

# The Inclusion Consultant pilot

A reflection on a student voice scheme to help close the ethnicity degree awarding gap

Mathew Haine, Student Outcomes Manager, University of Reading

September 2023

## Contents

Contextual statement.....	1
Introduction .....	2
The Inclusion Consultant scheme .....	3
Research and design .....	3
Recruitment and training.....	4
Implementation .....	5
Student Feedback .....	6
Staff Feedback.....	8
Reflection: What we learned .....	9
Establishing the group.....	9
Mitigating risk .....	10
Creating change .....	10
Conclusion.....	11
References.....	11

## Contextual statement

This report was written to reflect upon and review the Inclusion Consultant pilot programme. It has been used to inform planning for the Access & Participation Plan (APP) 2024-2028.

# Introduction

There is a growing body of research advocating for student partnership in educational policy. Involving students in decision making can improve relationships between students and their institution (Bovill, 2019; Verwoord, 2016) and may even result in improved academic outcomes (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004). Empowering students to be 'change agents' in their educational experience subverts the traditional top-down power dynamic which positions them as passive consumers.

This is especially important for students from underrepresented communities whose perspectives can often be minimised or overlooked. Students with lived experience of systemic inequalities are uniquely capable of providing personal insights that open avenues for more inclusive policy and practice (Bertrand, 2014). Each institution will have local, specific barriers to equality which must be identified and challenged. The changing face of education and lasting effects of the coronavirus pandemic mean we need an ongoing dialogue with students to anticipate and meet emergent needs.

One of the challenges of ensuring diverse voices are heard is that typical means of gathering student input (such as unpaid focus groups or drop-in feedback sessions) often inadequately meet the needs of underrepresented students and staff, implicitly centring the views and experiences of privileged groups (Felten et al., 2013). Students from underrepresented groups are more likely to face barriers to participation such as a reduced sense of belonging, a lack of representation and financial hardship. As part of any efforts to close the degree awarding gaps, we must deliberately cater to students most affected by inequalities in education. This ensures that we tailor solutions to relevant needs.

The need for such a scheme was clear at the University of Reading. Our degree awarding gaps – percentage point differences in final degree outcomes between comparison groups – are broadly consistent with those around the sector in relation to ethnicity. In 2020/21, 7.8% fewer Black, Asian and minority ethnic final degree qualifiers achieved a 2:1 or first-class degree than their white counterparts. An internal investigation, 'The Race Equality Review', uncovered differential experiences for Black, Asian and minority ethnic students and staff across wide ranging aspects (University of Reading, 2021). Our students were telling us that they desired more safe discussion spaces, more inclusive learning environments and the opportunity to have their perspectives help shape decision-making (see also Wong et al., 2021). The university is already committed to student voice and partnership and representation and principles of diversity and inclusion are embedded in these undertakings. However, the unique focus on designing awarding gap interventions with students required us to establish a bespoke mechanism specifically for representative student voice.

This report reflects our attempt to develop a student voice pilot scheme oriented towards degree awarding gaps. It documents how we devised and implemented the scheme, showcases participant feedback, and summarises what we learned, including recommendations for practice for the future.

# The Inclusion Consultant scheme

## Research and design

We drew from precedent set by the University of Hertfordshire’s ‘BME Advocates’ (Barefoot and Boons, 2019) and Kingston University’s ‘Inclusive Curriculum Consultants’. Using an adapted version of the Appreciative Inquiry project planning tool (Cooperrider et. al, 2008), our goal was to extract the most favourable aspects of schemes such as this to fit our institutional context (see our Advance HE case study, Wong et al., 2022).

We took the view that closing awarding gaps requires improving student experience in and out of the classroom. Consequently, we broadened the remit beyond curricula to enable us to meet the range of issues that students may be facing. We invited colleagues to request feedback on whatever barriers to student experience they had observed in their practice.

