The Student Voice at UQ: A Practical Guide

The student voice at UQ

The student voice plays an integral role in academic and professional work across the University of Queensland.

A large number of UQ students are highly passionate about contributing to this work and in influencing the strategic direction of the University as a whole. Gaining students' insights on initiatives both in learning and extra-curricular spaces helps to foster a culture of partnership at the University and places students as active participants in their own learning experience.

This handbook seeks to share the strategies that UQ staff members employ to elicit successfully the student voice in ways that are beneficial to both the staff members and student participants in these activities. For the purposes of this handbook, 'student voice activities' refer to any group activities in which students are asked to provide feedback, such as focus groups, interviews, or student forums.

At the end of this guide is a short bibliography of some useful resources for tips on how to run successful student voice activities.

How to recruit participants successfully

Recruiting participants for student voice activities can, at times, be a challenge, and activity leaders can be surprised at the amount of registered participants that do not actually turn up to the activity.

To give yourself the best chance of recruiting the required number of participants – and ensuring that they attend your session – employ the following strategies:

1. Plan ahead and leave yourself ample time to recruit participants

- In general, you will need a minimum of three weeks to give yourself enough time to recruit and notify participants of location, time, and any requirements.

2. Make the session sound appealing and exciting

- You are asking people to give up time and make an effort – this requires you to sell the opportunity as much as possible.

3. Choose a time that is suitable for your desired cohort

- Early mornings or late afternoons may be too much to expect of volunteers
- Is it a good time of semester, or are there exams / assignment deadlines?
- If student participants are required from a particular program / school, are there any key lectures or events occurring at the same time as your activity?

4. Choose a location that is easy to find and access

- Will participants need a map to locate the building and room?

5. Clearly advertise what is required of participants and what they should expect from the session

- Will this activity involve a group activity, or a one-on-one interview?
- Will participants need to complete a pre-survey?
- How long will the session last for?
- What else is required of them on the day?

6. Explain why the student voice is so important to your work

- What is the bigger project that this activity will help to inform? For example, will this contribute to policy change at the University, or the development of new materials for a particular program?
- Please note: this is often the biggest incentive of all – students want to know what they are contributing to and the significance of this work.

7. Provide incentives to participants. These should be clearly outlined and might include:

- A UQU voucher to spend on campus
- Free food / refreshments
- UQ merchandise (clothing, stationery etc.).

8. Outline any skills that participants may develop through this activity e.g.:

- interview skills
- group work
- communication skills.

Appreciate your participants

Experts highlight the need for moderators to recognise the fact that participants have sacrificed time and made a significant effort to attend your session.

Recognition of this should be apparent from the very beginning of the process, starting with the recruitment stage.

How to run effective student voice activities

There are a number of factors that help student voice activities to meet their aims and to make the experience for participants an inclusive and engaging one. Some things to consider when running your activities:

Be clear in your aims

- What data do you need from these sessions? What questions / exercises will help you to get this?

Make sure all participants are clear in the overall objectives of the activity

- This should be communicated in an email prior to the activity, but also made explicit at the beginning of the session by the activity leader.

Create a relaxing, comfortable environment - participants are more likely to talk freely if they feel relaxed

- Think carefully about the suitability of the location. Does it have natural light and comfortable seating? Is it big enough for your needs?
- Consider the layout of the room and whether it is conducive to group discussion or not.

Provide refreshments (including breakfast / lunch if the activity lasts for 2 hours or more)

- This is particularly important if your session is during or near mealtimes
- Light refreshments have been proven to help stimulate discussion.

Aim for 6-12 participants per session

- Fewer than 6 participants significantly decreases the chances of stimulating discussions to take place
- More than 12 participants makes the activity difficult to moderate and to record the views of all, meaning that valuable data may be lost
- Remember to over recruit by a couple of participants as it is likely you will get at least one or two 'no-shows'.

Write your questions so that they are clear and easy to understand

- You will likely have a number of participants for whom English is a second or third language – avoid unnecessarily complicated vocabulary and explain any technical terms or jargon
- Ask a colleague to read over these for you – a second pair of eyes can be invaluable.

Don't dive straight into your key questions

- Run some icebreaker / warmer exercises to ease participants into the session
- Ask lead-in questions to stimulate ideas on the general topic before introducing your key questions.

Be creative with your discussion exercises

- Try to avoid simply asking participants a list of questions
- Use visual aids or other multimedia to activate more stimulating conversations and interest
- Use interactive activities e.g. brainstorming ideas or their input on white boards.

Facilitate the conversation, but allow organic discussions to develop

- Leave time for participants to explore themes related to your questions
- Sometimes a 'backseat approach' as an activity leader can allow you to gain insights you may not have previously considered
- Ensure there is adequate two-way communication between activity leaders and participants.

How to increase the chances of re-engagement

Recruiting participants effectively and including them in well-run, engaging voice activities will inevitably boost the chances of re-engagement by these participants for future student voice activities. Most important of all, however, is to 'close the loop' with participants.

What is closing the loop and why should I do it?

'Closing the loop' means contacting participants after the voice activity has finished and informing them how their input contributed to your project, and how this work is progressing. This not only reinforces to participants how valuable their input is, but it also informs them of the impact that they have had in the wider context of the University. Understanding the extent of this impact is essential to feelings of satisfaction among participants that their time volunteering was well spent and of persuading them to volunteer their time for future opportunities.

Closing the loop can be achieved by simply emailing all participants in the days or even weeks after the voice activity to thank them for their contribution, inform them of how their insights were used, and explain how this will inform your project or work going forward.

In doing so, you increase the chances of future activity leaders to recruit successfully participants, and you reinforce the importance and value of the student voice to the wider student body at the University.

How to close the loop:

Closing the loop is one of the most important parts of the student voice process. To close the loop remember to:

- Thank participants for their contribution
- Inform participants of how their information will used
- Let participants know why their information will benefit the overall student experience


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Further information & resources

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Seale, Jane. "Doing student voice work in higher education: an exploration of the value of participatory methods." British Educational Research Journal 36, no. 6 (2009): 995-1015.

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