

Every Voice Matters: Reimagining Student Engagement Through Policy, Data, and Leadership





Executive Summary

The future of higher education depends on how well institutions listen and respond to student voices.

The reason is simple: Higher education decision-makers must adapt quickly to evolving expectations on campus and proactively address emerging challenges. Students want environments where feedback is welcomed and leads to meaningful change, not just talk.

This report shares insights from a roundtable discussion that took place at an Explorance Impact Tour event in South Africa. The discussion, featuring input from seven higher education leaders working at different institutions across the region, highlighted three foundations for effective engagement: policy clarity, psychological safety, and meaningful, data-driven action.

As one leader emphasized, student engagement is “a strategic priority requiring leadership commitment, cross-unit coordination, technological support, and cultural alignment.” True progress requires more than policies. It means harnessing technology alongside a culture of trust, responsiveness, and genuine inclusion.

Digital tools like Explorance Blue, MLY, and BlueX can help institutions scale feedback and turn insights into action more effectively. It’s all in service of the ultimate goal, framed by another participant as a campus experience where “feedback culture, data ethics, and inclusive engagement aren’t separate initiatives. Together they define the next generation learning experience.”

You can find a full list of contributors at the end of this report.

Modernizing Feedback Policy to Boost Student Survey Engagement

A primary discussion point during the roundtable was how to effectively modernize feedback policies. Several contributors noted that, for a variety of reasons, there are many universities regionally and globally that work with policies that no longer match today’s campus environment.

The conversation moderator, Samer Jaffar, General Manager of Global Higher Education at Explorance, observed a range of policy maturity, reflecting that “some institutions do have a policy” while others “struggle” building and implementing them. Stephen Marquard, Deputy Director CILT at the University of Cape Town, offered some additional context from his institution’s perspective: “We don’t have a modern course evaluation or student feedback policy [...] and it feels like there is a gap there because the previous policy work was done in a very different context.”

It’s worth noting that what is included in a university’s feedback policy can differ significantly from institution to institution. Some will have formal guidelines and strategies for student voice initiatives and how comments are processed. Others may have gaps, especially around student participation and engagement metrics or incentives. Roundtable participants agreed that a unified approach helps ensure clarity and accountability across all individual stakeholders or departments involved in the project.



That said, unified policies work only when they are visible, well-understood, and easy to evolve over time. For real impact, it's crucial to integrate tools that facilitate policy awareness and shared dashboards to give everyone a single reference point and encourage broader participation.

This approach positions feedback policies as pathways to reducing survey fatigue, boosting engagement, and preventing data from stalling in the system. When everyone, from students to leadership, understands their role, feedback becomes a powerful driver of improvement.

Recommendation

Run policy-awareness sessions across faculties each semester and publish a consolidated feedback calendar on a shared dashboard. This ensures all stakeholders understand current guidelines and have a single, accessible reference point for feedback activities and responsibilities.

Psychological Safety in Feedback: Fostering Openness and Trust

Psychological safety means students and staff alike feel free to express honest feedback or concerns without fear of negative consequences. When psychological safety is missing from a campus environment, both parties hesitate to share genuine opinions or comments. During the roundtable conversation, an important question was raised: Are students aware of psychological safety and how safe they feel sharing feedback?

Dr. Liile Lerato Lekena-Bayaga, Senior Director of Institutional Planning and Research at the Mangosuthu University of Technology, grounded this challenge in a real-world scenario, describing how students sometimes “go there, they lay their souls bare, and then the kind of assistance thereafter is not what they expect it to be.” Although institutions may provide educational or personal counseling, stability and follow-through can sometimes be lacking. Communication around available support should be strengthened, and services more responsive to the needs revealed by feedback.

Jaffar asked how institutions can encourage students to share their views without fear. Students want confidence that their feedback will not be ignored or misused, and staff value seeing real action and supportive colleagues. Maria Ramaahlo, Director at the University of Johannesburg, shared that counselors have seats on faculty boards to advocate for students. These dialogues help ensure clear communication, confidentiality, and follow-through to build psychological safety across campus.

The issue, Jaffar noted, is just as real and pervasive for faculty as it is for students, especially early-career lecturers and those from underrepresented backgrounds. In response, Stephen Marquard, Deputy Director CILT, University of Cape Town, underscored the stakes for faculty, noting: “People were very concerned about the negative and harmful impacts from poorly considered comments, or comments verging on directly abusive, that were put into student evaluations.”

Recommendation

Embed short, practical training on respectful feedback and confidentiality directly into all student and staff surveys. Start every survey with a clear statement about how responses will be protected and used.

Enabling Every Voice: Maximizing Student Participation and Inclusion

In many higher education feedback collection and analysis processes, the most visible comments often comes from either the most engaged or the most struggling students. But what about the “missing middle,” students who are neither at risk nor excelling? Their voices are just as important.