*Table 1 - A theory of change for the Inclusion Consultants scheme*

Assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusive teaching strategies and practices can positively impact student experience and attainment.</li> <li>• Engaging students to review the inclusivity of our practices will lead to more welcoming and effective learning environments.</li> </ul>
Inputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Faculty/staff time and commitment to engaging in consultations.</li> <li>• Facilitators to moderate consultations and manage student cohort.</li> <li>• Financial investment in student labour.</li> </ul>
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weekly consultations for faculty/staff to collaborate with students to jointly design inclusive teaching and practice.</li> <li>• Staff subsequently implement the co-produced practices.</li> </ul>
Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New resources, materials, and methods</li> </ul>
Short/medium term outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved teaching practices – faculty gain a deeper understanding of diverse student needs and preferences.</li> <li>• Enhanced engagement from diverse students – participating students become more engaged in the learning process as they see their input reflected in changes to the university; wider student body benefit from enhanced practice.</li> <li>• Increased sense of belonging – participating students feel a valued part of university life.</li> <li>• Better communication skills – faculty and students develop skills and experience relating to one another and problem-solving sensitive topics</li> </ul>
Long-term outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased attainment for participating students</li> <li>• Increased attainment for student beneficiaries of improved inclusive practices</li> </ul>

In 2021/22, we invited educational decision makers to visit the students and participate in moderated, problem-solving workshops, rather than deploying students around the university. We were reluctant to have students navigate environments which they may associate with reduced belonging, unequal power structures and conflicts of interest. We also wanted to provide an approach to eliciting feedback that would contain sensitive discussions within a consistent, facilitated safe space that was familiar to the students.

It was important that students did not feel compelled to shared lived experiences solely for the benefit of staff. We were committed to treating student colleagues as professionals with expertise worthy of respect, paying them accordingly, and emphasising the employability benefits of participation. As one Inclusion Consultant and third-year Economics student wrote: “When I’m applying for jobs, ‘Consultant’ just sounds better.”

## Recruitment and training

To encourage engagement from academic schools and facilitate the dynamic exchange of ideas, we enlisted at least one Inclusion Consultant from each academic school. Our focus was on providing an inclusive recruitment journey. We issued a carefully worded job advertisement calling specifically for students who identify as being from communities that have historically faced marginalisation in education. We emphasised that the ethnicity awarding gap was our focus and we therefore sought student colleagues with minority ethnic heritage. We offered a video application alternative to the written application (which, it transpired, no student chose to use) and allowed students to select their own interview time slots across multiple days. We designed the interview process to be inclusive and simulate the real-world experience of doing the job. We invited groups of 4-6 applicants to take part in moderated group discussions in which students could respond as much or as little as they wished to.

Twenty students were recruited from a pool of 75 candidates. The level of study and domicile status were evenly distributed but there were fewer male students who applied.

*Table 2 - Overview of Inclusion Consultant characteristics*

<b>Pronouns</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Fee paying status</b>
She/her	6	Home
She/her	6	Home
He/him	6	Home
He/him	6	Home
She/her	6	Home
She/her	6	Home
She/her	6	International
She/They	6	Home
She/her	6	Home
She/her	6	Home
She/her	6	Home

He/him	6	Home
He/him	5	International
She/her	7	International
She/her	7	International
He/him	7	International
She/her	7	International
They/them	8	Home

The onboarding period took place across three two-hour training sessions, during the first three weeks of January 2022. This was considered critical for developing students' confidence to speak freely among staff. A three-part, six-hour training programme was designed to achieve this:

- Session one: Social Justice in Higher Education

The Director of Student Success introduced the concepts of awarding gaps and inequality in education. We agreed on a set of ground rules to maintain a safe discussion space in which students could share lived experience if they wished to and practiced setting boundaries.

- Session two: 'Using your voice'.

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor taught the group public speaking skills and listened to Inclusion Consultants give speeches about 'the one thing they would change to make university more inclusive'.

- Session three: 'Building an anti-racist institution'.

The group received a presentation on concepts such as decolonising curricula, inclusive practice, and student partnership, from a colleague in the Academic Development and Enhancement team.

## Implementation

Two-hour consultations were held at a reoccurring time and place each week, in which colleagues from around the university met with the cohort, presented elements of their practice, and participated in a group dialogue to problem-solve around a specific question or theme. Consultation requests were made to Student, Success and Engagement who met with participating staff to brief them on expectations and plan the discussion topics. The requirement for a consultation topic being approved was that it would tangibly benefit underrepresented students, theoretically reducing awarding gaps. The consultation was moderated by the facilitators. Some consultations took place online and others in-person, depending on the availability of the student colleagues.

Given the additional burdens on students' time, attendance was elective, and students could request to participate online. The consultations covered a vast array of topics and practical activities including designing new resources, reviewing internal policies, and evaluating teaching and learning materials.

The consultations were punctuated by 'group check-ins' in which students could reflect on their experience, suggest improvements to the process and explore problems of their own choosing.

