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2026 Series

Wired to Thrive: Student Voice, Belonging, and Institutional Success



Introduction

Throughout higher education, there's no question that the student voice matters. For many global campuses, it's more important than ever before.

What's more difficult to answer is what happens after you've collected that feedback. How do you turn those comments into visible change?

Those questions shaped a global roundtable at Explorance World 2026. Leaders from 12 institutions across North America, the UK, the Middle East, and Singapore shared current practices, debated tensions, and compared what works in different contexts.

The group represented:



This eBook captures the main insights from that roundtable. Each section follows one of the four questions used to guide the discussion:

1. **What student voice initiatives move beyond traditional feedback and into genuine partnership?**

2. **How do institutions handle psychological safety and student well-being through feedback systems?**

3. **Should student voice be tied to faculty performance as a primary indicator?**

4. **If institutions redesigned student voice from the ground up, what should stay and what should change?**

The answers point to a common conclusion: Student voice feedback loops work when institutions treat it as a system, not a one-off survey.

1. From Listening to Partnership Around Student Voice

Roundtable participants agreed that students are more invested when institutions give them real roles in governance, design, and improvement.

The key idea throughout the conversation was partnership. Collaboration across the feedback process, including formal governance integration and survey co-creation, is essential to capturing and acting on student voice.

AI: The Competitive Edge in Modern Higher Education

Shifts in expectations across higher education since 2020 mean that student representation on committees and governing bodies is no longer a nice-to-have.

That change has bolstered students' role in various campus-wide initiatives, making them active contributors rather than simply recipients of feedback surveys with limited impact.

Heriot-Watt University uses a Student Partnership Agreement with four principal criteria covering academic, community, sport, and wellbeing. Students serve on Senate and University Court, and student unions operate across all its campuses.

At the University of Notre Dame, student seats on governing bodies, committees, and task forces are standard practice.

The American University in Cairo reinforced a similar model through a 2017 task force that included students as contributors and identified quality of education as the most important uniting factor.

As Dalhousie University has expressed, "it would be inconceivable" to have a task force without student representation. Otherwise, student input would be lost and the ensuing loss of trust might never be regained.

At SUNY Polytechnic Institute, co-curricular officers receive reports generated from student feedback, and these results are made visible to department leaders to help drive change. This approach emphasizes the value of both accessible feedback timing and the visibility of results in making student voice actionable across campus leadership.

Co-Creation in Survey Design

Partnership also changes how evaluation instruments are designed. In several cases, students are helping shape the questions asked instead of being sent a survey and responding without having any say in the process.

At the American University in Cairo, their most recent course evaluation redesign went through eight rounds of revisions before it was finalized. The process involved students, faculty, department chairs, provosts, and senate members and included surveys, focus groups, and classroom discussions. Every step of the way, students were able to participate.

Cornell University took a similar approach with a student group in veterinary medicine.

They tested the core course evaluation question set before implementation, and the university's roundtable contributor, noted that students responded positively to being included in the design process.

Fanshawe College deployed yet another partnership strategy, with student-elected class representatives provided formative survey feedback during the term. This setup adds a layer of responsiveness that goes beyond periodic check-ins and strengthens the feedback loop.

The Representation Challenge

While all contributors saw participation as critical to student voice success, they also agreed that it's not the same as representation. When engagement depends on volunteered time, only students with available capacity are likely to be heard.

That can create a bias toward students who can attend meetings, join groups, and respond quickly to questions, a fact roundtable participants cautioned against. Students balancing employment, commuting, caregiving, or other commitments can be left out.

A contributor from the University of Ottawa observed that using the same set of survey questions for the past 20 years may no longer accurately reflect the experiences or needs of today's student population.

Dalhousie University notes that institutions risk focusing on helping a few students learn to navigate existing systems, rather than implementing broader changes to improve the system for all students.

Vanderbilt University highlighted that making feedback systems student-centered from the start increases engagement and leads to better feedback, which faculty need to improve teaching.

Institutional design matters when it comes to addressing those concerns. When participation occurs only through high-effort channels, the same student voices recur. But if institutions add more accessible mechanisms for student feedback, they will likely hear from more students.

The Feedback Loop Imperative

The reality is that students notice when feedback disappears into a black hole. Comments that go (or appear to go) unaddressed weaken trust across campus and reduce confidence that their input leads to action.

