

Student Mini-Publics

How to run democratic innovations in universities

Who we are

We are a small group of practitioners and academics committed to exploring how to create and expand democratic spaces. We aspire to foster deeper understanding and increased use of Student Mini-Publics (SMPs) within universities globally as an impactful model for young adults' democratic participation in decision making. Our hope is that this guide will help generate the necessary support and infrastructure to accelerate the take-up of the SMPs, facilitate learning about their potential, and ultimately generate wider civic impacts.

This guide—currently Version 1.0—will evolve as this ongoing learning takes place, both through continued research and through further experimentation in universities globally.

Acknowledgements

We are appreciative of Queen Mary University of London's interest in our work, and the QM Impact Grant and accompanying support, including from University of Victoria, that provided the funding to us to collaborate and consolidate some practical thinking within this guide.

We would also like to thank all those who have been engaged in this learning with us for so generously sharing their passion, time, and expertise as we have explored democratic innovations together. In particular, we would like to thank the students, university staff, and collaborators involved in the Queen Mary University of London's Students' Jury on Pandemic Learning, the London School of Economics Student Unions' Democracy Summit, and the University of Victoria's Students' Dialogue on Democratic Engagement.

Welcome to this guide

Introduction

Deliberative democracy has emerged as a powerful approach to decision-making, prioritising thoughtful and inclusive discussions among participants to reach well-considered, collective decisions. Across the globe, there have been numerous innovative processes of this kind, exemplifying the potential for open dialogue that can facilitate deeper understanding of complex issues and promote more informed and fairer outcomes.¹

The Student Mini-Public (SMP) is one such innovation. When done well, SMPs can enhance the diversity and inclusion of voices, promote critical thinking, and lead to consensus-driven outcomes—while providing formative experiences for those involved. This guide showcases different approaches for running SMPs and provides practical options for a more informed, deliberative pathway when engaging students.

This guide is designed to support individuals and groups within universities who seek a more meaningful and innovative way of involving students in decision-making processes. The motivations for exploring may vary, from reaching beyond the already engaged to finding new solutions to complex problems or seeking greater consensus on contentious issues. While primarily aimed at supporting people working in Student Unions, Federations of Student Unions, and Student Relations/Student Affairs departments at universities, its insights are applicable more broadly to those passionate about the future of education.

It draws insights from three distinct sources:

1. Our own experiences of running SMPs in university settings (see case studies) and other deliberative democracy processes, such as Citizens Assemblies and Deliberative Summits in other settings;
2. Our own academic research and structured focus groups on SMPs; and
3. Wider research and practical guidance written from around the world.

Universities are a unique context, with particular challenges and opportunities. While drawing on knowledge and experience with mini-publics more generally, this guide is sensitive to the key features of the university environment, using university-specific case studies to offer lessons and demonstrate what is possible in these special places.

The need for deliberative democratic innovations in universities

Democracy is seen as an important part of effective and fair university governance. Additionally, universities play an important role in facilitating democracy in society more broadly, including by exercising the civic capacities of the people who pass through them. For both of these reasons, there is an increasing appetite for improving students' democratic involvement or 'voice' within universities—not only in student unions, but in other university spaces as well.² To sustainably realise universities' democratic aspirations, however, student participation needs to be thoughtful, meaningful, and effective.

Formal research and informal discussions with students and their organisations have highlighted issues like mistrust, disconnection, an overreliance on select individuals, or conflictual approaches to contentious topics. This has led to instances of poor representation and limited outreach beyond a few actively engaged students. Many approaches to involving students also provide them with little information, time, and influence.

These challenges are often connected to crises of democracy outside universities and the role of younger people in it, including issues like low voter turnout and disengagement. Despite caring deeply about policies and issues that matter to them, young adults often feel powerless to make a meaningful impact, or are given few opportunities to participate in decision-making in ways that feel meaningful.

But, just as deliberative approaches to democracy—often through mini-publics— have been gaining momentum globally, these approaches likewise offer considerable potential for transforming university environments and furthering universities’ own goals.

One significant advantage of student mini-publics is their ability to provide an immersive, deliberative civic experience that is proportionately distributed across the entire student body. This inclusivity ensures that all students, regardless of their confidence or ambition, have an equal opportunity to engage in meaningful democratic processes. Research also suggests that SMPs can offer transformative developmental experiences for student participants—touching on their understanding, capacities, dispositions, and sense of community—and can bring about a variety of positive impacts on university decisions, environments, and processes.

What is a student mini-public and how does it work?

A Student Mini-Public (SMP) is an innovative mechanism that brings together a diverse and representative group of students, chosen through a randomised democratic lottery. These participants undergo a balanced learning phase on the given issue, engage in facilitated deliberations, and then collectively draft policy recommendations. The concept is part of a broader family of democratic innovations called deliberative mini-publics, which include Citizens Juries, Deliberative Polls, and Citizens Assemblies.³

Undertaking SMPs takes time and effort, and can be especially complex for those doing so for the first time. To help make them more accessible, this Guide offers a tried and tested way of doing this. In short, this involves six steps.



1. Purposeful Design (pre-SMP): Clarify the rationale for the SMP and identify the complex problem it aims to address. Focus on its scope and remit and formulate a compelling calling question. Set a realistic decision-making timeline and ensure sufficient time for deliberation. Identify key stakeholders and involve them in the SMP process. Don't forget to plan for the SMP's lasting legacy and wider impact.



2. Selection and Recruitment: Consider the demographic profile of your student population so you can construct a representative microcosm of participants through a democratic lottery. Offer participants clear information on what they would be getting involved in, and offer good reasons to participate.



