



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE



STUDENT CONSULTATION
FRAMEWORK

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AIMS & PRINCIPLES



The Student Consultation Framework outlines a minimum expectation of consultation that should be undertaken across the University when making decisions or leading projects that have a direct impact on the student experience. It outlines the types of changes that could affect students and the likely level of impact it will have. The Framework provides a breakdown of appropriate consultation steps to be taken during a decision-making process, including methods of engaging with students and methods of communicating outcomes to students.

Student engagement is critical for the University to ensure a positive student experience and to enable students to achieve their full potential during their time at Cambridge. It is a clear priority for the higher education sector, and several Universities have worked with their Students' Unions to introduce Student Consultation Frameworks.

The Education Quality and Policy Office recommends that student consultation should be:

- Active
- Proportionate (to the change/impact; might also reflect differences in modes of study, e.g., PG/UG or full/part-time)
- Representative (of the cohort)
- Informative
- Adaptive (to cohort needs/preferences re: methods or time for consultation)
- Bi-directional (closing the feedback loop so students know their voices are heard, even if changes aren't forthcoming)
- Transparent (ensuring they understand systems and what happens with their feedback; who is responsible for it so it doesn't feel that it's going into a vacuum)
- Enabling
- Timely

When students are treated as co-creators of their student experience, in whatever aspect of university life, they will be well informed about how and why decisions have been made. Having a consistent consultation process will ensure that there is continual engagement and clear communication with students when implementing changes, with the aim of reducing disparity when similar changes occur across different parts of the University.

DECISION IMPACT MATRIX



The decision impact matrix below outlines the key areas where decisions could affect the student experience, and the level of impact it may have. Choose the appropriate level of consultation based on the potential impact on students.

Inform affected students

An unavoidable and temporary change, which will likely have a negligible impact on students' opinions of their time at Cambridge

Minor

A change which may affect students for a short period of time, but will not likely influence students' opinions of their time at Cambridge

Moderate

A change which will have a large impact on students for a short period of time, and may somewhat influence students' opinions of their time at Cambridge

Major

A change which will have a significant and long-lasting impact on students, and will likely have a heavy influence on students' opinions of their time at Cambridge

When using the matrix to determine the level of impact, it is important to also recognise the distinction between consultation with students resulting from impact on their experience, versus the normal expectations of user consultation when developing a project or service. As an example, it would normally be expected that development of IT systems or platforms would regularly engage a broad user group which includes students, as opposed to organising a student-specific consultation element via the academic representatives. As a broad rule of thumb, it would normally be expected that students would be consulted on the development of policy or strategic direction, but utilise normal development procedures to contribute to projects or services.

| | Education | Welfare | Union | Spaces | People | ICT |
|----------------------------|---|--|--|--|---|--|
| Informed affected students | Changes to teaching rooms | Availability times for staff e.g. nurse | Service opening times | Replacing furniture | Lecturer absence | Short network disruptions |
| Minor | Changes to reading lists | Resources available to students | Service opening times | Short-term closure of a room commonly used by students | Changes to working hours or schedules that affect students (e.g. housekeeping staff) | Significant changes to websites e.g. large restructuring |
| Moderate | Changes to assessment methods, Changes to papers/modules offered | Trainings given to staff members who work closely with students | Affiliations to external organisations, changes to services | Refurbishing or building accommodation | Significant expansion or reduction in staff teams that will affect student experience. | Major changes to software used |
| Major | Large-scale changes to course structure, New course proposals | Changes to student support services, changes to student funding | Sabbatical Team structure, large-scale changes to governing documents | Rent prices and structures | Appointment of senior leaders whose roles have a large impact on student experience ¹ , modifications to rep structures | Introduction of new technologies, change of data sharing policies |

¹ As examples but not a definitive list: Heads of Department, Senior Tutors, Pro-Vice-Chancellors

CONSULTATION PROCESS



Your student representatives should always be the starting point for the timing and process of consultations.

Timeframes

The most appropriate timeframe for consultation will vary depending on the severity of impact and method of consultation. However, you should normally anticipate completing consultations in sufficient time before a decision is due to be made. Suggestions for completion of consultation are below, but these are a guideline rather than a requirement.

In some situations, particularly emergency cases, it will be difficult to engage with students in a timely manner. In such cases, you should still aim to communicate clearly and regularly with students, particularly involving student representatives in decision-making where possible, although the processes above may need to be expedited.

Communicating with Students

When students are asked to participate in a consultation process, it may be unclear what their feedback is for and they often feel that their opinions will have little effect on outcomes. Appropriate communication should be provided to students around how their feedback will be used and what effect, if any, it had on the decision(s) made - this is sometimes referred to as 'closing the feedback loop'.