Therefore, closing the loop is part of the larger value proposition.

Nanyang Polytechnic treats its survey exercise as a structured improvement ecosystem. Academic quality assurance processes require course-level units to review results and implement holistic changes where necessary. As the representative explained, the survey is a conversation starter, not an endpoint.

The University of Notre Dame uses a campus climate survey roadshow that presents results shortly after feedback is collected. The message is explicit in its structure: you all said this, we listened, we did (or are doing) this.

That visible response tells students and staff exactly what's happening as a result of their input.



2. Psychological Safety and Student Well-Being

To fully empower a campus' student voice, systems must be able to identify risk without misleading any participants about privacy or security measures. In other words, don't promise protections they can't guarantee.

These considerations are particularly important for psychological safety and student well-being. Even small wording choices can have a huge impact on campus-wide trust in the institution's methods.

Anonymous vs. Confidential: A Critical Distinction

Shifts in expectations across higher education since 2020 mean that student representation on committees and governing bodies is no longer a nice-to-have.

An example of a decision institutions should be particularly mindful of is the distinction between "anonymous" and "confidential" in student surveys. As the roundtable participants noted, it matters because students will interpret them as completely different mechanisms.

In this context, anonymous means the institution does not collect identifying information about survey participants, such as their name. Confidential means the institution collects identifying information but restricts internal access to it.

As was pointed out during the discussion, single sign-on (SSO) systems make true anonymity difficult because it can inherently create data trails. For this reason, the University of Notre Dame is deliberate in its language, calling its surveys confidential rather than anonymous. Heriot-Watt University also explicitly states it can't guarantee survey anonymity.

Student feedback and continuous listening depend on transparency to function smoothly. Precise language and careful identity-handling statements go a long way toward supporting that need.



Detecting and Responding to Crisis Signals

Institutions also need procedures for handling comments that suggest immediate risk. If a feedback tool can accomplish this, ideally with purpose-built technology like Explorance MLY, it becomes integral to the campus' discourse safety net.

There are many ways to implement crisis detection and response as seen in these examples:

- **Heriot-Watt University uses sensitivity thresholds in qualitative analysis tools to flag potential self-harm indicators.**
- **Nanyang Polytechnic has instructors read comments and flag concerning content (director-level approval is required before sharing identity to counselors).**
- **The University of Michigan encourages reporting concerns about students through a wellbeing committee, where faculty and peers can flag issues.**

These models all respond to the same need: An institutional pathway from detection to response.

The Silent Student Problem

Unfortunately, some of the most at-risk students may never submit feedback. Silence itself is a signal worth focusing on as part of a feedback loop.

To address this aspect, Dalhousie University uses an early alert system that combines student demographic and performance patterns. One high-risk pattern example given during the roundtable involves White males from rural areas whose GPA drops significantly in the first term.

The University of North Carolina School of the Arts relies on close faculty-to-student ratios. When one instructor teaches only two harp students, any absence or disengagement is acutely felt.

American University in Cairo also runs a "Your Voice Matters" campaign led by the psychology department and student mentors. This initiative gives students another channel for sharing feedback.

Third-party administration can also help in this regard. The University of Michigan has used external organizations to run climate and sexual harassment surveys, as students may respond more honestly when the university is not the direct administrator.



3. The Faculty Performance Debate

The sharpest disagreement during the roundtable centered on whether student voice should serve as a primary indicator of faculty performance.

Most participants favored student feedback as one of several valued inputs, but not as a leading effectiveness metric. Some, however, supported the idea. Ultimately, it was clear that while institutions want to act on student input, they also want to avoid reducing complex teaching roles to a single score.

The Case Against: Protecting Faculty and Recognizing Limitations

Several contributors said there must be a clear separation between program or course assessment and the evaluation of individuals. They pointed to cases in which, due to misuse or misinterpretation, student feedback was used to punish instructors rather than to support improvement.

Several participants also stressed that students are still developing evaluative judgment and communication skills. This dynamic ties back to the importance of psychological safety, but, in this instance, for faculty.

Institutional context and training backgrounds are another concern. Research universities and conservatories may hire faculty based more on professional credentials than formal teaching training. Student feedback may not take such a reality into consideration.

