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The Student Councils programme: evaluation findings

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Executive summary

- The Student Councils programme, funded by Health Education England (HEE) South East, was a two-year initiative aimed at incorporating student perspectives into the development of education and learning structures across the region. The funding was used to develop six multiprofessional student councils, comprised of student nurses, trainee nursing associates, midwives, and allied health professionals (AHPs) across the six Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) in the region.
- The Florence Nightingale Foundation (FNF) undertook a realist evaluation of the programme to assess its implementation and outcomes. The evaluation demonstrates that well-developed and adequately supported multiprofessional student councils can bridge the gap between practice providers, universities, and the student population – galvanising positive change and preparing students to transition into practice.
- The programme was found to benefit students personally by boosting their core confidence, expanding their support networks, and helping them develop new skills in leadership, quality improvement, and stakeholder engagement.
- The student councils benefited the educational structure of ICSs in numerous ways, including by providing a platform for students to voice concerns and identify issues in practice education. This inclusive approach has highlighted supervisory and assessment challenges across universities and practice settings.
- Successful councils achieved tangible outcomes, such as establishing hardship funds and wellbeing support initiatives. These initiatives may contribute to reducing attrition rates amongst the student and newly qualified nurse, midwife, nursing associate and AHP populations.
- Key factors for an effective student council programme include reimbursement schemes, an induction programme, leadership opportunities, social media use, system-level representation, alignment with training competencies, collaboration with RePAIR fellows, regional meetings, engagement with higher education institutions, and dedicated facilitative and administrative support.
- Some councils faced challenges, including navigating an evolving system, reconciling local variations, managing engagement levels, setting realistic objectives, ensuring continuity of membership, addressing personality clashes, and a lack of administrative support.
- Implementing positive action measures during recruitment, like reserving seats for global majority members and providing reasonable adjustments for those that required them, is critical for creating a diverse and inclusive council, despite logistical challenges that need mapping and action.
- Learnings from this Student Councils programme evaluation can provide a blueprint for other regions and ICSs to follow to develop their own Student Councils programme. We recommend any regional Student Councils programme do the following:
 - Identify and map key stakeholders, e.g. higher education institutions, practice partners, senior system leaders, and supportive agencies at ICS and regional levels.
 - Have a remuneration and reimbursement protocol to fairly compensate members for their time and contribution.
 - Build relationships with stakeholders, particularly in higher education

institutions, to develop a supportive and engaged network.

- o Adopt an intentional recruitment protocol that incorporates positive action plans for equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) to ensure diverse and multidisciplinary representation.
- o Provide dedicated facilitative and administrative support for ICS councils and for an overarching regional council.
- o Offer council members leadership development opportunities to equip them with the skills to be effective and influential.
- o Hold regional level meetings to foster collaboration and facilitate knowledge sharing amongst the councils.
- o Identify and secure system level opportunities for engagement, collaboration, and initiatives that are aligned with the council's objectives.
- o Establish regular reporting mechanisms to track progress, address challenges, and celebrate achievements.
- o Establish a reverse mentoring scheme by recruiting senior leaders and implementing a robust matching protocol.

1. Introduction

HEE South East Student Councils programme

The Student Councils programme was a two-year initiative funded by Health Education England (HEE) South East which commenced delivery in September 2021. It was established in response to multiple factors, including the need to better support students whose training had been disrupted due to Covid-19, the national drive to increase placement capacity, and the need to reduce attrition rates amongst the student nursing, midwifery, and allied health professional (AHP) populations.

Its main aim was to enable a student perspective to become an integral part of the development of education and learning structures and processes and to shape the quality agenda. To achieve this, the programme provided £253,000 in funding, distributed over two-years, to establish student councils in each of the six Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) in the South East region. The programme also facilitated the establishment of a regional student council, where all the councils could come together on a quarterly basis. Seats were allocated to ensure proportionate representation for the nursing, midwifery, trainee nursing associate and allied health professions based on the student population of the ICS. Additionally, there were protected seats for students from a global majority background.

The students were offered a support package from the Workforce Transformation team at HEE South East and the Florence Nightingale Foundation (FNF), which included remuneration or practice hours for their time, a full induction programme, reverse mentoring, regular 1:1s, and a three-day bespoke FNF leadership programme. There were 12 seats available for each council, providing 72 new unique leadership opportunities per year. Students were expected to hold their position as a student

council member for up to 12 months and work with university and practice providers in their ICS to set the direction of the council with clear objectives tailored to their specific priorities and context. They also came together to define a broader, overarching regional mission and vision (outlined in Section 2).

The evaluation

FNF was commissioned to undertake a mixed methods process evaluation of the Student Councils programme. The evaluation commenced in September 2023 with the aims of assessing how the programme was implemented in practice and understanding programme mechanisms and outcomes from a variety of perspectives in order to provide insights to aid implementation in other contexts. Underpinning these aims, the evaluation sought to answer the following key questions:

1. What were the critical steps and effective strategies employed in setting up the student councils. How can these be replicated in other regions?
2. What were the main benefits experienced by student council members and what main challenges did they encounter?
3. How did the student councils benefit ICSs in terms of educational structure, development, and support and what were the notable challenges in integrating student perspectives into decision-making?
4. What significant insights or actions emerged regarding equality, diversity, and inclusion within the activities and discussions of the student councils?

The evaluation used a theory-based methodology, drawing from realist evaluation principles, aiming to interrogate not only the programme's outcomes but also the reasons behind them and the contextual factors influencing these outcomes (Pawson and Tilley, 1997).

Key considerations

This report should be read with the following considerations in mind:

- Council maturity and output was variable and, therefore, evidence presented in this report is richer for some councils than for others.
- Different stakeholders were consulted from each council, reflecting the variety of project activity and wide reach of the programme. Insights have been assessed thematically as far as possible and where appropriate to assess delivery across the entire programme and make generalisable recommendations.
- Participation in data collection efforts for this evaluation was optional and, therefore, not every council is represented equally in the stakeholder feedback.
- The Student Councils programme took place amidst an uncertain period of system transformation and transition. HEE integrated into a new directorate within NHS England, officially recognised since 1 April 2023 as NHSE Workforce, Training and Education (WT&E). Throughout this report we refer to the commissioner as HEE South East reflecting its status when the programme was commissioned and for the majority of its delivery.

2. Programme development and delivery

This section details the rationale behind the programme's inception, its developmental stages and delivery methods, and offers a concise overview of the composition, objectives, activities and outputs of each council.

Programme context and rationale

The Student Councils programme was developed in response to several overlapping agendas of vital importance to NHS performance and care quality, including:

- **Improving rates of attrition and retention** – There is a high rate of attrition in the student clinical training pipeline. For every five nurse training places, only three full-time nurses join the NHS (Nuffield Trust, 2023). A 2022 survey found that around a third (30%) of allied health professionals in training have considered leaving (Palmer and Rolewicz, 2022). The NHS will not be able to turn the corner on staffing shortages, or deliver against new retention aspirations outlined in the recently published NHS Long Term Workforce Plan (NHSE, 2023), without better responding to the needs of students throughout their training.
- **Supporting the place-based learning environments programme** – In 2016, HEE adopted a 'place based' model to distribute placement funding. This model pooled placement funding for all nursing, midwives, and AHPs in a geographic area (i.e. 'a place') together in order to reshape the funding flows based on the health and workforce needs of a specific place. An essential component of a high-performing place-based learning environment is to be involving and hearing from students within the system about what it is like to train within that system and to ensure that there are mechanisms to hear ideas around

innovation and improvement from this part of the workforce.

