

Student Inclusion Consultants: An inclusive partnership scheme

Vicky Blacklock¹ and Emily Parkin²

¹Student Inclusion Coordinator, Northumbria University

²Student Experience and Enhancement Manager, Northumbria University

Abstract

Northumbria University's Student Inclusion Consultant (SIC) scheme, heavily influenced by the principles of Student as Producer (Neary, 2020), empowers those from underrepresented groups to enhance the inclusivity of our institution. Every year students from all of Northumbria University's campuses, and at all entry points, are offered flexible, paid partnership opportunities to share any barriers they have had in accessing, progressing or succeeding at University with a focus on their lived experience.

Initially piloted in April 2020, a team of SICs is now recruited on a cyclical basis from our student body and informs a wide range of university policies and initiatives. To date, over 50 SIC review projects have been undertaken with staff across both academic and professional service departments. These have explored a range of co-curricular and extra-curricular topics which have included identifying the barriers that student carers might have in accessing course-related field trips and reviewing the accessibility of online Library platforms for international students.

The impact has been wide ranging, including improving the confidence and employability skills of the SICs, enhancing the inclusivity of the student experience, and providing paid work experience which has a positive impact on the cost of living.

Keywords: Underrepresented, Barrier, Access, Success, Inclusion

Summary

Based on principles of partnership (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014), Northumbria University's Student Inclusion Team has employed student interns to work in partnership with the team and wider institution since it was established in 2020. A variety of pilot schemes have been rolled out exploring what works in relation to underrepresented students as partners, with the aims of enhancing inclusion within all areas of the student experience and tackling differential student outcomes and experiences.

Our SIC scheme has been widely regarded as a great example of student engagement practice. The scheme offers a framework of activity focusing on the lived experience and student voice of underrepresented students who have faced barriers in accessing, or succeeding at, university.

SICs are provided with flexible, paid partnership opportunities to enhance inclusive practice and feel empowered with the impact of their insight. Their work offers a clear opportunity to better understand differences in student experience, outcomes and satisfaction, benefitting other institutional activity such as TEF, APP and NSS. Through them, the University benefits from a level of insight and accountability that would not otherwise be possible.

Project Background

The elevation of student voice which is core to the SIC scheme is embedded within the institution's education strategy and also contributes to key agendas including the APP, which states; "At the centre of our plan is engagement to help us to understand our student body" (2019, p. 14). The SIC scheme intends to embed this statement through meaningful engagement with the intended beneficiaries of Northumbria's APP to improve individual success of the students involved, the collective success of the target APP groups through learning from the 'student voice', and by contributing to a culture shift in the way Northumbria approaches both student engagement and support for its underrepresented students.

Engaging students in enhancement activities can have the dual benefit of increasing the sense of belonging of those in paid and voluntary roles (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017), but also have wider impact on belonging through co-creating inclusive environments for all students. This is underpinned by the development of new communities of practice.

Lave and Wenger (1991) first used the term communities of practice to describe learning through practice and participation, which they named situated learning. This learning model refers to both new and returning SICs and to staff members engaged with the scheme who represent established community members and newcomers. One of the initial Student Inclusion Team members previously worked at the University of Lincoln and continues to embed its Student as Producer principles at Northumbria University, due to seeing the positive impact on students, staff and institutional culture firsthand.

When presenting at the RAISE conference in September 2022, two SICs and two members of staff co-created and co-delivered a workshop that built on the Student as Producer legacy while acknowledging the challenges that can exist within this practice, for example the removal of financial barriers for engagement. Delegates of the workshop were encouraged to unpick the potential barriers and benefits of enhancing institutional inclusivity in partnership with underrepresented students. In doing so, they were asked to explore what is meant by the term

‘underrepresented students’ and to identify opportunities to meaningfully engage with these students at their own institutions.

Discussion

There are currently four key ways in which SICs can engage in their role and make an impact, namely Student Reviews; the Inclusive Reciprocal Insight Scheme (IRIS); Content Creation; and Scholarly Opportunities. We will now briefly explore each of these in turn.

Student Reviews encourage SICs to work with staff from across the University as a critical friend, reviewing an element of practice to ensure inclusivity. Student Reviews can be short standalone projects or larger scale collaborative projects inviting multiple SICs to apply a broader lens to an issue. The process itself is fully inclusive, with staff at all professional pay grades across the University encouraged to apply. Student Reviews encourage reflective practice from staff members taking part by proposing they follow the ‘What’ model to achieve clear outputs (Rolfe, Freshwater, & Jasper: 2001).

IRIS focuses on matching a SIC with a member of senior University staff to work together as reciprocal mentors. IRIS is based on an equal partnership between staff and SICs, whereby the student feels empowered to have meaningful and transformative conversations with decision makers who influence or lead change. This develops the SICs’ employability skills and their exposure to professional networks.