If student voice becomes a primary performance indicator because teaching matters, the same logic can extend to every other institutional function.

The Case For: Accountability and Responsible Data Use

The case supporting student feedback as a leading indicator starts with an institution's mission.

As one contributor argued, the student experience sits at the heart of evaluation surveys across regions and institution types. If teaching quality drives that experience, there must be built-in consequences for all feedback, positive or not.

There's also a practical element at play. Several participants agreed that transparency cuts both ways, and if institutions collect opinions, they have a duty to act on them. When students can see feedback patterns, they also gain a clearer view of faculty quality.

In some markets, feedback is already tied to contract renewal, so some institutions have already crossed this bridge out of necessity.

Finding Middle Ground: Holistic and Informed Use

Most participants converged on a middle ground: student feedback should count but not stand alone.

University of Notre Dame described student feedback as one component of a holistic evaluation of people, which should be combined with peer review, self-reflection, and administrative observation. Heriot-Watt University and the University of Michigan also noted that innovative teaching styles can initially produce lower scores.

Bias analysis is essential. Reviewing response patterns by gender, race, age, and other categorizations can help better understand fairness concerns, as can using multilevel regression.

Language helps shape the culture around feedback. University of Notre Dame renamed "course evaluations" to "course instructor feedback" to make the purpose clearer and less punitive sounding. This tweak sets more precise expectations for how the data will be treated.

4. Redesigning Student Voice Systems

Contributors noted that, in general, current student voice systems tend to be too slow, too opaque, and too disconnected from visible action to be consistently effective.

The group agreed that redesigns were necessary to keep pace with modern student and campus expectations. The three pillars they identified were:

Pillar One: Speed

The first redesign priority is the time gap between feedback collection and visible action. Nanyang Polytechnic noted that when the process takes too long, students may not feel that their input has made a meaningful difference.

Annual and semester-based feedback cycles were deemed too slow, since students may graduate before they ever see any change. More frequent pulse checks at natural touchpoints produce more accurate longitudinal data and enable faster action.

SUNY Polytechnic Institute pointed out that while most institutions already have the technology needed for rapid feedback, the real bottleneck is in will and workflow design. Organizational priorities and processes must shift so that student voices are not only collected, but also seen and acted on quickly by the campus community.

Pillar Two: Visibility

Velocity doesn't matter if the students can't see what changed on campus. Multiple roundtable contributors emphasized the need for students to understand what institutions are doing in response to their feedback.

American University in Cairo emphasized that students should be able to see, each semester, the changes made in response to their feedback.

That visibility turns a survey from a reporting mechanism into one for partnership. It also supports increased response rates over time because students are more invested in the process.

Practical approaches to increase visibility include:

- **"You said, we did" reporting**
- **semester-by-semester updates**
- **survey invitation messaging that references past change**
- **road shows for student leaders**

Pillar Three: Action and Ownership

The final pillar discussed during the roundtable was responsibility.

Dalhousie University expressed that institutional heads, chairs, and directors should own the response to unit-level data. The burden of development shouldn't rest solely on the shoulders of any individual academic alone.

The shift matters in decentralized institutions. University of Michigan stated that, while some departments use data well, others don't incorporate it as well into their feedback processes. Centralized support for student voice initiatives could improve consistency.

That said, the group was clear on this point: The goal is not to remove local ownership. It is to make sure every unit has the capacity and expectation to act on feedback insights effectively.



Conclusion: **Actionable Next Steps**

The main takeaway from this roundtable is simple. Student voice only becomes meaningful when institutions treat it as a system for action, not a collection ritual.

These consensus points stood out as actionable next steps for higher education institutions:

1. **Student representation on governance bodies is a fundamental practice.**
2. **Closing the feedback loop is essential for trust and participation.**
3. **Survey models need updating to reflect current student expectations.**
4. **Confidential systems can be more realistic than claims of anonymity.**
5. **Holistic evaluation frameworks are more defensible than single-metric approaches.**
6. **Speed, visibility, and ownership are the priorities for redesign.**

The direction is clear. Institutions that want stronger student voice need faster insight-to-action processes, clearer communication, and stronger structures for response.

Students should be able to see what changed because of their feedback. That is what promotes campus belonging and long-term institutional success.

All eBook contributors use Explorance solutions for student voice.



Appendix: **Roundtable Participants**



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