Reflecting on this point, Gaylene Oliver, Director of Student Experience at the Independent Institute of Education, prompted the group to consider how they could collectively get into “micro-level analysis” of feedback. She said she was most curious to assess feedback from “students I haven’t heard from [or] that never voiced an opinion.” Echoing the sentiment, Nompumelelo Mazibuko, Evaluation Officer at the University of the Witwatersrand, explained that “The students who sit in that [‘missing middle’] space need prompting and support.”





To reach them, inclusion efforts need to use technology and structured processes to identify students who haven’t provided feedback. Peer forums, small-group meetings, and automated alerts expand the invitation. Shared responsibility and clear guidance make sure everyone has a chance to shape the learning environment. As Antoinette van der Merve, Chief Director CIO at Stellenbosch University, explained: “We want our students to take responsibility for their own learning. That’s what makes the experience transformative.”

Recommendation

Deploy automated alerts using LMS and CRM data to flag non-engaged students and trigger proactive outreach to these groups. For example, Explorance integrates with popular LMS platforms to automatically identify non-responding students and send targeted nudges or reminders.

When institutions facilitate that growth opportunity by taking action on campus feedback insights, they create a sense of ownership and accountability that supports everyone’s success. It goes a long way to establishing the culture of trust panelists identified as so important to an exceptional teaching and learning experience.

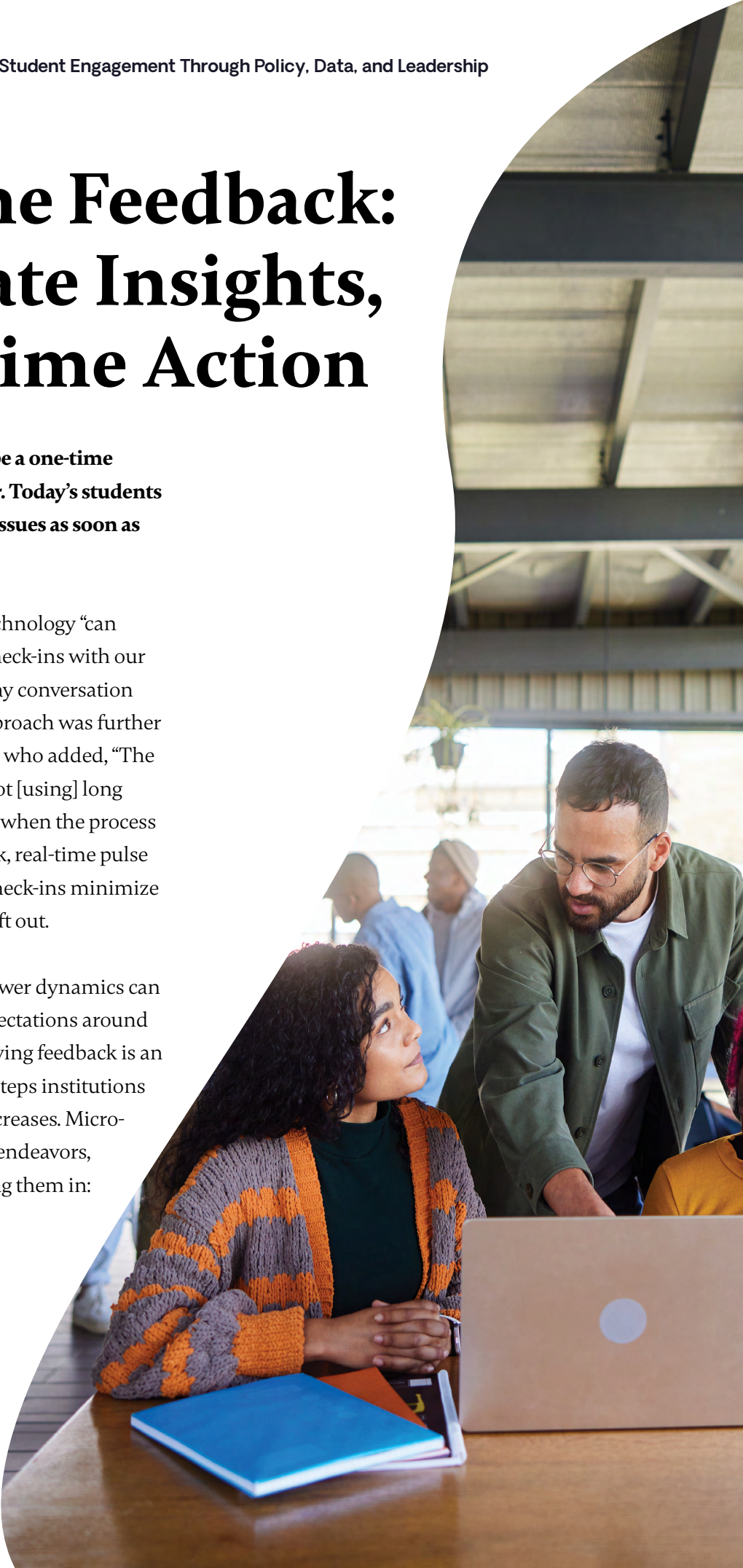
Real-Time Feedback: Immediate Insights, Just-in-Time Action

Collecting feedback shouldn’t be a one-time event at the end of the semester. Today’s students and educators want to address issues as soon as they arise.

