it works. We offer help through local hubs across England. These give impartial advice and information to 1,613 schools and colleges, which reach over 180,000 young people and their parents. **www.ofsuniconnect.org**

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The Lundy model of child participation **ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/lundy_ model_of_participation.pdf**

UNICEF (1990) The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), UNICEF London, **downloads.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_united_nations_ convention_on_the_rights_of_the_child.pdf**

United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the child **www.ohchr.org/sites/default/ files/crc.pdf**

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