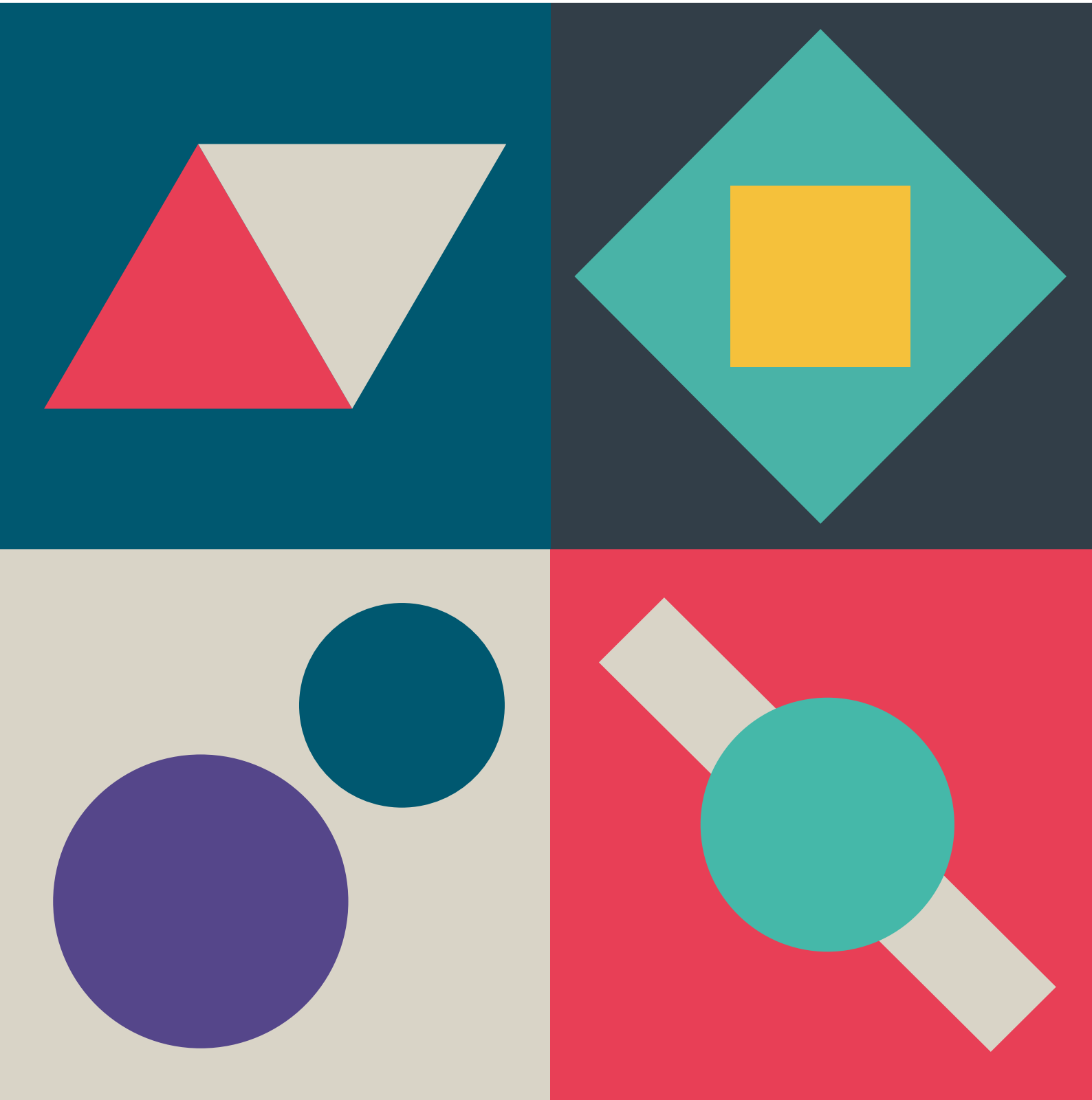


The future of the student voice? Policy, principles, practice

Case study: University of Salford





University of
Salford
MANCHESTER

“We have witnessed closer, more agile partnership working, underpinned by a strengthened sense of trust in the impacts, effects, and value of co-production.”