The Content Creation strand of activity open to SICs allows them to develop and review content with a student inclusion lens. A previous example of activity undertaken was commissioned by the Nursing department who were keen for male SIC insight into their marketing materials. He noted that there were no male Nursing students visible in the printed or online materials and that the language used was not very inclusive. As a result, the department reviewed their written and visual content and adapted and renewed it accordingly.

Through engaging with Scholarly Opportunities, SICs have been able to disseminate learning and share best practice from the work they have undertaken, as well as begin to develop their career in an academic direction, should they wish. To date, over 20 SICs have worked with academic colleagues to provide an evidence-based insight into their student experience through contributing to a journal (Tong, 2023). As the SIC scheme develops, SICs are increasingly being offered opportunities to engage and lead on research-led projects.

Outcomes and Impact

The direct impact of the SIC scheme from those students taking part is clearly highlighted in this example of student feedback:

“I was able to find a sense of community in becoming an SIC, as well as participating in additional opportunities which allowed me to meet senior members of university staff. The opportunity to meet people from different year groups and courses was really good, and insightful for what is yet to come in my journey at Northumbria. This experience has really encouraged me to socialise more and gain confidence in approaching staff members”.

The level of interest to become a SIC is reflected in the increased number of applications received from students year on year. Many existing SICs are keen to continue working within the Student Inclusion team, developing themselves and the impact of the scheme itself.

Building on the success of the work to date, 2022/23 has seen the appointment of four Senior SICs. Their role focusses on the planning and delivery of a range of approaches to student voice engagement, developing diverse methods of participation for facilitating student co-creation and capturing insight and ensures that the SIC scheme continues to be informed by the underrepresented student voice. Their role has seen them co-develop and co-deliver on the recruitment, training and ongoing support of the broader SIC team. Not only does their appointment to a Senior position provide these students with a professional development opportunity, it also ensures the SIC scheme continues to be directly informed by student voice in its strategy and operations.

One of the best examples of a Student Review in practice was recently undertaken by two SICs who identify as having lived experience of the transgender community. They worked with an academic who was keen to help lecturers to support their transgender students effectively, and to educate teaching staff about the needs of transgender students.

Based on their personal insight and research, the SICs created a wealth of documents and references for staff within that faculty which they presented at a faculty away day. This included a timeline of trans history, a presentation based on how academic staff can support transgender students, and a list of agencies to support Trans People in the Northeast.

The staff member summarised their experience at working with the SICs and the impact of commissioning a Student Review as follows:

“it [the presentation] was amazing. Not only were the SICs amazing but it generated such incredible discussion afterwards and the Head of Department had to draw it to a close in the end as we’d gone over time into lunch. Honestly, I think we could have continued our discussion for another hour. It was so well received”.

Conclusion

The SIC scheme is based on a hub and spoke model with ambitions to scale this beyond the current four main areas for engagement. The model has gained traction as a vehicle for delivery as the visibility and appetite for engagement with SICs has increased internally. The SICs are increasingly presented and involved with opportunities to collaborate in the production of knowledge, research, and lived-experience informed practice beyond the current parameters of the scheme. Accordingly, the Senior SICs will become further involved with co-developing the 'hub' which sees SICs receive training, support, and development within the community of practice. They will work with the Student Inclusion Coordinator and the wider Student Inclusion team to ensure that SICs are provided with the space to shape and own their student experiences and that practices and interventions put in place are reflective of our diverse student community.

The SIC scheme has demonstrated its sustainability through senior staff support which has seen it develop into a business-as-usual practice, suggesting the beginning of a 'culture shift' in the way Northumbria works with students on strategic priorities. This is supported by the increasing numbers of staff and students engaging across the breadth and depth of the University, highlighting how positively this has been received by stakeholders and linking back to the model of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The paid aspect of the SIC scheme is a key recommendation for anyone considering true inclusivity of their schemes. Payment removes financial barriers, supports 'time-poor' (Weller & Mahbul, 2018) students, and provides recompense for potential emotional labour involved in sharing their lived experiences. The scheme also embeds flexibility as a core principle, providing a variety of projects in length, method, and feedback mechanisms. This enables a wider group of students to engage and aims to make the scheme as inclusive as possible.

A final key consideration for best practice is ensuring that the distinction between representatives and non-representatives is understood by staff working with SICs. The scheme was intentionally non-representative with the aim being to identify the 'deeply felt' rather than 'widely felt' student issues (Bols, 2020:75). Although individual rather than collective voices are appropriate in this instance, Bols (2020) reflects the importance rep systems place on drawing on the wider student voice to represent effectively. This suggests that although not all schemes need to engage reps in their delivery, routes could be established to feed into rep systems and enhance 'representativeness'. Recent reflections from us delivering the scheme, combined with staff and SIC feedback, shows that this distinction needs to be very visible and reinforced for those engaging with the scheme.

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