

Academic Communities Toolkit

About the academic communities project

The Welsh Academic Communities Experiment tested combining student voice & academic societies in Wales. From September 2025 to April 2026 the Undeb Aberystwyth & the Students' Union at Swansea University worked together with consultants to run two 'experiments' testing models and new interventions for student voice and community building to try to address some of the challenges facing the sector.

This toolkit summarises the findings and recommendations from their experiments. You can read more about their experiments in Appendix 1

Why Academic Communities?

The 2025 Academic Communities Report's literature and sector review found that the sector needs to move towards more integrated, student-centered engagement models:

- Traditional student representation, e.g, course rep systems, are increasingly viewed as bureaucratic, tokenistic, and disconnected from the needs and experiences of modern students.
- Reliance on student volunteers is becoming unsustainable, as students face significant financial and time pressures that exclude many from participating.
- Academic societies are thriving due to their student-led, flexible approach and ability to foster community and genuine engagement

Academic communities (combining representation and society activity) are a potential opportunity to build upon the interest and success of academic societies whilst developing systems of representation and meaningful student voice opportunities.

The Academic Communities Experiment used following definition to frame the project:

An active academic community intentionally combines student representation with the activities and identity of academic societies. It brings together social, academic, co-curricular and student voice through informal or formal approaches.

Academic societies exist in many institutions, typically supported by the students' union and sometimes collaboratively with the academic department or school. The 2025 research showed that students are naturally finding their academic society and in many cases the activities and leaders of the society are incidentally enhancing student voice.

Key findings & recommendations

1. The academic community as a concept not structure

Prior to conducting the experiments, academic communities were considered as a new way of structuring student voice and society activity. The experiments have shown that it is potentially just as beneficial to consider the academic community as a concept rather than a new, formal, constitutionalised structure.

Across both experiments, developments did not rely on the creation of new formal frameworks. Instead, it came from strengthening what was already there, building better connections between academic reps, society leaders and staff. All of these groups were already contributing to the academic experience in different ways, the experiments simply created more opportunities for them to work together and support each other.

Recommendation: Approach academic communities as a fluid concept to give students' unions and university departments greater flexibility to adapt the approach to suit their context, culture and existing structures.

This is especially important given how different departments can be, with their own ways of communicating, engaging students and organising student leadership.

There are also some clear practical benefits. Setting up new formal structures can take a lot of time, resources and approval, and can sometimes duplicate or complicate what's already in place. A more conceptual approach is easier to build into existing ways of working, allowing for gradual, manageable change rather than large-scale reform.

That said, this doesn't mean formal structures aren't ever useful. In some cases, having clearer frameworks can help with coordination or accountability. However, the experiments suggest that formalisation isn't a requirement for success. In many cases, the benefits of building an academic community come from having a shared understanding and being intentional about how people connect and work together, rather than from introducing something entirely new.

2. Balance the new and extend the existing

One of the interesting reflections from this project is whether new approaches need to be clearly introduced as something "new", or whether they work better when they're built into what's already happening. In reality, both were observed and each approach has its place.

Recommendation: Balance the positioning of activity as new, particularly at an institutional level, and an extension of what's already happening.

Being open about something being new or experimental can be really helpful, especially at an institutional level. Framing activity as a pilot or experiment creates space for people to get involved, share ideas and shape how things develop. It also makes it clear that the approach isn't set in stone, and that feedback is part of the process. This can make it easier to get support and buy-in, as it feels lower risk and more collaborative.

At the same time, from a student perspective, there's a lot to be said for keeping things feeling normal: the most successful activity didn't feel like a brand new initiative, it felt like a natural extension of what was already going on. Joint events, informal conversations and shared spaces worked best when they were just part of the day-to-day academic environment, rather than something extra students had to opt into.

This points to a more balanced approach. Being clear at an institutional level that something is new or being tested can help unlock support, time and flexibility. But at a student level, embedding that activity into existing spaces and routines makes it much easier to engage with. It feels intuitive, accessible and, importantly, not "another thing to do" alongside everything else.

In practice, this might look like:

- **Overt at institutional level:**

Talk about the work as new, experimental and co-create to build buy-in and support

- **Embedded at student level:**

Integrate activity into existing spaces and ways of working so it feels natural and sustainable

Getting that balance right helps create a sense of shared ownership, where students aren't just taking part in something new, but are actively shaping something that feels like part of their everyday experience.

3. Build buy-in early

One of the clearest lessons from this work is that developing new cross-institutional approaches takes significantly longer than anticipated.

Recommendation: Institutions considering creating academic communities should plan for a substantial lead-in period and avoid underestimating the time needed to build consensus and secure formal approval.

