

Edinburgh
University
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Association



**From Representative to
Partner: Moving Beyond
Representation as Process**

The Representation Trap

We have representation, but do we have partnership?

Like most Universities we have:

- Elections
- Student Representatives
- Training
- Committees
- Working Groups
- Consultation Exercises

But:

Participation does not automatically equal partnership.

When Representation Becomes Process

Signs of Procedural Representation:

- Students attend meetings but rarely contribute
- Gathering feedback is treated as the end goal
- Representatives become messengers rather than changemakers
- Students feel they are consulted after decisions are already made
- Staff see representation as a requirement rather than a resource

Representation is happening

Partnership is not

Partnerships Requires Two Forms of Preparation

We often focus on preparing students:

- Training
- Leadership Development
- Governance Knowledge
- Communication Skills

But partnership also requires preparing staff:

- Openness to challenge
- Willingness to share power
- Recognition of lived experience as expertise
- Commitment to dialogue rather than defence

Building Representative's Confidence

Developing Representative as Institutional Partners

Three things matter:

- Confidence
 - “I belong in this room”
- Institutional Literacy
 - “I understand how decisions are made”
- Legitimacy
 - “My perspective has value”

Demystifying Power

Universities Speak Their Own Language

Students encounter:

- Acronyms
- Committee structures
- Governance processes
- Technical terminology

Without support, these become barriers

Institutional literacy is an equity issue

The Cultural Signals We Send

What Students Learn Without Being Told

Students notice:

- Whose contributions are acknowledged
- Who speaks first
- How challenge is received
- Whether disagreement is welcomed
- Whether feedback leads to visible actions

Culture speaks louder than process



Representation as Relationship

Meaningful Student Voice is Relational

- Structures enable participation
- Relationships enable influence
- Belonging enables confidence
- Trust enables challenge

Partnership happens when students and staff see each other as collaborators

Reflection for Participants

A Question For You To Reflect On

Where does representation risk becoming performative?

- In committees?
- In consultation?
- In feedback processes?
- In decision-making?

And what would need to change for it to become transformative?

Closing Thoughts

Representation gets students into the room

Partnership ensures they can shape what happens there

Structures enable participation

Belief sustains it

Thank you

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