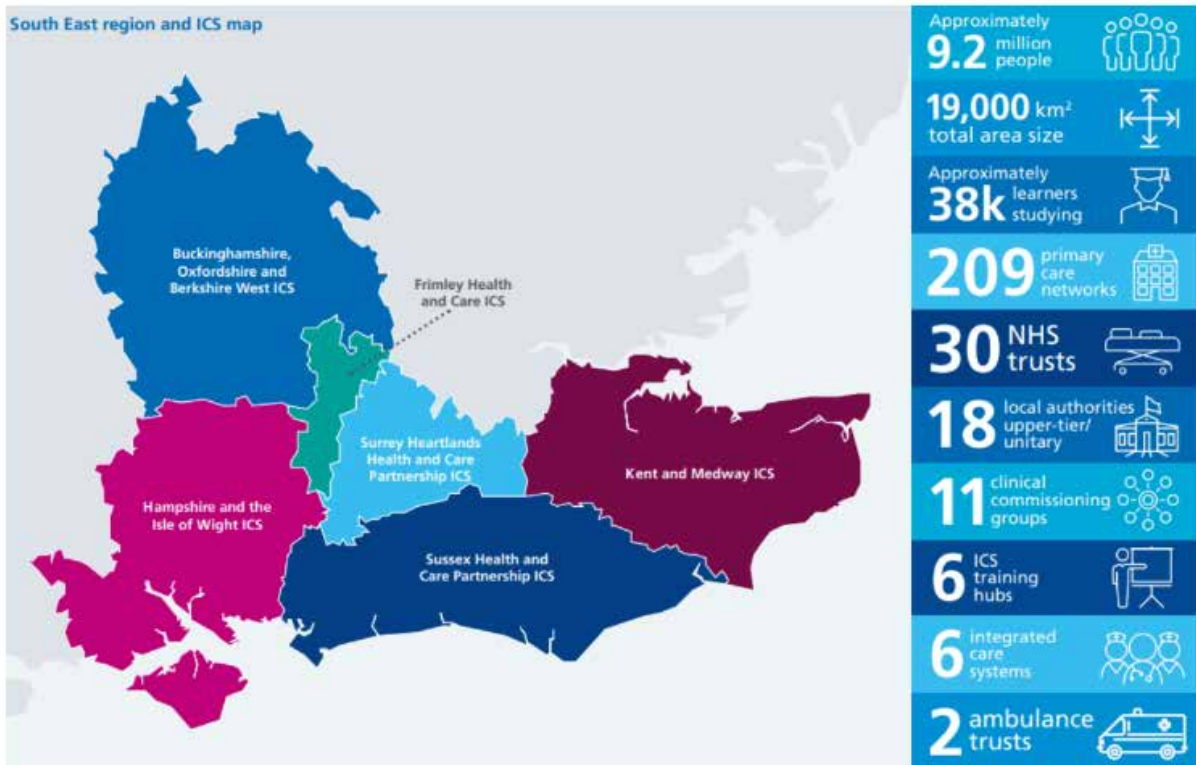
- **Supporting Covid-19 restoration and recovery efforts** – The first wave of the pandemic greatly impacted learning opportunities for students. Engaging students in a proactive and meaningful way about their experiences and the challenges they face was seen as a vital component of restoration efforts.

Programme development and delivery

The Student Councils programme was based on a successful nursing student council pilot programme developed in Hampshire and Isle of Wight (HIOW) ICS. The HIOW student nursing council was formed after student learners and senior system leaders came together for a one-off event in July 2019 and realised that there was no formal mechanism in place for students to regularly share their placement experiences and shape decisions that would impact them. To address this, they resolved to establish a Student Nursing Council based on a model of management and leadership popular in the field of nursing known as shared governance. The purpose of shared governance is to empower individuals at all levels in decision-making processes while assisting in the development of professional autonomy.

Hear from the council members about the impact of this pilot in their own words:

[Solent IND Conference 2021](#)



Using the HIOW model, with some new variations to reflect pilot learning, the programme was then rolled out to all six ICSs within the South East region, which are as follows:

1. Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire West (BOB)
2. Hampshire and Isle of Wight (HIOW) (already established as initial pilot site, with funding previously secured)
3. Frimley
4. Surrey Heartlands
5. Sussex
6. Kent & Medway

Funding

HEE South East provided £253,000 in funding to establish the programme for two years (2021/22 to 2022/23), which included funding for an evaluation. Each council had a running cost of £20,000 per year which covered 1 day per month (7.5 hours at Band 4 rate) of work for each council member.

It was a core expectation of each ICS to continue the councils as Business as

Usual activity through local investment of placement tariff funding. There was also funding for an FNF programme lead, FNF administration, and travel expenses.

Membership

There were 12 seats available for each council, providing up to 72 new unique leadership opportunities per year at any given time. Students were expected to hold their position as a Student Council member for up to 12 months.

Council membership was designed to be comprised of a set number of nurses (including nursing associates), midwives, and AHPs depending on the size of the student population, the number of affiliate higher education institutions, and the spread of the three professions across the student population.

Additionally, there were protected seats for students from a global majority background. The original allocation of places is illustrated on the next page in Table 1.

ICS	Number of nurses on the Council (1 seat reserved for TNAs)	Number of midwives on the Council	Number of AHPs on the Council	Total
BOB	6	1	5	12
Frimley	6	3	3	12
HIOW	7	1	4	12
Kent and Medway	7	1	4	12
Surrey	6	3	3	12
Sussex	6	1	5	12

Table 1: Council member place allocation by profession

Recruitment

Recruitment rounds took place in the spring and autumn of each year in order to ensure that the student council members had staggered start and end times so that the council could evolve while still maintaining some continuity. Recruitment utilised several different channels, including social media, with serving council members often using innovative methods, like [videos](#), to spread word of this opportunity. Although there were challenges both in terms of reaching out to people from the global majority, and to certain disciplines such as nursing associates, many councils adopted successful strategies to overcome these barriers (more on this in section 5).



MEET OUR TEAM!



CECILE
3rd yr student Midwife
CCCU



ZUNAIRA
3rd year student Dietitian
Uni of Surrey



YVETTE
Final yr adult nursing
CCCU



KELLY
2nd yr Adult nursing
City University of London



CINDI
Masters in adult nursing



EMMANUEL
Trainee nursing associate

Application process

Eligible student nurses, midwives, AHPs, and trainee nursing associates were invited to apply for membership on the council by completing a short online application form. Students were asked to demonstrate the following in their application:

- Ability to reflect on their own authentic healthcare student journey
- Motivation for applying for the role
- Perception and vision for leadership in health and social care
- Qualities and values they aspire to in a leader
- Ability to escalate and raise concerns
- Support from their Academic Tutor to apply

In order to help socialise them with what the role entailed, a role descriptor was created.

Support

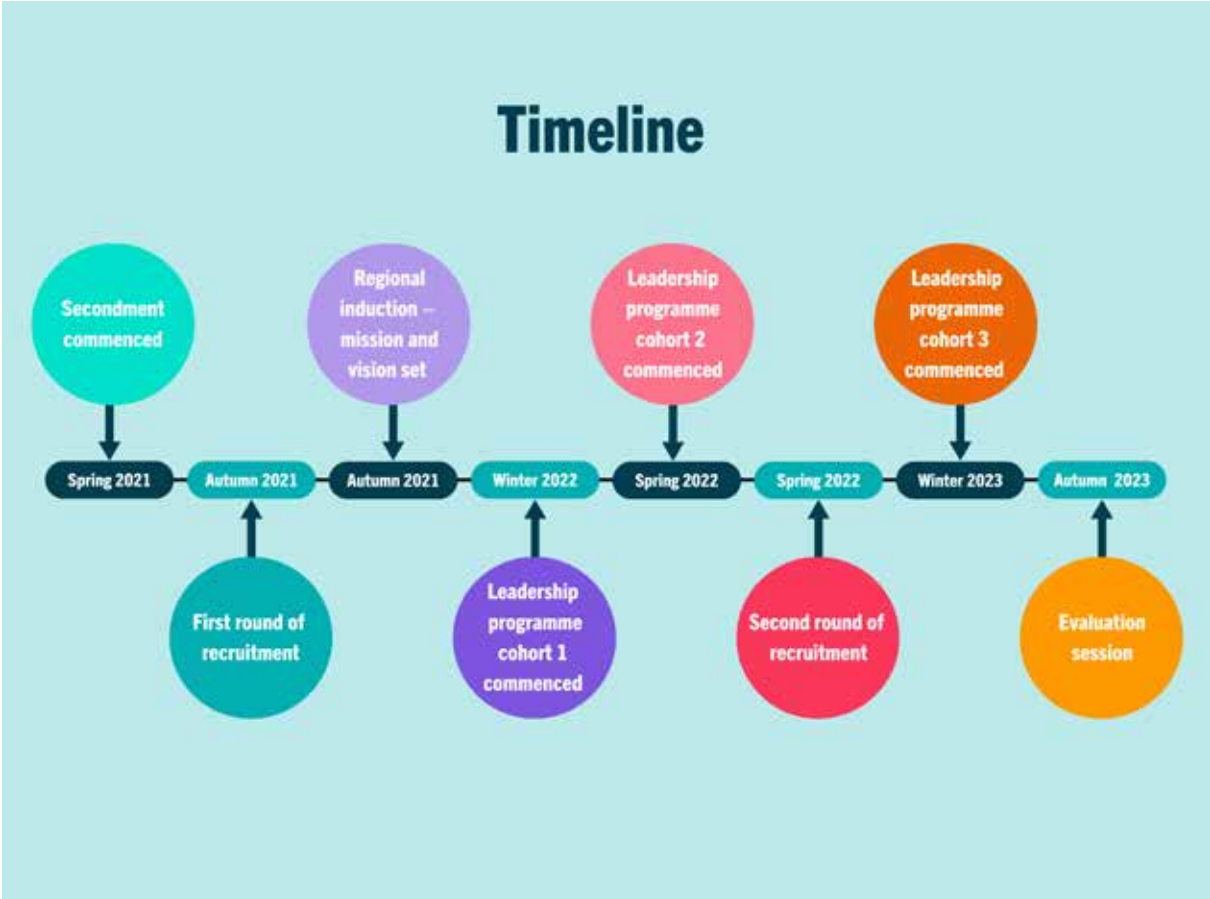
Student council members were offered the following types of support for taking part in the Council to help ensure their success:

- **Remuneration** – Student council members were paid 7.5 hours per month at Band 4 or alternatively they could opt to claim 7.5 practice hours per month.
- **Florence Nightingale Foundation leadership programme** – Student council members were automatically enrolled in a 3-day FNF leadership programme, which included a session facilitated by the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) on presentation of self and personal impact.
- **One-to-one supervision** – Student council members were supported via one-to-one sessions with a member of the FNF team or RePAIR Fellows.
- **Reverse mentoring** – Student council members were supported to engage in reverse mentoring with senior leaders in their ICS.

- **One day virtual induction** – Student council members were offered an induction which included expectation setting, sharing hopes and fears, and social media training amongst other topics.
- **FNF secretariat and facilitation support** – FNF provided dedicated secretariat support, including arranging council meetings and taking minutes. FNF also served as overarching programme facilitator.
- **Training** – FNF provided additional training to develop council member skills.
- **Peer learning** – FNF also facilitated significant peer to peer learning opportunities for the council members, including publishing student council [blogs](#), disseminating student council work to highlight best practice, and convening quarterly regional meetings with all the councils.

Programme timeline

The programme funding was released in April 2021, with the first round of recruitment beginning in the autumn of 2021. The second year commenced in the autumn of 2022, with the final meetings held in autumn of 2023.



3. Council composition and activity

Regional vision and mission

The six student councils came together to define a single, overarching regional mission and vision to guide the work of their individual councils.

Regional Mission: Valuing, nurturing, and amplifying the voice of the future workforce by bridging the gap between healthcare students, universities, and practice providers.

Regional Vision: The Student councils will improve the student experience by providing a strategic and consistent voice within the southeast region of England and the six Integrated Care Systems within it. We aim to change workplace culture at all levels in regards to student contribution, value and support within health and social care. Promoting safe, diverse, authentic, and respectful ways of working for all to enable true advocacy for our professions.

Council objectives

Each of the six councils established their own objectives, as outlined in Table 2 on the

following page. Objectives were developed through collaboration at regional meetings and reflected the evolving objectives of the ICSs. While all the councils established objectives unique to their own context and needs, some similarities emerged in what the council members sought to achieve.

One key focus revolved around **amplifying student engagement and communication**, utilising surveys and social media platforms to gather diverse perspectives and disseminate information about opportunities. Another common theme centred on **promoting best practice** and fostering awareness by showcasing exemplary models of student support and education. Additionally, there was a strong emphasis across the councils on **setting standards and support systems**, including the establishment of a recognised 'gold standard' for supervisors, providing clarity on skills expectations during placements, and introducing buddy systems or packages of support to enhance student wellbeing. Lastly, councils sought to **improve student experience** and knowledge by actively collecting feedback on placement experiences, facilitating webinars, and producing informative resources.

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#FNFSTUDENTS



3rd year - Physiotherapy

Sammi – University of Chichester

Placement Oversight Group

What is it? Working collaboratively with partners across the system to shape strategic direction of placement management.

Aim: Build a National Placement Management System by researching clinical placements and processes.

Who? Senior group representing each partner organisation. Advisory perspective providing recommendations for sign off at the Chief Nurses Forum, AHP Council and ultimately the People Committee.

How? By adopting a co-production approach to student placements strategy. Integrated working to ensure consistency in approaches across AHP, Nursing and Midwifery.

Mission:

- >Enabling an increase in capacity (where required) to meet future workforce requirements.
- >Optimising placement capacity and efficiency of placement activity.
- >Collecting data in real time to provide ICS, Regional and National oversight of placement

Example of a Council Project

A snapshot of each Council

Table 2: An overview of each council

Site 1: Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West (BOB)	
Named delivery partners	Oxford Brookes University
Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhanced focus on raising the profile of the student council Benefited from optimal support from regional stakeholders, offering opportunities to network with regional leaders and present at key events
Broader system context	The council benefited from Oxford Brookes University having shared decision-making councils. University and placement provider partners were supportive. Local Trust committed to Pathways to Excellence.
Modifications	No significant modifications enacted. There was a noted reduction in AHP students over time.
Objectives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Garner the wider student voice within the BOB ICS via a survey and creating a presence on social media Showcase best practice in regard to student support, education and placement experience across the BOB ICS Champion and create more awareness of the shared decision-making model in HEIs and Practice
Progress against objectives	Achieved all objectives
Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Membership of local forums, including representation of all student councils at the regional delivery group. Keynote speakers at the Thames Valley LEL good practice event. A network of students and stakeholders was built across the Southeast region.
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student nurses active in recruitment to council through word of mouth recommendation lead to high levels of student nurse representation. Student nurses completed the leadership programme in higher numbers than other healthcare students. Student council enjoyed raising their profile through members taking up opportunities to promote their work; this approach, in turn, led to further opportunities being offered. Council members reported increased confidence, self-awareness and self-efficacy. Council members reported opportunities for progression and leadership in newly qualified roles. New ideas, perspectives and concerns were shared with regional decision-makers. Students understood broader system structures and decision-making protocols. Student council members felt empowered to make positive change.

Site 2: Frimley	
Noted delivery partners	Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust
Approach	Council members place a high value on shared learning from regional student council meetings and support from stakeholders, with key focus on generating sustainability.
Broader system context	The council benefited from the local Trust being on the Magnet pathway. Local stakeholders demonstrated commitment to shared governance.
Modifications	There was no local student council before the programme's inception. Recruitment was challenging but has gained momentum due to the commitment of council members and local stakeholders.
Objectives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Collate the wider student voice within the Frimley ICS via a survey 2. Showcase best practice with a focus on student support, education, and the placement experience across the Frimley ICS 3. Create more awareness around the expectations of student support and how we can welcome our students into the clinical environment 4. Increase the awareness of the HEE Student Council within the Frimley ICS
Progress against objectives	Achieved all objectives
Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Profile raising activities- presence on social media, notably X (previously Twitter) and blog posts • Coordinated role specific Focus groups to identify issues to be addressed by the council • Presented at the International Nursing Day event • The site of instigating the shared email address for the council facilitated shared opportunities and responsibility.
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successful in generating sustainability for the council through engagement and responsiveness to opportunities. • Students approached the role in a professional manner • Students reported increased confidence, self-awareness and authority. • Skills in hosting focus groups, which were used in practice. • Recognition of the value of the student's voice • Positive relationships with stakeholders, robust network. • Professional generosity- making introductions within the network • Students understand broader system structures and decision-making protocols.