Establishing a shared understanding across the students' union, university department(s), key people and groups. Securing agreement on objectives, defining measures of success, and developing the necessary systems and processes all require considerable time and coordination.

Even where there is enthusiasm for change, ensuring everyone involved across different parts of the university is in agreement can be a lengthy process.

Recommendation: Position new initiatives as enhancements or complementary developments, rather than wholesale replacements.

Institutions are often deeply invested in their existing student voice structures. Established representative systems have usually been developed over many years, with significant organisational and cultural investment. As a result, proposals to introduce new models can understandably generate concern, particularly if they appear to challenge or replace familiar approaches.

Framing the work as an experiment or pilot can be especially effective, as it creates space for innovation while reducing the perceived risk. It signals that the approach will be tested, evaluated and refined, rather than imposed permanently from the outset.

Recommendation: Involve institutional partners in the design process at an early stage.

While starting with a completely blank slate can slow progress, stakeholders benefit from having meaningful opportunities to shape and refine the approach.

Early engagement helps to build ownership, surface potential challenges, and ensure that the model is workable within the institutional context.

Striking the right balance between providing a clear initial framework and allowing room for co-creation is likely to be key to successful implementation.

4. Prioritise in-person and physical interactions

Physical, face-to-face spaces play a vital role in building strong academic communities.

Recommendation: Co-locate information and resources about academic representatives and societies ensuring both are visible and accessible.

Case study from Swansea:

Students were often familiar with both their academic representatives and their society committee members, in part because these groups were visibly connected within the department. Something as simple as placing their noticeboards alongside one another created opportunities for students to discover the different ways they could get involved. Students interested in representation could easily learn more about society activities, and vice versa. This kind of co-location helps to reinforce the relationship between academic representation and student community, making both more visible and accessible.

Recommendation: Incorporate informal opportunities for student feedback and input to encourage participation and build a feedback-focused culture.

Case study from Aberystwyth:

A simple, low-cost feedback box had been introduced by the academic community. Rather than relying solely on formal or digital systems, students were invited to leave comments on Post-it notes about their course, their experience in the department, or ideas for future society activities. The informal and unbranded nature of the box appeared to encourage honest, varied and highly engaged responses. Students shared everything from praise for recent social events to frustrations about course-related issues. This demonstrates how straightforward, accessible methods can help normalise feedback and make it feel more approachable.

Importantly, tools like a feedback box are most effective when seen as part of a wider feedback ecosystem rather than as a standalone mechanism. Its primary value lies not in collecting formal, actionable casework, but in fostering a culture where students feel comfortable sharing their experiences: whether positive, negative or somewhere in between. While more structured digital systems remain essential for processing and responding to formal feedback, informal channels can play a crucial role in encouraging participation and building trust. They signal that student voices are welcomed and valued in everyday ways.

Recommendation: Create intentional opportunities for in-person connection between academic representatives, society leaders and university staff.



Swansea student leaders at a training session were asked to do a 'would you rather' exercise. Staff were surprised to note that students overwhelmingly chose face to face feedback (rather than online). While formal training and meetings have their place, much of the real value comes from the informal conversations that happen around them.

Bringing together academic representatives, society leaders and staff in shared physical spaces allows relationships to develop naturally through casual interactions. These conversations between the formal training sessions help to build connections. This kind of community-building is much harder to replicate in online environments, where spontaneous interaction is far less likely to occur.

5. Support clarity, communication and connection

It was observed in both institutions that good communication is vital across the various departments, teams and individuals working on or volunteering with academic communities.

Recommendation: Create opportunities for academic representatives and society leaders to build relationships and understand each other's roles, purpose and value.

Effective practice does not need to be overly complex or resource-intensive. Often, the most valuable interventions are the simplest: creating opportunities for people to meet informally, or putting information in the right place.



Case study from Swansea:

A joint training event for academic representatives and society leaders provided a valuable space for connection. Open to students from across the institution, the session combined practical training with opportunities for interaction. The content focused on transferable skills which were relevant regardless of the specific volunteer role participants held. This shared learning environment also prompted important moments of understanding, as students gained greater insight into how different aspects of student representation and leadership work.

Ways to facilitate this:

1. Informal mixers or socials for academic representatives and society leaders
2. Noticeboards for staff and students visible in high footfall areas for the school or faculty
3. Central coordinating staff making connections, introducing the right people to each other (within SU or academic departments)
4. Promote academic societies in academic representative training and academic representatives to societies in society training
5. Joined up training opportunities for academic representatives and society leaders



6. Flexible and intentional approaches

Successful approaches are intentional in purpose but flexible in practice.