Van der Merve explained that technology “can help us to have more frequent check-ins with our students and to start that two-way conversation earlier and more often.” This approach was further supported by Dr. Lekena-Bayaga, who added, “The more feedback, the better, and not [using] long surveys. Students respond more when the process is simple and quick.” These quick, real-time pulse surveys, self-assessments, and check-ins minimize friction and ensure no voice is left out.

Mazibuko added that existing power dynamics can affect the process. Clarifying expectations around feedback and reinforcing that giving feedback is an act of accountability are critical steps institutions can take to drive engagement increases. Micro-level analysis can support those endeavors, with the possibility of embedding them in:

- Competency assessments
- Self-assessments
- Advisory assessments



In the end, the more real-time the feedback is, the more it enables targeted outreach. Jaffar added that, if an administrator looks at all the survey data, they can more easily answer questions like “what students I haven’t heard from and [how can we] enable that level of engagement?” Brief, consistent feedback cycles and technology-driven dashboards keep instructors informed and students engaged. This process is ongoing, not one-off.

Recommendation

Adopt two mandatory micro-feedback intervals per module, combining quick self-assessment questions and open comment prompts. Pull the results into live dashboards for immediate action.



Redefining Student Success: Moving Beyond Academic Metrics

Traditionally, academic achievement was measured by grades, exam results, and the ability to complete a degree program. While these indicators still matter, there is growing recognition that students expect more from their university experience. They are looking to develop a sense of identity, resilience, and skills that serve them both in and beyond the workplace.

This broader vision of success is powerfully captured by Luci Carosin, GM Applications Delivery and Support Services (Wits ICT) at Wits. “I think success is more than the degree. I can achieve my personal goals without the degree and be successful,” she said. “It is all about identity shifting. Students are redefining who they are and what success means for them.” Her reflections are underscored by Patricia Muhuro, Senior Consultant Teaching and Learning at the University of Fort Hare, who observed, “It is all about identity shifting.”



Leaders and educators also recognize that even high-achieving students may leave university without some of the life skills they need to thrive. Modern student success is marked by the ability to adapt, take responsibility, and find purpose both inside and outside the classroom. Institutions are responding by supporting student growth in areas like emotional intelligence, adaptability, and wellbeing, alongside helping students gain professional knowledge.

Universities that engage with this expanded definition and invest in holistic student support can put graduates in a position to leave the institution with both academic qualifications and the confidence to shape their own futures. Once they attain that goal, they'll be better prepared to contribute to society in meaningful ways.

Recommendation

Establish a Student Engagement Charter that clearly outlines your institution's commitments to feedback, transparency, and action. Ensure this charter is communicated at orientation, referenced in every major student survey, and revisited regularly in leadership meetings.

Key Takeaways & Action Framework

Listening is only the start of true student engagement. Institutions must act, close the loop, and communicate clearly. Modern student engagement relies on leadership commitment, coordinated action, and the smart use of technology.

Key Takeaways:

- **Student engagement must be a top institutional priority.**
- **Clear, unified policies and visible processes drive consistency.**
- **Psychological safety supports honest, constructive feedback for both students and staff.**
- **“Every voice matters” means reaching out to disengaged and underrepresented groups.**
- **Success should be defined holistically, including personal growth, belonging, and resilience.**
- **Real-time feedback and data-informed action keep the experience relevant.**
- **Technology, when used thoughtfully, enables rapid response and continuous improvement.**





Action Steps for Leaders:

- Audit existing feedback policies and pinpoint gaps.
- Centralize coordination of all feedback activities and data.
- Provide psychological safety training for students and staff.
- Launch micro-feedback tools for ongoing, real-time dialogue.
- Ensure every feedback cycle is closed with clear, transparent communication.
- Expand your definition of student success to include wellbeing, identity, and life skills.
- Use dashboards and AI analytics to detect and respond to emerging trends.
- Report regularly on actions taken in response to feedback.

Leadership Call to Action:

- Implement a 90-day roadmap for feedback and engagement upgrades.
- Create a Student Voice Task Force or similar group to guide change.
- Publish a quarterly Student Voice Impact Report so progress is visible to all.

By following these steps, institutions can build a culture of trust, responsiveness, and shared success that meets the expectations of today's learners and educators.

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