



Inviting everyone to the HE dinner party and empowering them *all* to take part in the conversation!

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ABSTRACT

This vignette illustrates how listening to students' voices can transform participation into empowerment. It follows the journey of 'Bridging the Gaps', a pre-arrival transition course designed to reassure and empower new students; particularly those from widening participation backgrounds. By weaving student voices into its design and delivery, the course created a space where confidence could grow, and belonging could begin before university life officially started. In short, a story of the exclusive attempting to become inclusive.

Keywords: student voice, widening participation, transition, belonging, empowerment

Setting the scene

Louise

I have learned that one amongst many challenges for students transitioning to university as undergraduates is to find and have confidence in their voice in the HE academic context (Gall et al., 2000; Richardson et al., 2012). As a post 1992 university, the University of Brighton is committed to creating an inclusive and equitable environment for all students, with a focus on addressing differential outcomes through various widening participation initiatives and strategies (Kift et al., 2010; Stokes, 2021, 2024). In reality, that means that we offer places to many students who traditionally would never have gone to university. A very big part of my role, and the most rewarding, is to try to smooth out those differences, making the playing field as equitable as possible, empowering them to not only stay on their courses, but to excel and find their voice.

"There is a clear link between students' ability to exercise voice and their achievement levels" (Gennrich & Dison, 2018, p.1).

As lead for transition in the Skills Hub, I was tasked with designing a pre-arrival skills programme, called 'Bridging the Gaps'; the aim of which was to offer early reassurance and academic confidence *before* students arrive on campus. Being a working class *first in family* to go to university many years ago, I can still vividly remember how I would spend time in the small seminar groups, struggling to compose contributions in my mind, then somehow missing the moment and inevitably remaining silent.

This reinforced the feeling of being invited to a very middle-class dinner party and not having the confidence to follow or join in with the conversation.

“Student-staff partnership working within higher education is a process in which student voice is critical for success” (McConnell et al., 2025, p.219).

So, to make this project as effective as possible, the presence and influence of student voice needed to be prioritised. As McConnell et al. (2025) argue, spaces for authentic student voice should be *intentionally* created to enable successful student-staff partnerships. To ensure participants recognised the relevance, usefulness, and inclusive delivery of the course content, we grounded the project in this student-staff partnership from the outset. The entire design of ‘Bridging the Gaps’ was shaped by a focus group of five student partners who explored this guiding question: “Which 5 academic skills would have made you feel more confident in your first semester/year at university?”.

In response to their conversations, we made a pool of resources which reflected their ‘I wish I had seen or known about before...’ lists and five live ‘How to ...’ workshops which covered those five skills.

To acknowledge and celebrate that partnership, I am particularly delighted to have as co-authors two of the students who were involved in the two key stages of ‘Bridging the Gaps’ project; design and delivery.

Here are Elizabeth’s perceptions on how *listened to* they felt.

Elizabeth

My main concern when starting university was the academic reading and writing required, and I would’ve loved the opportunity to prepare these essential skills in the summer before first year. It was my first time studying since finishing my A-Levels over 10 years ago, and I was anxious about catching up academically. Although there is so much support available once you’ve started your course at the University of Brighton, it’s a lot to take in alongside the course learning and preparing for winter assessments.

I remember sharing in the focus group that this academic anxiety meant I put a lot of pressure on myself in first year to complete the course reading list in-depth, which was exhausting during assessment periods. Tips like skimming a journal article’s introduction and conclusion to determine relevancy before reading in full may sound obvious, but I felt like I needed permission to be selective in both what and how I read for assessments. Hearing other students in the focus group talk about similar reading concerns and experiences when starting university was really reassuring and our discussion is closely captured in the ‘How to Read Effectively and Critically’ resources. They provide guidance on good practice when completing literature reviews and assessments, including reading techniques such as skimming and scanning, which would’ve been so helpful to access before my course started.

Similarly, the Q&As for student ambassadors after each workshop is a brilliant idea; the encouragement and insight from mature students in the year above me have been invaluable as I’ve progressed through my degree, and I think being able to tap into that support before you’ve started your course is incredible. I’m so grateful to the research team who sought out our voices, and it’s exciting to see our experiences translated into resources that will hopefully bridge the gaps for future students from diverse academic backgrounds.

Louise

It was essential to maintain and prioritise the presence of student ambassadors in the workshop delivery. Throughout each workshop, they exemplified reassuring and knowledgeable voices which empathised, informed and encouraged participants. The final workshop was entitled 'How to 'be' at uni' and was led entirely by the student ambassadors.

Here are Hasti's reflections on that experience and the perceived impact their voices had on the course participants.

Hasti

During the first live workshop, I immediately put myself in the shoes of my first-year self and experienced the doubt and lack of confidence once again. I had rarely felt *enough* for my course compared to my peers in first year. The imposter syndrome took the best of me, and I did not reach out to seek help from the Skills Hub, personal tutors or others. This resulted in me being unsuccessful in my first year and having to repeat the year. In my old self's eyes, I recognise the Bridging the Gaps content and activities were exactly what I had needed in my 'first' first year.

I was one of five student ambassadors who joined the team of Skills Hub professionals to deliver the week of lunch time live online workshops. As ambassadors we started to break the ice for the cohort as we answered their questions and left comments on the platform to make the environment lively and useful. I found that the weeklong sessions gave the participants so much confidence to actively participate, as they started interacting with our team with their cameras and mics on, consistently contributing with polls and questions, resulting in more reassurance on starting university as freshers. It was as though the first-year students were opening their shells to us and the new experience of higher education.

To note an example, an ambassador mentioned their experience of receiving support from our Disability and Dyslexia team at the university for her anxiety; opening up to the cohort to reassure them of the procedures the university has in place to aid each student. Following this, a first-year student clearly appreciated the ambassador's experience, related to it and shared their thoughts in the chat about their own struggle with anxiety and how they would be reaching out to be supported by our disability and dyslexia team.

Overall, I sensed that the students valued this programme and clearly felt more confident during and hopefully after the experience.

One more voice

In these very initial stages of reflecting on the efficacy and impact of the transition course, it is encouraging to note that one of the recurring themes emerging in the evaluative feedback is the positive impact of student voice. In response to the question 'Which aspect of the course did you find the most effective and enjoyable?', one participant responded:

Hearing the student ambassadors talk about their experiences whilst starting uni including what they were most looking forward to/excited about as well as their concerns. This made me feel a lot more reassured when I first start uni as I understand more so that everyone is in the same boat and feels the same (course participant, 2025).*

Conclusion

We hope that in truly reflecting student voice, our participants, the dinner party guests, have recognised and understood the language being spoken and as a result will go on to find the courage and confidence to speak up at the illustrious table of HE.

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Biographies

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Hasti Zare is a third-year student in the Masters of Pharmacy (MPharm Hons) course at the University of Brighton. She has a role as Student Ambassador working for the Student Recruitment and Outreach Team.

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