Recommendation: Work with departments or faculties to build bespoke approaches to academic communities.

Cross-institutional implementation is more likely when there is a universal intention for building academic communities applied differently based on the specific needs of the faculty or department. Attempting to design a single, universal model for all departments or faculties is likely to fail because departments have different cultures, priorities and needs.

Case study from Aberystwyth:

In our programme reflection meeting with student leaders, student staff, the SU and the TFTS department, we considered what had worked well for their experiment and how we can maximise this approach in other departments. The team all agreed that the flexibility of approach and being able to lean into the existing culture of the department were key success factors.

Understanding the departmental priorities and their unique context, for example their current student engagement challenges, student demographic and course structures, will help with designing an approach that works.



7. Paid students increase impact

Observations suggest that employing student staff can increase both the volume of activity and the strength of the community that develops around it.

Case study from Aberystwyth:

Undeb Aber introduced a new student staff position, employed for 8 hours per week, 30 weeks per year, paid the national living wage. The Student Community & Representation Assistant was employed to build the student community within Theatre, Film and Television Studies (TFTS) department and work with Undeb Aberystwyth to utilise this community to innovate and improve academic representation.

Recommendation: Consider (resource-permitting) employing student staff to coordinate the community.

A dedicated student staff member can play a pivotal role in building relationships, facilitating communication and driving initiatives forward. Having someone specifically tasked with this work can make it easier to create a cohesive, consistent and connected approach, particularly across complex, multi-stakeholder and multi-campus environments.

Employing student staff is not a prerequisite for success. Many institutions achieve excellent outcomes through volunteer-led models. However, where resources allow, a paid student role can provide valuable additional capacity and act as a bridge between different stakeholders, such as the students' union, academic departments, course representatives and student societies.

Unlike volunteers, who understandably balance their roles alongside academic and personal commitments, paid staff can usually dedicate more focused time and energy to key priorities.

Recommendation: If employing student staff, have clear responsibilities for paid and volunteer roles.

At Aberystwyth, a particularly effective relationship was observed between the student staff member, academic representatives and society leaders. While there was some overlap in their work, a strong mutual understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities had developed. This meant they could collaborate effectively without duplicating effort or undermining one another's contributions. Establishing this clarity is essential, both to ensure fairness and to avoid situations where volunteers are expected to undertake work comparable to that of paid staff.

See Appendix 2 for a matrix of responsibilities from the Aberystwyth experiment.

8. Maximise your own experiment

Institutions are encouraged to consider running their own experiments. These tools were found to be effective:

- Keep a running project impact journal: document progress as the project continues, rather than relying solely on end-of-project evaluation. Regular journalling helps to track how the understanding of the work evolves over time, what is working well, and where challenges are emerging. This ongoing reflection not only supports learning and adaptation during the project, but also provides a much richer picture of impact when it comes to reporting and evaluation.
- Collaborate with other students' unions working on similar things - the students' union staff and officers involved all reflected on the value of shared learnings and problem solving sessions.

- Get clear on your objectives and know how you will achieve them: it's easy to be ambitious at the start of a project like this and set too many or too ambitious objectives. Taking the time to define a small number of clear, realistic goals and being specific about how you plan to achieve them, can make the work much more manageable. This can also help with prioritisation, decision making and communicating the purpose of the project to others.
- Understand responsibilities across the institution, the students' union, and student leaders (staff or volunteers) to avoid duplication or inactivity - know who holds responsibility for each element. Being clear on roles also makes collaboration easier, as everyone understands how their contribution fits into the bigger picture.
- Regular project team meetings and check-ins help keep momentum, maintain alignment and create space to share updates, challenges and ideas. These don't need to be long or overly structured, but having a consistent space can make a big difference. They provide an opportunity to reflect on progress, adjust plans where needed, and ensure everyone involved feels informed and engaged.
- Consultant support can offer an external input and bring fresh perspective, it can help to challenge assumptions and approaches that may feel like the norm in your local context. Consultants can support with facilitation, provide structure, and share insight from similar work elsewhere. They can also act as a useful sounding board when navigating challenges or making decisions. Where available, this kind of support can strengthen both the process and outcomes of the project.

About the project

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Appendix 1 - The experiments at Swansea and Aberystwyth

Undeb Aberystwyth

Undeb Aberystwyth wanted to introduce new methods to get academic reps and academic societies to mix more, creating bonds between reps and societies. They employed a new student staff member to build student community in the Theatre, Film, and Television (TFTS) department.

This staff member worked with the SU, the department, existing student reps and the existing TFTS societies. They also supported students to create a new TFTS Community to operate across societies and academic reps.