Site 3: IOW and Hampshire	
Named delivery partners	Health Education England Southeast, Workforce Transformation Team, NHSE Workforce Training and Education Team, Solent NHS Trust, University of Winchester.
Approach	Commitment to build on successes of the pilot, while incorporating learnings to make programme even stronger.
Broader system context	There were structures already in place as facilitators for the council's development. Nursing students were already in place; recruitment focused on Midwifery, AHP and TNA students.
Modifications	The existing structure was built upon, regional meetings were instigated, and the RePAIR fellows were introduced to add value to the existing framework. The council had issues recruiting members from diverse backgrounds, which led to the creation of protected seats for those from a global majority background.
Objectives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish / design a charter (a gold standard) for supervisors to adhere to 2. Create a student landing page that would function as an online reporting system, with a feedback template for students to provide to placement providers 3. Establish the four pillars of clinical practice in student expectations across all healthcare practices
Progress against objectives	Did not report achieving all initially set objectives as priorities shifted and different objectives were delivered against.
Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of a hardship fund as a direct result of the University of Winchester liaising with the University of Southampton. • Representing student voice at national events and at system level. • Establishment of practice learning travel funding for international students (who are not eligible for TDAE- the result of liaising with the BOB student council). • Social media presence. • Schwartz rounds were introduced at the University of Southampton to improve the well-being of students. • Network building, including relationships with ICB. • Hosting webinars and writing articles. • Establishment of food parcels and free parking for students at the University of Southampton. • Hosting focus groups. • Initiation of the development of a mentoring platform for healthcare students with disabilities.

Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students understand wider system structures and decision-making protocols.• Confidence, self-awareness and self-efficacy.• Confidence to apply for other things.• Supporting each other with endeavours beyond the scope of the council.• Being inspired by each other.• Learning from role models like the RePAIR fellows and Jess Sainsbury, FNF student councils programme facilitator .• Sense of contribution.• The benefits of recruiting for diversity were tangible in terms of broadening the strengths of the council.• Perceived prestige of the FNF leadership programme brought a sense of responsibility.• Teamworking- the centrality of collaboration rather than competition between council members.• Value of in-person meetings.• Breaking down barriers between students from different professions- a unique opportunity.• Preparation for transition to practice.
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Site 4: Kent and Medway	
Named delivery partners	Learning Environment Leads, Placement expansion team, RePAIR fellows, Canterbury Christchurch University, City University of London
Approach	This council was notable for turning challenges into opportunities. During the early stages, there was attrition of members, which made continuity and development challenging. The diverse mix of courses represented presented logistical challenges. Strong members took the work forward, with collaborative practices improving over time.
Broader system context	The local Trust was not seeking magnet status at the current time. The NMC was addressing issues locally, which considerably impacted council activities. RePAIR supported the promotion of EDI at this location. A RePAIR fellow from the area was a facilitator. An HEI partner took time to engage with the project.
Modifications	Due to local practice considerations, the student council operated at the Trust level rather than the ICB level.
Objectives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To disseminate information about FNF and HEE council to our cohorts and networks 2. To produce an infographic on Student Leadership to inspire and inform students on opportunities, demystify leadership and aid other students on their leadership journeys 3. To be more active in getting feedback from the region about how courses / training is going and factors that are impacting the education of the future workforce 4. To host several webinars for students from our region to attend
Progress against objectives	Achieved all objectives
Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active comms team in the second round, one council member had a robust social media presence. • Raising awareness of neurodiversity in practice • Establishment of a hardship fund for students impacted by local practice issues. • Raising the voice of students in challenging situations, responsive to local needs • Made improvements through role-specific focus groups
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidence, self-awareness and self-efficacy • Raised student voice- amplified the voice of students in challenging situations, speaking up. • Learning to be advocates • Learning to be mentors • Presentation and leadership skills • Networking: Building relationships with national leaders • Life skills • Students understand broader system structures and decision-making protocols. • Collaborative working practices took time to establish

Site 5: Surrey	No representation at evaluation workshop
Named delivery partners	Shared governance with Frimley
Approach	Details not available
Broader system context	Details not available
Modifications	The council experienced issues with attrition; many council members did not complete the term of 12 months, possibly because the numbers were low. Positive stakeholder contacts didn't translate to recruitment. They were initially attached to Frimley for support to increase recruitment and independence.
Objectives	Shared objectives with Frimley, as above.
Progress against objectives	Achieved objectives 1 and 3
Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for students to speaking up in practice areas • Worked with Surrey Heartlands to develop ICS-wide placement evaluation survey
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One active member who facilitated speaking up in practice for students in local area

Site 6: Sussex	No representation at evaluation workshop
Named delivery partners	Supportive HEI partners
Approach	Details not available
Broader system context	There was a lower local appreciation of how the student council programme works; one Trust wanted to set up its own student council. There was less structure for the student council within practice partners in this area. There were few opportunities for council members in this area.
Modifications	Frimley council have supported monitoring. Programme leadership currently supporting with sharing best practice.
Objectives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To provide clarity around the skill expectations on placements 2. Share the thanks – promote positive placement educator experiences and create the gold standard of the role of the educator in practice 3. Develop and initiate a ‘pre placement package’ to help students on their placements 4. Establish and promote a buddy initiative to provide wellbeing and other forms of support
Progress against objectives	Did not report against set objectives
Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The establishment of a Nursing Society • Fed the student voice into wider work across the ICS to create a new placement portal / database • Participated in system level exercises mapping proficiencies for student nurses in new placements • Met with placement development team at ICB level to discuss findings from Student Council activity around student wellbeing, financial issues, and placement quality issues
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AHP students provided a case-study to argue against the closure of the Leaf hospital (a gold standard training environment) and presented it directly to the Dean of Brighton University, resulting in a change in plans. • There have been challenges with communication between council members. • Council in the early stages of implementing best practices shared by other councils • Strong presentation skills • Engagement with meetings is low.



December 2022 Regional Meeting



Student council meeting for the Student Councils programme in the South East of England

4. Impact and understanding outcomes

This section provides a detailed overview of the evaluation methodology and design and assesses outcomes. Critically it also identifies five underlying programme principles (referred to as CMOs) that describe the causal mechanisms influencing intended programme outcomes, which have enabled us to understand and distil what it is about this complex programme that has underpinned its successes.

Evaluation methodology

This report uses realist evaluation to meet the need for a complexity-sensitive approach to evaluating the student councils programme (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Realist evaluation involves a qualitative research approach, focusing on stakeholders' experiences using multiple data sources (Bryman, 2012; Danermark et al., 2002). It aims to use critical realism to study how interventions work in real-world contexts. Realist evaluations assume that when a programme is implemented, it aims for positive change and it asks the question 'What works, for whom, in which circumstances, and why?' to understand how the programme brought about change (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). To answer this question, the context, mechanisms, and outcomes related to the programme are triangulated from the perspective of multiple stakeholders. Examining how the programme develops in different locations and exploring various stakeholders' perspectives allows initial programme theories to be refined (Greenhalgh et al., 2015).

Design

The evaluation comprised three phases as indicated in Figure 1.

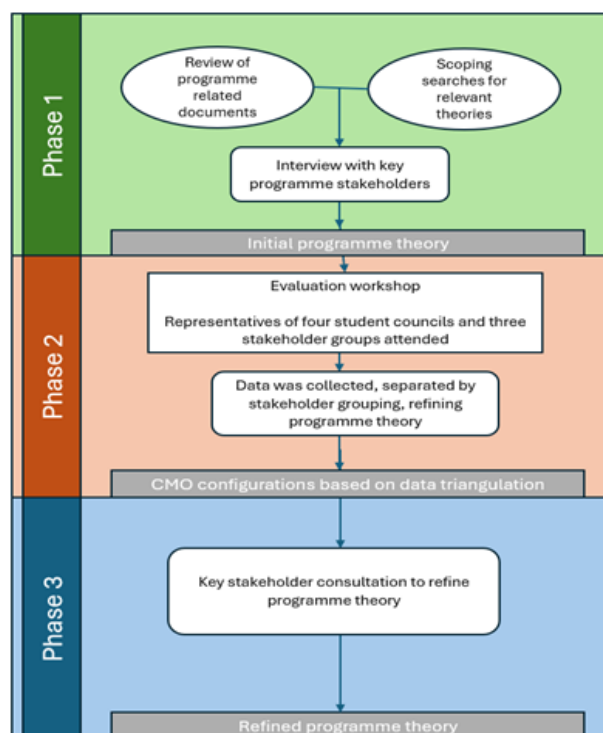


Figure 1: Evaluation design

Data collection and programme theory development

Data on the programme were collected through a review of programme documents, interviews, and an evaluation workshop (Skivington, et al., 2021) and analysed to produce an initial programme theory outlining how the programme was implemented across the six sites and common barriers and enablers. A refined programme theory was generated iteratively through theory gleaning, testing and validation, using context-mechanism-outcome (CMOCs) to describe what enables student councils to work, when, for whom, and in what ways. These CMOCs were tested through further consultations with key stakeholders to validate the theory. Where participants disputed the programme theory, it was revisited by recourse to study data until the final theory was agreed upon.