A sample of consultation themes is provided below:

- Muslim student experience and prayer space provisions.
- Harassment and discrimination reporting procedures.
- Improving representation in course content.
- Designing inclusive recruitment materials.
- Reviewing the university's gender identity policy.
- 'Active Bystander' training.
- Experiences of accommodation and the hall warden service.
- Establishing BAME student networks in schools and departments.

Here is a sample of institutional changes which were influenced by or resulted from Inclusion Consultant activity:

- The Decolonising the Curriculum toolkit resource.
- The establishment of a small prayer/wellbeing breakout space on campus.
- The licensing of a new reporting system for harassment and discrimination entitled 'Report + Support'.
- Amendments to the Hall Warden role.
- Increased engagement in the Life Tools webinar series.
- Provision of online Active Bystander training.
- Guidance on inclusive teaching methods and practices.

## **Student Feedback**

Using an online survey with closed and open ended questions, the scheme received very positive feedback from participating students. Out of 20 respondents, 13 rated their 'overall impression' as 'very good,' and the remaining 7 rated it as 'good.' Students also expressed positivity about the scheme's effectiveness in providing a platform for underrepresented students to share their views. Specifically, 14 out of 20 respondents found it 'very effective,' while 6 out of 20 considered it 'effective.'

The results were not as decisively positive when it came to whether the scheme was effective in producing positive changes in services, policies, or practices. Only 2 out of 20 students found it 'very effective', 14 out of 20 considered it 'effective,' and the remaining 4 out of 20 rated it as 'neither effective nor ineffective.'

The participating students were asked to rate the scheme in terms of whether they felt improvement in several areas, including self-confidence, a sense of belonging, understanding of university, employability, confidence interacting with staff, and attitudes towards studies. Notably, no student responded with 'declined' or 'declined a lot' in any area.

The most significant transformation was observed in confidence when interacting with staff, with 13 out of 20 students reporting 'improved a lot,' and the remaining 7

indicating 'improved.' In all other cases, typically 1-3 students said, 'stayed the same,' while the rest were evenly split between 'improved' and 'improved a lot.' The area with the least noticeable impact was attitudes towards studies, with 10 out of 20 respondents selecting 'stayed the same'; 3 chose 'improved,' and 7 chose 'improved a lot'.

Thematic analysis of responses to the open-ended questions 'what did you enjoy most about the scheme?' and 'what would have improved the scheme?' produced four broad themes: "giving us a voice", "empowering us to make change", 'helping us to engage' and 'closing the feedback loop.' Illustrative quotes are provided below.

#### Giving us a voice.

Most respondents highlighted their satisfaction with the opportunity to share authentic views and have their opinion respected:

*"It made me feel like I actually had a say for once, and that they cared about my input/opinion, without having to worry about how it would be received."*

Some students explicitly tied this to the marginalisation of underrepresented groups:

*"It gives a voice to students, particularly minority ones, so the university is gaining an understanding of how we actually think and feel about things."*

In their accounts, students frequently described benefitting from an inclusive environment in which they built positive relationships with staff and fellow students.

*"I was confident that my opinions were heard and appreciated not just by [the facilitators] but the external guests and the entire team who supported each other throughout."*

Some students noted the equalising effect of a moderated discussion space:

*"I never felt like it was 'teacher speaking to student', we were all equals putting forward ideas. I really liked how collaborative it was when staff came to work with us."*

#### Empowering us to make change

Some students emphasised that they valued the knowledge and skills they developed, on a personal level.

*"The insight it gives you into how different university policies work was really beneficial for me, personally."*

*"I understood the functioning of the university in depth. I passed this onto my peers."*

*"It improved aspects of my life like self-confidence, employability and courage."*

Around half of respondents noted feeling empowered to affect change and redistribute power.

*“I understood more about the barriers and how to overcome them. This was fulfilling as the work I put into it will have a positive effect on the minority group I’m a part of.”*

### Helping us to engage

Around half of respondents provided suggestions for improving the delivery such that students would feel more prepared and engaged.

Most responses in this vein reported better outcomes from in-person workshops.

*“We need to have more in-person sessions. Online is good for people with issues getting to campus but you just don’t have the same impact online.”*

Some students expressed frustration at the perceived unfairness of a vocal minority of students leading the discussion.

*“I don’t believe it’s fair that some members come in and give it their all, and others are paid to sit back and not speak.”*

### Closing the feedback loop

Many students noted an absence of follow-up information that kept them updated on the progress of their recommendations. This is a key opportunity area for improving student experience in future iterations.