Collaboration and co-production during Covid-19: a reflection on the mutual benefits of partnership working with the Student Voice at the University of Salford

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Ed Moloney, Chief Executive Officer of University of Salford Students' Union
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Background

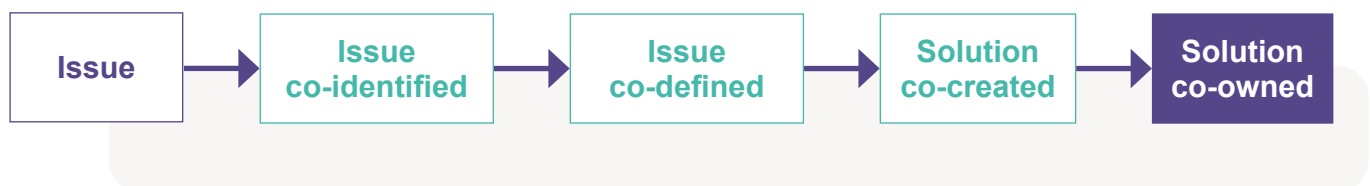
Over the past three years University of Salford Students' Union (USSU) and University of Salford (UoS) have developed their working relationship considerably. Together, we have ensured the priorities of the USSU and the university work in an ongoing dynamic handshake with each other towards the betterment of the student experience and the removal of barriers to learning. Through aligning key performance indicators and performance metrics of both institutions, and through recognising the spaces and places in which each organisation can boost the efforts of the other, we have developed a strong sense of mutual trust and respect based on partnership working. This allows for constructive challenge, with the recognition that we are all driving towards very similar goals. Crucially, this alignment is strategic and structural, rather than entirely reliant on good interpersonal dynamics. Alongside the regular informal 121's between key senior staff and student officers from both organisations, our governance arrangements for the partnership make space for co-creation and

co-production around shared ideas and priorities. Outside the governance of the partnership itself, students and the Students' Union have active presence across all key decision making and operational groups, assurance committees, and academic management groups.

Pre Covid-19, these informal and formal structures and practices all came together to help us collectively recognise that:

- + Co-production is fundamental to meeting mutually beneficial outcomes – this work really starts with co-definition of problems/issues.
- + The quality and standard of communication in open and honest dialogue must be a shared, ongoing practice towards excellence. Communication is at the heart of any relationship.
- + We nurture space for high quality dialogue and disagreements (not arguments)
- + Navigating complexity and nuance in the process of clear decision making should be embraced. It is only through this we progress to the mutual satisfaction of all stakeholders.
- + A true partnership means there is 'joint and several' responsibility for outcomes and impacts, whatever they are. It also means that student representatives need equitable access to senior decision makers at the university, and vice versa, so an issue can be taken through from co-identification to co-ownership.

Figure 1: Our approach to developing solutions.