Data analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed; researcher notes were taken at the time using mind mapping software. Field notes and participant notes were collected at the stakeholder workshop. Programme documents were collated. For each phase, two researchers (LL and LP) analysed all forms of data and met to interrogate emerging CMOCs (outlined in full in the Appendix).

Results: Understanding success factors across all the Councils

CMOC 1: Sustainable membership

Sustainable student council membership relies on aligning the work of the council with local priorities, facilitated by a supportive framework that includes protected and reimbursed time. Recruitment should prioritise equality, diversity, and inclusion and consider positive action approaches to broaden the strengths of the council.

The success of the student councils relies on the sustainability of student council membership, which is contingent on aligning council work with local priorities and interests, supported by an enabling framework. Key sustainability factors include recruitment strategies, partnership working, evolving healthcare landscapes, leadership impact, and the reimbursement structures.

FNF leadership programme

The introduction of the FNF leadership programme emerges as a critical mechanism in supporting council member sustainability. Acting as both an incentive and a skill-building platform, it positively correlates with increased engagement in the councils:

“Through the leadership programme, my confidence in myself and my presence has significantly improved. I am more curious and self-aware and can communicate better. This has enabled me to engage with more opportunities the council has presented me.”
(Student council member)

Nursing students were particularly likely to recommend student council membership to peers, which enhanced recruitment efforts. The leadership programme counted as practice hours for student nurses, further influencing sustained engagement.

Remuneration and reimbursement policy

Reimbursement policy emphasised the importance of recognising the value of council members' contributions. Payment of council members for their time was designed into the programme from the beginning. However, the mechanism for payment evolved through learning from the programme. Initially, Solent NHS Trust had the student council members on their employment bank and payment was facilitated via this system. However, due to Solent's inability to administer this process regionally, FNF stepped in. When FNF assumed the role, the payment was then distributed to the council members as 'reimbursement' rather than 'payment.'

Reimbursement was considered a significant factor in sustaining student engagement in

the programme; all stakeholders considered it essential to ensure that council members are reimbursed at the right level for contribution. Council members appreciated flexibility about how they were remunerated. Where the student council programme was built into their practice hours tariff, those students had more time to get immersed in the role's practicalities and reported a better outcome.

A community of support

Having a community of support available to the student council members was essential to the programme's success. Facilitators reported that getting to know each member was essential when establishing the programme. The iteration of the community of support available to the councils looked slightly different for each council due to local policy drivers. However, regional support systems, such as the RePAIR fellows, Learning Environment Leads and the Clinical Placement Expansion Programme, could offer varying levels of support to the councils depending on the local context.

*"We all need cheerleaders to get us over the finishing line."
(Programme facilitator)*

Delays in implementing the ICSs, however, had an impact on the ability of system partners to support the councils and sometimes led to a sense of changing goal posts in terms of setting council objectives that aligned with ICS priorities.

*"A challenge has been that the councils and the Integrated Care Systems (ICS) are both currently in an early stage of development and integration."
(Programme facilitator)*

Recruitment and equality, diversity, and inclusion

Integration of equality, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) principles into recruitment strategies aimed for inclusive representation, though challenges persisted. Positive action to enhance diversity within council membership was taken in the form of the creation of protected seats for those from global majority backgrounds. Recruiting to

the protected seats was more successful in some councils than others, with some councils needing help to fill the protected seats. Targeted activity to engage students from underrepresented groups is indicated for future recruitment rounds, requiring local area mapping. There was some criticism from council members of protecting seats only for those from a global majority background, with suggestions that future recruitment rounds should seek to reserve seats for people with other protected characteristics, such as disability.

CMOC 2: Sustained stakeholder engagement and collaboration

Stakeholders will have confidence in the Student Councils programme if student council members receive professional leadership training, enabling them to contribute on an equal footing. Additionally, the more that stakeholders are exposed to the Student Councils programme, the better their understanding and continued levels of engagement.

A foundation of shared working practices, upskilling student council members with skills in presentation, quality improvement, enhancing their confidence in public speaking and fostering an understanding of systems-level work is viewed by stakeholders as vital to the success of the Student Councils programme.

Building confidence

The ability to influence change at system level depended entirely on being able to identify and credibly engage with decision-makers. This required council members to be able to build trust quickly with key stakeholders. The skills that the student council members learnt during their leadership programme proved to be a critical mechanism to enable this to happen.

*"The leadership development prepares students- we know that they will be ready and able to represent their peers professionally, even if it is a challenging conversation."
(Stakeholder participant)*

Attending regional student council meetings instilled confidence in stakeholders in the student councils by showcasing the professionalism and training of students and highlighting the tangible benefits of active integration of the student councils in the work of the ICSs:

“Our confidence in council members means we can put them forward to speak at big events as we know this is a space that they can own.”

(Stakeholder participant)

It was observed that the increasing confidence of student council members over their tenure contributed to enhanced engagement and stakeholder confidence in them. To sustain this benefit, recruitment to the councils occurs every six months, providing time to upskill new members gradually and integrate them into the role with guidance from experienced members. In this manner, consistency and confidence in the council are maintained:

“At the first meeting, I said nothing. Now I can present with confidence.”

(Student council member)

A Council of equals

Stakeholders demonstrated commitment to the value of raising the student voice by aiming to reduce the hierarchical elements of meetings. They recognised that increasing the confidence of students supported this process:

“Building the confidence of the students to do this was an essential part of the mix to challenge the power dynamic.”

(Stakeholder participant)

FNF programme and administrative support

With such diverse makeups, the administration of the council proved challenging. Administrative support from the FNF programme facilitators allowed the student council members to focus on core business, maintaining professionalism and momentum. Additionally, responsive training to council needs, such as the ‘Facilitating fantastic focus groups’ training provided by FNF, allowed the student council members

to broaden their skill sets, meet stakeholder needs as they arose, and increase the quality of the student council outputs:

“Focus group training was incredible and allowed us research opportunities that we would not otherwise have had.”

(Student council member)

Building meaningful relationships

Attending in-person engagements, such as meetings, fostered the building of meaningful relationships between system level decision-makers and council members. Council members reported that their networking during these events led to fruitful idea generation and problem solving. The quarterly regional meetings, emerged as critical platforms for sharing learning, identifying best practice, and showcasing the high quality of the council outputs. System leaders who attended the regional meetings, or were otherwise exposed to the councils, were then more likely to engage with them and offer opportunities for them to influence.

“Stakeholders came to the regional meeting, and they got it ‘this is something special’ when we could showcase it all.”

(Programme facilitator)

Reverse mentoring

Senior leaders valued reverse mentors for sharing their current clinical knowledge, and it also helped them consider issues related to EDI through exposure to the experiences of reverse mentors:

“(Reverse mentoring) opened my eyes to things I could not have known otherwise, the current experiences of students in training, things I would not have considered. It helped me to grow as a leader.”

(Stakeholder participant)

CMOC 3: Raising the student voice

Providing student councils with opportunities for collaboration, shared decision making, and meaningful support empowers them to enhance their visibility, establish valuable connections, and sustain

momentum. This, in turn, opens doors to more opportunities to influence and amplify the student voice.

'The snowball effect'

In order to increase their impact and profile, student councils require opportunities for collaboration and partnership working. Taking up such opportunities, for example by attending forums or by sitting on steering groups, allowed council members to speak directly to those who could influence change. By seizing opportunities available, councils increased their networks which led to more opportunities to influence.

*“Some councils experienced a “positive snowball effect”, catching the positive waves and making them count.”
(Programme facilitator)*

*“The LEL good practice event raised the profile of (our student council) and the student councils programme.”
(Student council member)*

When councils were viewed as trusted partners, senior system leaders turned to them for quick information and intelligence about the student population. For example, during the cost of living crisis in 2022, HEE South East asked the student councils to urgently collate evidence regarding student finance and welfare issues to feed into ICS policy about student support. The councils came together to report back a regional temperature check of student financial issues, covering concerns over the cost of travelling to placements, support for international students, student debt and other issues.