*“I would like to get emails in the upcoming future regarding the projects we worked on this year as I would love to gain insights on how the university has handled the information and ideas that was shared during the scheme.”*

## **Staff Feedback**

Staff attending the consultations hoped to “reflect on the experiences of students”, “use their insights to make meaningful changes to practices”, “demonstrate the value of focus groups to colleagues” and “find practical solutions to enhancing inclusivity.” We received 12 responses via a simple online survey.

Responses to the extent to which staff objectives for the consultations were met were overwhelmingly positive with 11/12 staff rating ‘very well met’ and 1/12 rating ‘well met’.

Staff were asked to rate various aspects of their experience from ‘very poor’ to ‘very good’: information provided prior to the consultation, how the consultation was delivered, effectiveness against objectives, value added personally, value added professionally, improvements to my practice and engagement from students. Responses were overwhelming positive with most respondents responding, ‘very good’ across most areas. The exceptions with more mixed responses were ‘value added to me personally’ (4: very good, 4: good, 4: satisfactory) and ‘improvements to



my practice' (6: very good, 4: good, 2: satisfactory). This signifies a theme across the student and staff feedback that the experience was positive but not all consultations produced tangible outputs and explicit enhancements to practice.

Thematic analysis of the responses produced the following themes: “*valuable insights*” and “*translating feedback into action.*”

Most staff responses highlighted an appreciation for the unique insights provided by Inclusion Consultants:

*“I learned a lot about the issues the students think are important and was impressed by their solutions... some of the problems were things that I had not anticipated, so it was hugely valuable.”*

*“I thoroughly enjoyed the session...the students provided valuable insights into our EDI work and how we might take that forward.”*

Some answers noted the inclusive facilitation which enabled the exchange of ideas:

*“[The facilitators] have clearly built a great rapport with and between the students.”*

Some respondents highlighted that the solutions discussed in consultations do not necessarily translate directly into change:

*“As a result of the student input, I realised that we could not meet the objectives discussed during the consultation.”*

Others felt that longer term engagement with students was needed to ensure the implementation of solutions was done properly:

*“I would have liked a follow up session to find out if we were on the right track with their suggestions.”*

## **Reflection: What we learned**

### **Establishing the group**

For most participants, employability and earning was the greatest attraction to apply – altruism being a secondary motivation - and so career development is a central focus. One student confirmed that the specific language of seeking to provide a trans-inclusive space was the encouragement needed to apply.

The norming process took time. Students were reticent to criticise the university directly to its staff, initially. Reflective discussion revealed that they feared facing academic penalties if the feedback was viewed by academic staff from their school or department. Discussing this dynamic and providing onboarding activities that promoted group social cohesion ameliorated this concern.

Proactive facilitation is the cornerstone of fostering an inclusive discussion structure. Questions such as, “tell us about when you felt excluded” do a disservice to students who should volunteer this type of experience at their own discretion. The Inclusion Consultants valued the discursive group feedback model in which the responsibility

to speak was shared. Facilitation techniques that intentionally include a plurality of voices and increase student confidence are essential. It was sometimes necessary to re-phrase or divert questions from external guests that threatened to jeopardise this safe climate. In other cases, external guests were reluctant to ask questions about lived experiences and facilitators chose to do so on their behalf.

### **Mitigating risk**

Managing students' faith in the process of institutional change is arguably the most critical – and most difficult - element of representative student voice/partnership. Universities bear a responsibility to avoiding worsening underrepresented students' sense of alienation. This is made difficult by the reality that consultations can produce mixed results. The changes that do result from student feedback do not always unfold in a way students can perceive or predict. For example, the impact of colleagues developing a more inclusive lens or disseminating the groups contributions was invisible to the group. The student voice efforts did not always produce recommendations that we were administratively capable of implementing and this could be a source of disappointment to the students.

Focus groups and reciprocal dialogues create a sense of public vulnerability in which students can feel pressured to moderate their views. It takes skilful facilitation and a dedicated norming process to empower students to overcome these concerns and speak with confidence. Some students are inhibited by cultural, or language barriers and participation is typically led by a vocal minority. There is also the plain risk of harm if the rules and expectations underpinning the safe and supportive environment are not followed, for instance if discriminatory views are shared and not challenged. We agree that if students perceive the exercise as having been harmful, tokenistic, or having not yielded change in the manner they were expecting, it may further erode their trust (Bertrand, 2014).