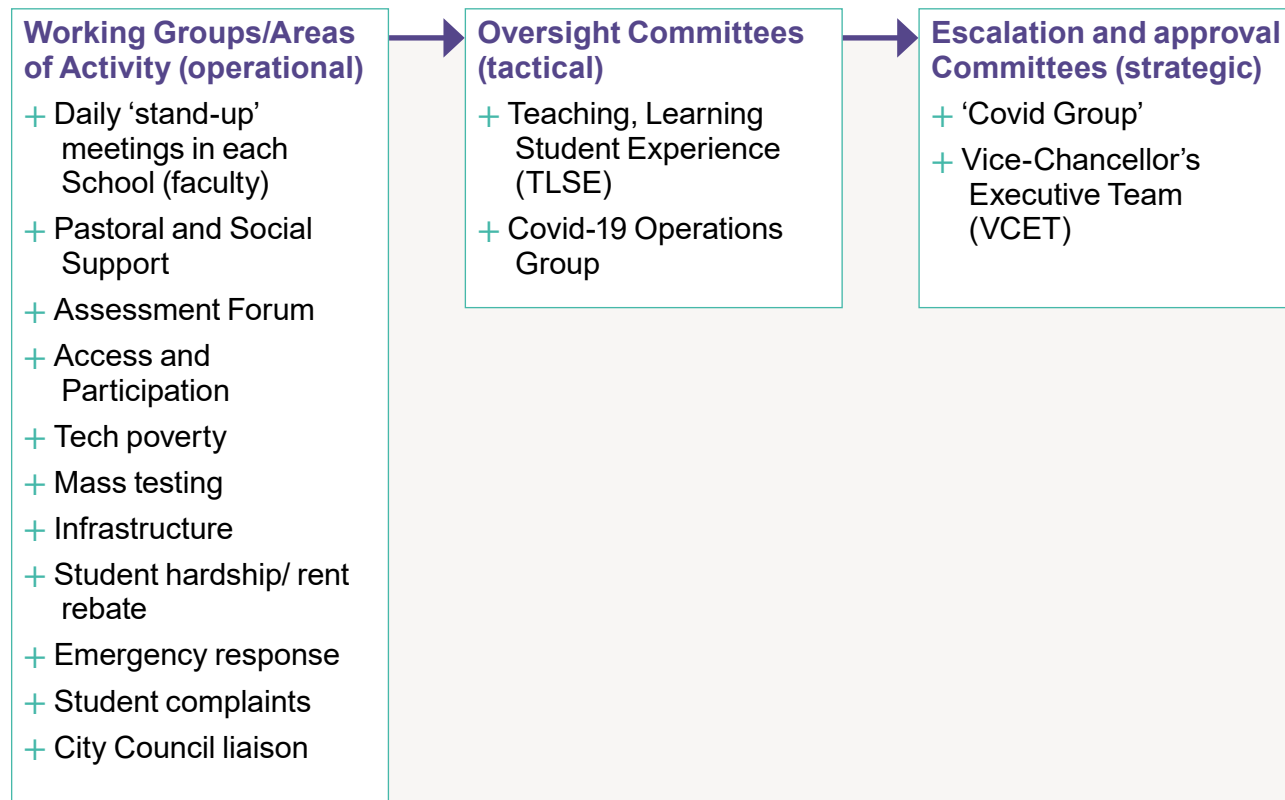
Operation during Covid-19

The speed and volatility of the early days and weeks of the pandemic and the modes of working that such an operating environment invites really tested our collective ability (and at some points willingness) to adhere to the learning that had evolved from the partnership development to date. In the flurry of invention of workarounds and unfamiliar ways of communicating and in the turbulence of shaping, managing and productively maintaining a positive student experience against shifting guidance and advice that, throughout the following months, required weekly and sometimes daily adjustments, it would have been easy to abandon the values of coproduction we had developed and take on a more rigid model of partnership working. However, we leant on the learning of the last three years and ensured that our response was a partnership effort on every level.

Operationally the response to Covid-19 at Salford continues to be steered through two response oversight groups, which intersect with each other and have an escalation route through to the Vice Chancellor's Executive Team (VCET). The Operations Group has focused on all matters pertaining to health and safety for all relevant stakeholders and Teaching, Learning and Student Experience has focused on all matters pertaining to the student experience.

From the start of the pandemic, USSU have always had access of escalation, input and oversight across all areas of activity. As the pandemic has progressed, we have structurally developed this working relationship to ensure USSU has been embedded across all strands of response activity. This mode of working has paid dividends and has significantly shaped and steered the response of the university and the path it continues to take as the nature of pandemic evolves. The diagram below gives an overview of where and how the driving principle of co-productive partnership working has been iterated in practice. Following the diagram, we take two aspects of this work and reflect on the nature and experience of the practice in more detail. Operation during Covid-19

Figure 2: Our joint Covid-19 response. USSU is engaged across every area of activity.