Support from RePAIR fellows

Support from the RePAIR fellows has proven instrumental in enhancing the student councils' standing by offering opportunities for strategic involvement. Enabling students to actively participate in steering groups, conferences and other strategic forums allows for a focused representation of the student voice, raising stakeholder awareness on previously unrecognised issues:

“(The RePAIR fellows) put us forward for

*things; this does wonders for our career, for our standing as FNF student nurses.”
(Student council member)*

*“Being able to present at regional events helped raise awareness and support the council’s activities.”
(RePAIR fellow)*

Support from FNF programme facilitator

The role of programme leadership has been pivotal; student council members praised Jess Sainsbury, Head of Engagement at FNF, for inspiring the student council members by role-modelling leadership and encouraging them to seek and take up opportunities that they felt they would not previously have had the confidence to engage with. Programme facilitators were viewed as role models. Having a role model builds a sense of confidence for council members, presenting a blueprint for success. The passion and vision underpinning the programme leadership were essential to driving the programme forward to achieve its ambitions:

*“It takes someone with passion and understanding to drive things forward.”
(Student council member)*

CMOC 4: Shared learning

Student council impact grows over time if the different councils meet in person to learn from each other and incorporate best practice into their operations. This continuous improvement enhances the council’s overall effectiveness and builds a positive reputation and a sense of contribution.

A commitment to shared learning has supported the programme to focus on continuous improvement, learning from one another and integrating successful practices into the councils' ways of working.

The value of the regional meetings

The regional meetings, mainly held in person, proved instrumental in the success of the programme, creating a platform for sharing experiences and seeking support. The six councils came together quarterly, with system stakeholders

actively participating in the latter half of the meeting. Regional meetings enable cross-sight learning to take place and facilitate networking:

*“The regional meetings make a positive change because we can meet and connect with key stakeholders such as a CNO.”
(Student council member)*

Students reported that the spontaneous sharing of ideas fermented creativity:

“Being able to be inspired by what everyone else is doing. Having a network of students at different unis and taking that back to our networks and different disciplines.” (Student council member)

*“At the meetings, we developed a greater understanding of the experience of the students and the importance of really listening to the students.”
(Stakeholder participant)*

*“We want to keep in-person meetings. Ad hoc conversations allowed new ideas and problems to be solved.”
(Student council member)*

Bringing student voice to other regional or system-level forums

Stakeholders acknowledged that having the student voice at meetings raised issues that were otherwise unknown and also had the benefit of enhancing their credibility when making decisions based on this knowledge:

*“There is something important about enabling students to speak at meetings so that people can hear the messages directly from the population it concerns. It is key to hearing the student voice in steering groups. As a stakeholder, you think you know, but you do not know. You realise this when you actually hear the student voice.”
(Stakeholder participant)*

Creating a regional identity

The regional identity cultivated through quarterly meetings fosters a space for learning from one another. Building the identity of the programme helped it to be understood and valued; this helped to bring

other stakeholders, such as the universities, on board as the Student Councils programme could be showcased:

*“Healthcare and social structures have not evolved for early career clinicians and students to strategically input at the systems level, apart from one area where shared decision making was in place. The council programme provided the mechanism to change that.”
(Programme facilitator)*

The importance of networks

Different stakeholders moved in and out of focus throughout the programme; this meant working dynamically within the changing landscape to maintain the momentum of the councils and meet their arising needs responsively; this can be facilitated through networks. It would benefit the student councils to have increased collaboration with practice providers as it goes forward.

CMOC 5: Developing and retaining talent

Student councils facilitate healthcare leadership succession planning by developing aspirant leadership talent and equipping the next generation of healthcare leaders with new skills, increased confidence, and developed networks.

Professional development

The Student Councils programme has created an opportunity to engage and support aspiring leaders, supporting students to recognise and maximise their place within strategic networks. Developing networks beyond university courses and placement experience, coupled with exposure to systems-level work, leads to the identification of future talent by systems-level leaders. Students build connections for future professional development, breaking down barriers and creating a talent pipeline of future leaders.

*“I now have connections in the ICS to support with future professional development.”
(Student council member)*

Increased core confidence and other skills

Increased core confidence, authority, executive presence, and self-awareness were identified as meaningful outcomes across student councils and disciplines. These skills empower students to engage with opportunities presented by the council:

“Through the leadership programme, my confidence in myself and my presence has significantly improved. I am more curious and self-aware and can communicate better. This has enabled me to engage with more opportunities that the council has presented to me, and now, as a newly qualified nurse, I am not afraid to speak up, engage with other leaders and seek out new opportunities to grow, develop, and learn.”
(Student council member)

Students also reported that learning how to deliver quality improvement (QI) initiatives as part of their FNF training helped them to be change-makers in practice from the very beginning of their careers. Exposure to senior leadership roles helps students to view themselves as leaders:

“Having a space like this is what makes the next CNOs.”
(Student council member)

Transition to practice

Students reported that the skills they gained during their time as a council member in leadership and influencing have been helpful in preparing them for the transition to practice. Similarly, stakeholders reported that they wanted to ensure that council members continued to be supported as they transitioned into practice to voice their opinions and make valuable contributions.

“This made us consider how do we ensure that we support the student council members to continue to own their voice as they start their newly qualified role.”
(Stakeholder participant)

5. Learning from the councils

What were the critical steps and effective strategies employed in setting up the student councils? How can these be replicated in other regions?

The Student Councils programme was largely effective in achieving its overall aim of better integrating the student voice into ICS decision-making and improving the learning environment for students. Some councils, however, demonstrably outperformed others – both in terms of the quality of outputs produced and the levels of engagement with the programme. Learnings from this evaluation have helped identify key enablers at both a programmatic and council level that can be applied in future programmes across other regions.

At programme level

There is consensus amongst all of the student council members that payment for their time, and for reasonable expenses, is critical to ensuring active and sustained engagement with the work of the council. The insights gained from this evaluation underscore the practical necessity of processing council member payments and reimbursements through a single institution, preferably the ICB, rather than at the individual provider level as doing the latter would prove excessively complex in practice. In this instance, FNF – as programme facilitator – administered the payments, but in future years this will not be the case so it is vital that another alternative is found.

Providing dedicated programme facilitation and secretariat support to the councils is also seen as critical. Council members need support with coordinating meetings, devising SMART objectives, creating workplans, and monitoring progress – all of which a dedicated student council facilitator will need to provide. They also need a champion who can inspire.

Hosting regional meetings, with key stakeholders in attendance, was seen

as vital to the success of the councils. The regional meetings, as detailed in the sections above, provided an opportunity for the council members to share learning, network, build new relationships, raise their profile, and have the ear of important system stakeholders. We would strongly encourage any ICS interested in developing student councils to consider approaching it as a region-wide initiative.

The leadership development aspects of the programme were valued incredibly highly by the programme participants, serving as incentives for taking part and positively correlating with increased levels of engagement. Council members widely reported that the leadership development aspects of the programme would help with their transition to practice and future career.

At council level

Each council should have its own recruitment strategy, which includes positive action to ensure that the council membership is representative of the student population and is inclusive. To achieve diverse representation will take time and should be planned in to any recruitment and programme launch timescales. Related to this, six-monthly recruitment cycles will help support council succession planning, ensuring continuity of membership while still allowing the council to evolve. The model used in this pilot to ensure proportionate representation of the various disciplines should be replicated in other areas.

The evaluation has identified that successful councils actively engaged with system level decision-making forums and built meaningful stakeholder relationships. It is, therefore, important that council workplans or a council induction include a stakeholder mapping exercise to upskill members who may not be familiar with doing this and/or to incentivise the council members to prioritise this activity.

The involvement of Learning Environment Leads, the Clinical Placement Expansion Programme, and RePAIR fellows as champions of the work of the council was vital to success. Councils will need champions with knowledge of how to navigate the system and where decisions are made in order to be successful.

The use of social media to recruit for the council, network with others, and shine a light on the work of the council was seen by council members as instrumental to their work.

What were the main benefits Student Council members experienced, and what challenges did they encounter?

Student council members identified multiple benefits of taking part in the programme. The main benefits cited were:

Leadership development: Access to prestigious leadership development training and mentorship to support the development of their core confidence, authority, executive presence and self-awareness.

“I was struggling to speak in public. The [leadership] training provided by the programme give me the strength to do that. I was able to teach other students at my placement place and I was confident to do that.” – Student council member

Enhanced social media profile: Trained in effective social media use to build professional relationships and reputation.

Network building: Developed networks beyond university courses and placement experiences.

Quality improvement experience: Had the chance to learn quality improvement (QI) skills, which will enable them to be change-makers from the beginning of their careers.

Preparation for transition to practice: Participating in the programme supported students in owning their voices in newly

qualified roles and provided a greater understanding of leadership throughout their careers.