They also did this by:

- Inviting academic society committee members to Rep Conference and the academic rep meet & greets
- Ensuring that academic society committee members know who their relevant reps are and vice-versa, e.g. via email and Teams channels

Finally, Undeb Aber aligned their Experiment with the introduction of a new digital system to support feedback collection.

Reflections

- Doing too much 'new' all at once was a challenge - a new staff member to onboard, train and get rolling, a new tech platform, a new way of working with a department, relationship building etc. Staggering any new activity is important for success.
- Introducing new tech across the students' union and institution took a lot longer than anticipated

- Clarity for the departmental society and subject societies around boundaries of activity and responsibilities was important. They're working well together but there's potential if established badly for tension and conflict
- A simple 'no-frills' physical post-box for feedback worked well. Students felt encouraged to give any type of feedback to the department, the society and to academic reps. Students reported that it felt 'real' and easy. The student society brought everything back to less corporate, more human connection.

Swansea University Students' Union

Swansea University Students' Union identified a faculty with active societies and clear representation gaps to conduct their experiment with.

Through their Experiment, they tried:

- Joint training for academic societies and reps
- New training for academic society committees on academic representation, feedback mechanisms, and collaboration with reps. This was co-designed with the selected department to ensure relevance and buy-in.
- The society committee were invited to participate in the annual rep conference, further embedding their role in the academic representation ecosystem and fostering cross-community learning.

They also wanted to pilot embedding academic society committees in student-staff forums to diversify student voice, link co-curricular and academic feedback, and elevate society-led insights.

Finally the SU wanted to pilot informal co-creation meetings where academic reps and society committee collaborate with department staff to identify issues, share feedback, and co-design solutions. These sessions were designed to be informal and to complement formal student-staff forums.

Reflections

- Working across a new team covering student activities and representation presented some challenges in ways of working
- Establishing a new initiative with the institution took many more meetings than anticipated. Establishing centrally rather than at faculty level worked better for getting traction. Establishing buy-in from the faculties is still ongoing.



Appendix 2 - Role distinction at Undeb Aber, as observed with the student staff and volunteers within the Theatre, Film and Television Studies (TFTS) department:

Society (volunteers)	Representatives (volunteers)		Staff
Society President	Faculty Representatives	Academic Representatives	Student Community & Representation Assistant
9.1 The President (or equivalent) shall be the main contact point for external communications with all external groups and individuals. This includes Undeb Aber. They are further responsible for the smooth and effective running of the committee and the Student Group, and shall be the final arbitrator of disputes amongst the committee.	Student Faculty Representatives participate in discussions across study schemes and the experiences of students at faculty level, the development of new or revised academic policy and consideration of NSS outcomes. They will represent students at faculty level and will be elected in accordance with a process under the oversight of Undeb Aber. There will be two representatives for each faculty.	Student Academic Representatives participate in discussions of study schemes and their annual monitoring and review, the review of external examiners' reports on taught schemes, the development of new or revised academic policy and consideration of NSS outcomes. Student Academic Representatives will be expected to attend training provided, take responsibility for ensuring that feedback and concerns of students	Support the coordination and delivery of social and extracurricular events and activities for students within the TFTS department. Collaborate with the Students' Union, TFTS staff, and students to strengthen and develop academic representation systems within the department. Contribute to fostering a strong sense of community and belonging among TFTS students.

They are responsible for creating the best environment for the committee and other members to operate in. They must ensure the general health and direction of the Student Group is in accordance with the views of its members. They must carry out duties that are listed elsewhere in this constitution	Student Faculty Representatives will sit on the Academic Affairs Committee at faculty level. Other informal channels are encouraged to discuss student feedback and identify joint priorities with the general aim of enhancing the quality of teaching and the overall student experience.	that they represent are addressed appropriately, and along with staff that actions and subsequent outcomes are communicated to the wider student body. Student Academic Representatives will form part of the membership of the Undeb Aber Academic Forum and will meet with Undeb Aber on a regular basis.	
Undeb Aberystwyth Student Group Constitution	Aberystwyth University Academic Handbook	Aberystwyth University Academic Handbook	Job Description



Appendix 3 - example project impact journal used on the Academic Communities Experiment

Impact questions	Date
What have you done this month to move your Experiment forward?	
Is anything stuck or behind schedule?	
Has anything happened that wasn't planned or surprised you?	
What are your next steps for the next month?	
Have you had any feedback from students or witnessed any impacts (good or bad) from the Experiment working?	
Have you had any feedback from departmental/university staff or witnessed any impacts (good or bad) from the Experiment working?	

Get in touch

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