Communications - reflections from Dr Sam Grogan

In working in partnership with the USSU, the goal was to get on the front foot and stay on it. This was hard to do, particularly given that we as an institution (or sector) would find out the information from the Downing St briefings and government updates at the same time as our students. We took an early decision to commit fully to open partnership – we had communication teams and the USSU in all relevant meetings from the outset - they were in the room from the very start. This approach was also replicated at all levels of the institution – for instance, the student officers were present at each of the daily school meetings. This approach helped us to understand the real impact of Covid-19 on students and local decision making and allowed us to ensure students were considered throughout.

We would also invite other agencies to join the meetings. For example, the other Greater Manchester universities, Salford City Council and Public Health England were all involved in the Operations Group. This was initially uncomfortable but created an essential space for productive discomfort. In these groups, particularly in the earlier stages of the pandemic, we were often not presenting proposals but exploring scenarios to get to the point of being able to forward a proposal. To be agile and responsive we brought the right people in from the start, no matter how uncomfortable (or indeed unprepared at times) we may have been.

Working jointly with the USSU really helped us in tailoring communications and engagement to the different audiences, and in ways and means which were relatable to our students (we already know our audience groups so had a strong starting position). We have had consistently positive feedback for the ways in which we have engaged our students and kept them up to date with developments. This feedback demonstrates our strategy of being proactive, empathetic, timely and tailored has landed effectively.

Being involved ensured we could be part of the solution - Reflections from Temi and Ed

Whenever a new challenge emerged – be it poor behaviour from a small group of students who were not socially-distancing in halls or another national lockdown – we were involved from the outset across the operational, tactical and strategic domains. This meant that we had the ability not only to shape the university's response but also respond ourselves. We were able to ensure that there was ongoing strategic alignment between our organisations.

An example of this is in how we addressed the impact of the pandemic upon students who were in social isolation in September/October 2020. USSU used its trained peer mentors, working as part of our [Rafiki programme](#), to contact each of those students. Calling began within a few days of the approach being conceived and co-agreed; there were no data-sharing issues or similar that needed to be resolved. Ultimately the Rafiki volunteers supported almost 1000 students and referred many to the university's wellbeing team as well as the university's support webpages. We replicated this model to provide specific support for international students quarantining on arrival in the country and have supported 270 international students through that programme. This is not something that UoS could have done without easy access to USSU's volunteers, nor would it have been considered without USSU's involvement at all levels of UoS's Covid-19 response.

An enabler of this work was USSU's 'Covid Listening Project' which took the form of two large scale surveys (with over 3000 respondents) which informed four priority areas, each of which USSU investigated in more detail through workshops:

- + Quality of Teaching
- + Access to on – campus spaces
- + Placements and practical skills sessions
- + Wellbeing and Sense of Belonging.

The outcomes of these workshops allowed USSU Student Officers to advocate for an extension to the library opening hours, increased access to studio spaces, improved communication for students on NHS placements, and continued resourcing for online social events. We also lobbied for the university's 'no detriment' policy to be reconsidered for students who were studying on courses with non-traditional start dates/lengths, as well as technical details around our mitigating circumstances policy. We also agreed a compressed process to ensure that any complaints regarding Covid-19 could be dealt with in a timely manner. The USSU Student Officers also sit on these panels and so are informing the outcomes of these complaints and any consequent policy recommendations. As a final example, in December USSU requested that student hardship funds be supplemented with an additional £0.5m, which was approved by the university.

In conclusion/routes forward...

Through the pandemic numerous aspects of the ways the USSU and the UoS have worked together have shown themselves to be highly effective. We have witnessed closer, more agile partnership working, underpinned by a strengthened sense of trust in the impacts, effects, and value of co-production. As we begin to lift eyes to embedding learning from the pandemic in longer term practices, we are actively seeking to deepen a mode of partnership by structurally embedding the modus operandi of 'co-definition of issue and co-production of developments' into many more of the intersections between the two organisations. In our discussions at present, there is a clear sense that we have just experienced the first chapter in a different kind of book: a new 'playbook' is emerging which recognises the independence of both institutions, whilst ensuring we have points of focus which dovetail well with each other. By extending this mode of working, future chapters could follow this pattern, helping demonstrably realise further shared benefits for the betterment of the student experience and outcomes.

To be continued...

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