Career path exploration: Students were enabled to consider future career paths, building relationships with those who can support and influence them. They gained exposure to senior leadership roles and broader systems-level working.

Mutual support and collaboration: Members benefited from each other’s support, enhancing their confidence to apply for other opportunities.

Sense of contribution: Students were able to advocate for peers and amplify learners’ voices. The council platform allowed them to talk directly to those who can influence change.

Students reported encountering some challenges during their tenure as student council members:

Logistical issues: Coordinating meetings for students from different universities studying different disciplines was challenging as calendars frequently conflicted. It required tenacity and commitment to work around these issues.

Sharing opportunities: Due to local variations in infrastructure, some councils received more opportunities than others. Within councils, developing communication protocols to share opportunities was helpful in ensuring all members had equal access to opportunities.

Evolving systems: Stakeholders moved in and out of focus throughout the programme; this meant working dynamically within the changing landscape to maintain the momentum of the councils.

Lack of dedicated administration support for the entire programme: Towards the end of the programme, the funding expired and FNF was not able to process expenses as quickly as had been done previously. This led to some students feeling frustrated with the programme and a sense of being devalued.

Lack of longstanding members: The programme staggered recruitment times to ensure that when longstanding members left, there would still be continuity on the council to help induct new members. In practice, this did not always work and some councils struggled to maintain focus and momentum.

“I think as a group we found it really difficult to “get going”. Without any existing, long standing members of the council to look to for guidance, I think we’ve recognised that we wasted a lot of time, simply not knowing what to do. This is something we’re keen to remedy.” – Student council member

Workload: Some council members reported that it very difficult to manage the balance of the student council, alongside their university and placement responsibilities. Student council members will need to be supported to establish a realistic and achievable workplan, otherwise there is a risk that students will feel demotivated.

“I think it was just too much work for me alongside my course. I had chosen to focus on two projects for the council, which may have stretched me too far.” – Student council member

Personality clashes: Some councils reported challenges in working together effectively, due to a variety of factors which included personality clashes.

How did the student councils benefit ICSs in terms of educational structure development and support and what were the notable challenges in integrating student perspectives into decision-making?

The Student Councils within ICSs have significantly benefited educational structure development by providing a platform for students to voice concerns and identify issues in practice and practice education. This inclusive approach has highlighted supervisory and assessment challenges across universities and practice settings,

along with bringing the lived experience of students into decision-making.

“Whilst on my final placement I arranged a meeting with practice education leads in Berkshire Healthcare NHS FT to share about our role as student council members and share some of the experiences and difficulties faced by Students in healthcare.” – Student council member

“I think one of our biggest take aways is how much the council contributes to transparency across HEIs within an ICB. Sharing best practice with my colleagues and Southampton and Solent (to name a few) has allowed us all to put additional pressure on our own Universities when our neighbours are excelling in an area we can improve on. This has been particularly apparent when it comes to things like responding to the cost of living crisis.’ – Student council member

The councils have undertaken Quality Improvement (QI) projects, utilising social media and blogs to raise the profile of healthcare students, promote leadership development, and increase awareness of system-level operations and opportunities in healthcare. The councils have played a crucial role in advocating for students in difficult situations, drawing attention to specific trends like neurodiversity in the workplace, and aligning agendas across organisations. Coordination of focus groups, breaking down barriers between healthcare courses, and addressing the transition-to-practice gap have been notable achievements.

Integrating student perspectives into decision-making

Challenges include:

- The need for stakeholder buy-in and recognising opportunities to integrate student perspectives as everyday practice
- Overcoming financial implications for student participation
- Building confidence among students to express their voice
- Ensuring continuity

- Addressing issues related to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)

The maturation and embedding of the councils within the ICS, amidst evolving structures and complexities, were ongoing challenges. Opportunities for greater collaboration with practice providers are seen as beneficial for the continued growth and success of the student councils.

What significant insights or actions emerged regarding equality, diversity, and inclusion within the activities and discussions of the student councils?

The Student Councils programme took steps to ensure that the council membership was diverse and representative of the nursing, nursing associate, midwifery, and AHP respective student populations. To help achieve this, the councils protected seats for those from a global majority background. However, simply reserving the seats was not enough to encourage participation; the councils found that they needed to actively engage with these students to support them to consider the benefits of this opportunity.

To achieve this, the councils engaged in targeted advertisements, they offered preapplication support, and invited potential members to shadow meetings. Additionally, some student councils offered reasonable adjustments to cater to the needs of candidates with protected characteristics. Collectively, these strategies contribute to fostering a more inclusive and representative environment within the student councils, although it continues to be recognised that more can be done.

It is recommended that in future programmes, a strategy to actively engage with existing networks of global majority students is developed and actioned. Additionally, students council members fed back that the councils programme moving forward should consider protecting seats for students from other underrepresented or marginalised groups, such as students with a disability, as per the local demographics within the ICS.

EDI-related insights from the work of the councils

While council projects did not explicitly seek to address EDI-related challenges, their intelligence gathering amongst their respective cohorts has shown a light on various EDI-related issues. Their work collating student financial experiences during the cost of living crisis revealed:

- Lack of support for those studying on an apprenticeship route
- Lack of support for international students
- Widespread mental health challenges due to worry over cost of living

Additionally, one student council experience survey uncovered that a considerable percentage of students experienced discrimination during their placements. However, it is unknown if or how they disseminated this finding to system leaders to tackle.

6. Recommendations and conclusion

Establishing student councils across a region involves a comprehensive approach encompassing stakeholder engagement, relationship building, recruitment strategies, funding, coordination, and leadership development opportunities. The following recommendations have been identified to ensure the effective establishment of a regional student councils programme:

- 1. Dedicated facilitation and administrative support** – Programme facilitation and administration is vital in order to coordinate meetings, facilitate communication amongst members, and ensure that activities align with the council's objectives.
- 2. Funding for payment and/or reimbursement of council members and programme management** – Paying the student council members for their time, and reimbursing reasonable travel expenses, was critical to ensuring student engagement with the council and signalling that the commissioners valued the student contributions. Payment and reimbursement should be managed by a single institution, such as an ICB.
- 3. Recruitment protocol** - Recruitment efforts should be intentional, incorporating positive action plans for Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) and to ensure multidisciplinary representation. Ensuring a diverse representation within the student council fosters an inclusive and representative body. Councils should consider providing protected seats for people from the global majority and other groups that are underrepresented in decision-making.
- 4. Provision of leadership training** - Providing leadership training equips council members with the necessary skills to effectively fulfil their roles.
- 5. Building strong stakeholder relationships** - Building relationships with stakeholders contributes to a supportive network that aids in the development and sustainability of the councils. Stakeholders will include HEIs, practice partners, senior systems-level leaders and supportive agencies at both ICS and regional levels.
- 6. Identifying opportunities** - Explore avenues for engagement, collaboration, and initiatives that align with the council's objectives.
- 7. Establishing regional meetings**- Conducting regional-level meetings allows for collaboration and knowledge-sharing among student councils. It provides a platform for exchanging ideas and strategies that contribute to the overall success of the councils.
- 8. Reporting strategy** - Regular reporting mechanisms should be established to help track progress, address challenges, and celebrate achievements.
- 9. An induction programme** – Student council members will require a comprehensive induction programme, which includes setting expectations around what the role requires, ways of working, and a facilitated stakeholder mapping exercise.
- 10. Establishing a mentorship programme** - Recruit senior leaders from the stakeholder groups to serve as mentors for the student council members. Implement a matching protocol to facilitate successful relationships.

This includes sessions on effective communication, conflict resolution, and decision-making.

Conclusion

This evaluation sought to understand whether the Student Councils programme across the South East of England region supported the integration of the student voice into education and learning structures and, if so, how the programme was successfully implemented in practice. Overall, the evaluation findings indicate that the programme provided a platform to elevate the student voice and created meaningful change, while also providing a valued leadership development opportunity for the council members. The programme has been able to achieve this with a relatively small amount of investment per ICS.

This evaluation has identified five CMOCs that describe the key elements of the programme's success and its main outcomes, which provide insights into the mechanisms by which the Student Councils programme and its associated activities might produce the intended programme outcomes. While successful overall, it is the variations in council performance and structure which have highlighted the key enablers for replication and that form the basis for the recommendations in this report.