You should also be mindful of the student lifecycle when considering consultations. While it is appreciated that it is not always possible to find the "perfect time" and that decisions must sometimes be made at speed, you should avoid undertaking large-scale or significant consultations during key periods of the course; examples of this may be during the examination period or when students are undertaking the last stages of dissertations and theses.

Inform Affected Students: completed as soon as possible

- Communicate proposed change to impacted students as soon as possible, ideally not on the day of impact

Minor Impact: completed at least two weeks prior to the decision point

- Work with student representatives to discuss the appropriate methods of consultation with the cohort and timeframe, as well as how this can be enabled
- Inform students of the decision made within a reasonable time frame
- Engage with particularly affected students

Moderate Impact: completed at least one month prior to the decision point

- Work with student representatives to discuss the appropriate methods of consultation with the cohort and timeframe, as well as how this can be enabled; provide them with assistance if required (e.g., if they agree a survey would be useful, offer use of survey tools or a meeting to discuss the specific questions to ask).
- Engage with as many students as possible, but particularly affected students, to determine possible mitigations
- Work with student representatives to communicate outcomes to students

Major Impact: completed at least three months prior to the decision point

- Work with student representatives to discuss appropriate timeframe and methods of consultation with the cohort, as well as how this can be enabled; provide them with assistance if required (e.g., scheduling a town hall meeting or offering note-taking assistance)
- Engage with whole student cohort; while there is no specific minimum threshold, you should ensure you have provided ample opportunity for any member of the cohort to raise questions or concerns
- Consider opinions of particularly affected students
- Work with student representatives to continually communicate the process to students, as well as the final outcome

METHODS OF CONSULTATION

As noted above, the most appropriate method of consultation will vary depending on the extent and type of change, and your local culture; your student representatives will be the best guide of what may be appropriate. However, below are some suggested common methods to support consideration of how students should be approached:

Working with Student Reps:

You should ensure you are effectively using your student representatives as a key part of the decision-making process. As a rule of thumb, seek to engage your student representatives to provide you with *the* student voice, not *a* student voice; that is, simply asking a single rep what they think is not appropriate consultation; they are the starting and enabling point, but not the sole source.

They should not only be involved at committee meetings but from the start of the process. Reps can be an excellent conduit for liaison with the student body, but you should ensure they are able to appropriately liaise with the cohort without being overworked; you should seek to support and enable this consultative process wherever possible.

| Method of Consultation | Benefits | Considerations |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Student Surveys | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enables collection of data/information on a large scale• Able to gather answers to specific questions | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students routinely report being over-surveyed, so gathering information should be embedded into existing resource where possible• It may be difficult to gauge appropriate nuances within an anonymised written response to a survey |

| Method of Consultation (cont.) | Education (cont.) | Welfare (cont.) |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
| Focus groups | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to collect more detailed feedback and explore particular points in-depth • Allows a range of views to be expressed without relying on individual student reps • This is a much more interactive process for students to engage with | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a time-intensive process for students, so it is important to recognise and reward their contribution, ideally with a financial incentive • Focus groups provide more qualitative feedback on a much smaller scale • More time-consuming with regard to setup as well as analysis of responses |
| Town halls/All student meetings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could attract large numbers of students • Enables all students to have a voice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource-intensive; it's important to put in the effort to ensure a high turnout and that all voices are heard • More time-consuming with regard to setup as well as analysis of responses |
| Using existing data | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimal work needed to gather information • This could offer a range of pre-existing consultation methods | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing information may not exactly match the current decision or project • When using older information, certain contextual factors may have changed since the initial collection point |

Developing a Consultation Process:

- Continued review may be useful when reviewing a project/programme, or determining the effects of a student-facing decision. Consider collecting data throughout a decision-making process, as this would make evaluating change easier
- Some methods of consultation do not need to be labour-intensive. A quick pulse or sense-check can be gathered immediately with anonymous polling at the beginning or end of a teaching session
- Be creative - students are more likely to engage with something quick and interactive than an extensive survey!

TYPES OF REPRESENTATIVE



Academic Reps:

Students elected to sit on their department/faculty/school Committee(s), with a responsibility to represent their peers on academic issues

College Reps:

Students elected onto their relevant collegiate student committee, there will be various roles related to supporting students on a range of issues within each College

Society Committees:

Students elected by their peers to lead a student group or society, which will likely have shared interests or experiences

Cambridge SU Campaigns:

Seven student-led groups who represent students with specific lived-experiences and/or campaigning interests

Cambridge SU Sabbatical Officers:

Students elected to work at Cambridge SU and represent students on a University level, with various remits and responsibilities