### **Creating change**

The aspect of the scheme which garnered the most negative feedback from participants was a mismatch in expectations regarding outputs and changes. Some students felt of specific consultations that the facilitating staff did not orient the discussion enough towards solution-finding and practical strategies. For staff, there were occasions when the student feedback exceeded what the university could implement. The slow nature of change means closing the feedback loop is not easy to achieve. Some recommendations given by students took over a year to come into effect and the students who gave them had left the university. In future, consultations will be planned with clearer outputs in mind and staff will be supported to plan the consultation delivery based on what is in within their power to affect. Staff participating in consultations will receive follow up engagement to determine the extent to which student recommendations had been adopted and implemented, so that the feedback loop can be closed on an ongoing basis.

The Inclusion Consultants scheme is making strides towards general sector recommendations for closing degree awarding gaps such as 'developing racially inclusive learning environments' and 'having conversations about race' (NUS, 2019). The scheme therefore appears effective in building intermediate outcomes linked to

attainment, such as positive relationships with staff and a greater sense of belonging. However, it is difficult to assess the impact on the broader student cohorts who are receiving the enhancements in the longer term, and the direct linkages to final degree outcomes (i.e., the awarding gap). A more robust evaluation strategy could be developed to comprehensively illustrate how policy and practice changes resulting from the Inclusion Consultant scheme are having an impact by focusing on individual changes.

Where progress can be made, project staff must be willing to lobby to translate the feedback into actions and progress. This includes petitioning colleagues to act by circulating the feedback to wider audiences. This may potentially undermine students' trust in the confidentiality of the original discussion if their consent is not adequately sought.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, creating change through representative student co-production highlights the importance of persistence and a commitment to inclusivity in higher education.

The Inclusion Consultants scheme will continue and be enhanced iteratively to address the challenges and shortcomings exposed by the pilot. In each year of delivery, the recruitment of the scheme will be adapted to reach the target student cohorts who most affected by awarding gaps. In future, we seek to focus on input from Black students, mature students and students who self-identify as experiencing financial hardship. We aim to continually improve our delivery methods and prioritise consultations in which tangible outputs can emerge. These efforts to bridge the gap between feedback and action must be coordinated and respectful of students' expectations of confidentiality. Assessing the broader impact on the student population and direct linkages to degree outcomes remains a growth area but a challenge, prompting the need for a strong evaluation strategy.

The Inclusion Consultants scheme demonstrates the potential for meaningful change, especially on participating staff and students but also to higher education institutions. Continued dedication to refining the process, addressing challenges, and pursuing implementation will be key to its long-term success.

## **Notes**

This report was reviewed by the APP evaluation team with some suggestions on structure and reporting.

## **References**

Barefoot, H.C. and Boons, C. (2019) 'Developing a BME student advocate programme', *Compass: Journal of Learning and Teaching*, 12(1). doi:10.21100/compass.v12i1.936.

Bertrand M. (2014). Reciprocal dialogue between educational decision makers and students of color: Opportunities and obstacles. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 50(5), 812–843. Doi:10.1177/0013161x14542582

Bovill, C. (2019) 'Co-creation in learning and teaching: The case for a whole-class approach in Higher Education', *Higher Education*, 79(6), pp. 1023–1037. doi:10.1007/s10734-019-00453-w.

Cooperrider, D.L., Whitney, D.K. and Stavros, J.M. (2008) *Appreciative inquiry handbook: For leaders of change*. Brunswick, OH: Crown Custom Pub., Inc.

Felten, P. et al. (2013) 'A call for expanding inclusive student engagement in Sotl', *Teaching & Learning Inquiry The ISSOTL Journal*, 1(2), pp. 63–74. doi:10.20343/teachlearninqu.1.2.63.

Flutter, J. and Rudduck, J. (2004) *Consulting Pupils: What's in It for Schools?* Routledge, London. DOI:10.4324/9780203464380\_chapter\_4

University of Reading (2021) 'Race Equality Review', Available at: <https://static.reading.ac.uk/content/PDFs/files/race-equality-review-report-2021.pdf> (Accessed 09/08/2023)

Verwoord, R. (2016) 'Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching: A guide for faculty', *International Journal for Academic Development*, 21(1), pp. 86–89. doi:10.1080/1360144x.2016.1124967.

Wong, B., ElMorally, R. and Copsey-Blake, M. (2021) 'Fair and square': What do students think about the ethnicity degree awarding gap?, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(8), pp. 1147–1161. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2021.1932773

Wong, B., Haine, M., De Burgos, M. M., Henderson, A-M., and Copsey-Blake, M. (2022). Promoting an inclusive culture at the University of Reading: A case-study. *Advance HE*. Available [here](#).