The funding award for this pilot scheme in its current structure has now expired. There is a risk that the programme's funding will not be sustained and the work of the individual councils will not be incorporated into business as usual activity across the South East. Given ambitious workforce recruitment and retention targets, it would be advisable to extend funding to sustain the student councils as critical mechanisms to support student nurses, nursing associates, midwives, and allied health professionals.

Appendix: CMOCs in more detail

<p>CMOC 1: Sustainable membership</p> <p><i>Sustainable student council membership relies on aligning the work of the council with local priorities, facilitated by a supportive framework that includes protected and reimbursed time. Recruitment should prioritise equality, diversity, and inclusion and consider positive action approaches to broaden the strengths of the council.</i></p>		
Context	Mechanism	Outcome
The FNF leadership programme is offered to student council members	The leadership programme acted as an incentive to join the council and was positively correlated to engagement with the council role	Sustained inclusive membership of individual student councils
Principles of equality, diversity and inclusion were integrated into the recruitment process	The importance of diversity of representation was a guiding principle of the programme. Protected seats were created to ensure the councils recruit inclusively through positive action	
Councils collaborated at regional level	Student council members found collaborating as a region to be a key facilitator for their progress, a source of support and helpful in problem solving	
Programme leadership substantive with student development agenda and position to influence	The passion underpinning the programme leadership was viewed as essential to driving the programme forward. A commitment to constant improvement of the programme is required	
Council members were reimbursed for their time, expertise and travel	Reimbursement of council members was designed into the programme from the beginning, however it evolved through learning from the programme. Reimbursement significantly contributes to keeping students engaged in the programme. Council members appreciated flexibility about how they were remunerated	
Creating a community of support around the student council	The community of support available to the councils looked slightly different for each council due to local drivers. Systems level support agencies were able to offer varying levels of support to the councils dependent on local context	
The student councils matured over time	A challenge has been that the councils and the Integrated Care Systems (ICS) are both currently in an early stage of development and integration. There is a need to retain and leverage the experience accumulated thus far whilst emphasising the need to evolve with ICS objectives	

CMOC 2: Sustained stakeholder engagement and collaboration

Stakeholders will have confidence in the Student Councils programme if student council members receive professional leadership training, enabling them to contribute on an equal footing. Additionally, the more that stakeholders are exposed to the Student Councils programme, the better their understanding and continued levels of engagement.

Context	Mechanism	Outcome
The remit of the student council is broad and easy to understand.	A wide range of stakeholders will engage with the councils, comfortable that they understand the brief and it reflects their priorities.	Sustained engagement between collaborative partners
The FNF leadership programme is offered to student council members and to stakeholders substantially involved in supporting the councils	Stakeholders found that the leadership development training prepares students to represent their peers in a professional manner which gives them confidence in the council members, as a consequence stakeholders increase offers of opportunities.	
Meetings are organised to reduce hierarchical elements and enhance active involvement.	Student council members are empowered to participate as equals in meetings. Confidence develops over the course of an individual's tenure as a council member.	
Recruitment to councils takes place at 6-monthly intervals whilst tenure is for a year	Having a rolling recruitment process allows for student council members to be at differing stages of development within the role to sustain impact and outputs.	
Healthcare students are juggling academia, council work and time for self	Administrative planning and support for students to attend the meeting is required due to varying workloads across the various curricula. Additionally students viewed learning to balance their commitments as a process they engaged with during their tenure as council members.	
In person meetings were held where possible	Meeting face-to-face allowed ad hoc conversations to take place, which were found fruitful for new ideas to be formulated and problems to be solved.	
Tailored responsive training	Training sessions were facilitated as need was identified by the council members. Providing these sessions lead to further outputs and a broader skillset responsive to needs.	
Regional council meetings	Shared learning was facilitated by these meetings which allowed emerging best practices to be recognised and instigated across councils. Learning was shared across universities and disciplines in this manner. This was viewed as a unique and valued opportunity.	
Senior leaders engaged with reverse mentors	Senior leaders valued reverse mentors for sharing their current clinical knowledge and this also helped them consider issues related to EDI through exposure to the experiences of the reverse mentor.	

CMOC 3: Raising the student voice

Providing student councils with opportunities for collaboration, shared decision making, and meaningful support empowers them to enhance their visibility, establish valuable connections, and sustain momentum. This, in turn, opens doors to more opportunities to influence and amplify the student voice.

Context	Mechanism	Outcome
Opportunities offered to speak at events and sit on steering groups or other forums	The council has been a springboard to enable students to talk directly to those who can influence change. Being part of steering groups and forums enables a focus on the student voice and raises stakeholder awareness on issues that may not be recognised or known.	Meaningful integration of the student voice into ICS decision making
Role leadership and collaboration	Programme facilitators were viewed as role models. Having a role model builds a sense of confidence for council members, presenting a blueprint for success	
Taking up opportunities leads to further collaboration and opportunities	Having invitations to meet with senior leaders showed that the council profile had been raised enough to have the meeting. This led to a snowball effect with further opportunities opening up for council members.	
The councils have access to regional decision makers	Students found their ICB-level relationships critical to achieving the objectives of their councils.	
Meeting peers out of ordinary sphere of influence	Breaking down the barriers between professional groups, and across HEI and ICB stakeholders, has led to new understandings and ways of working.	
Building not just networks but relationships	System stakeholders have developed meaningful relationships by engaging with the lived experiences of students and witnessing their growth as leaders. This exposure has provided stakeholders with a different perspective on the value of the student councils programme.	

CMOC 4: Shared learning

Student council impact grows over time if the different councils meet in person to learn from each other and incorporate best practice into their operations. This continuous improvement enhances the council's overall effectiveness and builds a positive reputation and a sense of contribution.

Context	Mechanism	Outcome
Regional meetings facilitate cross-site and within system learning and iteration of improvement.	Regional meetings emerge as key platforms for shared learning, inspiring best practices across universities and disciplines with peers that would otherwise not meet. Stakeholders can share what they are doing creating transparency and openness, they can also ask for help.	Learning from each other creates a growing improvement community
Student councils are transparent about successes and failures at large collaborative meetings.	Student council members value cross-site learning and adopt the most successful parts of each other's interventions.	
Student councils shared ideas for developing practice at a systems level at regional meetings	For stakeholders, learning from new generations of professions can support development in practice	
The councils were developed in an evolving healthcare systems landscape	Different stakeholders moved in and out of focus of the course of the programme, this meant working dynamically within the changing landscape to maintain the momentum of the councils. It would be beneficial for the student councils to have increased collaboration with practice providers as it goes forward.	
Student councils shared ideas to use social media to build reputation	Social media use has been pivotal. Training in effective social media use was built in to the programme. Students were able to see the value of social media presence overtime, in terms of building and maintain relationships and building reputation.	
In person meetings	In-person meetings facilitate ad hoc conversations, which are beneficial for idea generation and problem-solving.	
Recognition of the value of student voice in practice	Stakeholders acknowledged that having the student voice at meetings raised issues that were otherwise unknown and also had the benefit of enhancing their credibility.	
A regional identity emerged	Building the identity of the programme helped it to be understood and valued, this helped to bring stakeholders, such as the universities, on board as the student councils programme could be showcased.	
Variety of regional forums	Different modes of input and influence across a range of policy activities	

CMOC 5: Developing and retaining talent

Student councils facilitate healthcare leadership succession planning by developing aspirant leadership talent and equipping the next generation of healthcare leaders with new skills, increased confidence, and developed networks.

Context	Mechanism	Outcome
Exposure to systems level work	Identification of future talent by systems level leaders.	A stronger pipeline of future nurse, nursing associate, midwifery, and AHP leaders
Access to leadership training	Student council members are able to complete the FNF leadership training programme. This supports the development of core confidence, authority and executive presence and self-awareness.	
Training in quality improvement	Enabling council members to position themselves to be change makers in practice from the beginning of their career.	
Exposure to senior leadership roles	Exposure to senior leadership roles supported students to develop an understanding of roles beyond the scope of their practice learning and think holistically about how they can lead at all stages of their career.	
Preparation for transition to practice	The skills gained from the student council were viewed as helpful in preparing students for the transition into practice, particularly being able to voice their opinions and in feeling their contribution is valued.	
Enhanced opportunities for career progression once qualified	Building relationships with senior leaders and accessing leadership forums was viewed as helpful in creating opportunities for early career progression.	
The centrality of relationships	Students felt enabled to build relationships with those who can support and influence and senior leaders felt able to cultivate future talent.	

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