3. Learning: Prepare a structured learning journey for participants, enabling them to explore and understand the calling question and the relevant issues comprehensively. Provide different types of information, and consider what expert witnesses and stakeholders they need to hear from and engage with.



4. Deliberation: Create safe and brave spaces for participants to engage in open and confident discussions with each other. Address trade-offs and complexities that arise during the deliberation process. Determine when reaching a consensus is necessary and when it may not be.



5. Making Recommendations: Facilitate the synthesis of deliberations into clear and actionable recommendations. Ensure that the recommendations are well-documented and communicated to the relevant audiences effectively.



6. Evaluation, Assessment, and Documentation (post-SMP): Conduct a thorough evaluation of the SMP process to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Monitor the implementation of the SMP's recommendations and track their impact over time. Assess the impacts that the SMP has had, whether on individuals or the institution, and document these.

This guide below explores each of these steps in much greater detail, sharing tips and case study examples along the way to illustrate what they might mean in practice.

1. Purposeful design

Things to consider before embarking on an SMP

Committing to a SMP can't be a hasty decision. There are many elements to think through before going ahead.

- ☑ **Readiness** - How ready is your university to embrace the idea of an SMP? Can you commit to delivery at this moment? Are you willing to work hard, possibly experience discomfort, and unlearn some of your current patterns or approaches?
- ☑ **Innovation** - What is truly in scope or out of scope? Is your level of ambition realistic? How far do you want to go in terms of designing the SMP and using its outputs?
- ☑ **Resources** - Do you have the resources in place to undertake a meaningful, well-planned, and fruitful SMP? The necessary resources include access to the right teammates, sufficient funds, time, and a suitable environment.
- ☑ **Capacity** - Do you have enough support in place to plan, deliver and take actions forward? Think about the skills, expertise, and energy of people who will be involved and whether they are ready for an SMP.

Build the broader team

The first step is to build your team. Identifying clear roles can help keep everyone on task, building skills and confidence against specific objectives. There are several roles needed to execute a successful SMP. These might be thought of as:

1. **Designers:** Much of the design and execution of the SMP will be led by a core group of designers. They are responsible for ensuring that all other teammates are in place. Designers can be internal or external to the university or student union (or a combination), though it is important to ensure they have the right skills and understanding to perform this work. This guide can help you.
2. **Advisors:** It is good practice to have an Advisory Group to oversee the design of the SMP and selection of participants. This group acts as both a source of expertise and independent scrutiny. Keep in mind that even when organisers have good intentions, there is a risk that their own biases and perspectives manifest within the process design. Through providing advice on what information the SMP receives, such as speakers and materials, they help ensure the evidence is fair and balanced. They often act as a sounding board for potential activities or decisions about the process or content, and can become an informal ambassador of the SMP.
3. **Facilitators:** For impartiality and to facilitate inclusive deliberation, it is worth investing in having a team of trained facilitators. This brings specific skills, energy and learning to the process. We will discuss this further in Step 4.
4. **Other key supporters** (e.g. recruitment, communication, logistics): Additional support will be needed to properly execute specific components of the SMP. As we discuss further in Step 2, depending on how you plan to recruit participants, you may need specialists who can execute the lottery process. Depending on the facilities and materials you have available, you may also need logistics support throughout. Finally,

you will likely require dedicated communications support for your recruitment efforts (Step 2) and for your dissemination efforts (Step 5).

To get the most out of this team and ensure that everyone is working together effectively, it is important to keep everyone informed about the SMP's progress and make sure they have the support and information they need. Plan ahead for any meetings among various team members. For example, the designers should plan to meet regularly with the Advisory Group throughout the entire process so that the advisers can be prepared to offer suggestions and feedback on any needed adaptations.

Case study

Building capacity into the team

Democracy Summit, London School of Economics Students' Union (LSESU), 2022⁴

LSESU dedicated a lot of time to stakeholder engagement prior to their SMP. All relevant stakeholders were mapped out in terms of what they needed to know and how they could contribute. Different members of the team were then given responsibility to communicate with different stakeholders to keep them informed or on track.

This investment, though time-consuming, paid off in adding capacity and depth to the SMP. It pulled more staff into both planning and delivery—for example, promoting the event and giving it a high profile throughout the university. It made putting recommendations into action a more robust and connected process, as more stakeholders had ownership of the process and understood its value.

Designing the journey

To ensure that the SMP achieves its goals and that participants have a meaningful experience, a well-structured and thoughtful design of the SMP's arc—and participants' journeys—is crucial. This high-level design should carefully map out each stage, providing a rationale for the overall flow of the SMP. It should cover:

- ✓ Agreeing on the remit;
- ✓ Creating the calling question;
- ✓ Mapping the decision-making pathway;
- ✓ Plotting the timeline;
- ✓ Planning for impact and legacy;
- ✓ Promoting the SMP; and
- ✓ Monitoring throughout.

Agreeing on the remit

You are probably starting this process with a particular topic for the SMP in mind. Make sure the SMP's remit is clear and goes to the core of the issue. Invest time in creating the question you want the SMP to address. Start with thinking about what is at the heart of the problem and how this will be sufficiently linked to policy action. You may already have an issue in mind, but if you

are looking for an opportunity to experiment with an SMP, consider choosing from among your university community's 'wicked' issues: things that are complex and would benefit from a diversity of viewpoints to unlock potential solutions, or are particularly charged and difficult to address in your usual structures of participation.

Case study

Tackling a complex problem

Students' Jury on Pandemic Learning, Queen Mary University of London's School of Law, 2021⁵

The Students' Jury took place one year into a global pandemic that significantly disrupted the norms of legal education and higher education, most notably by moving all education online into a novel format for both students and staff, disconnecting members of the university community, and adding considerable personal and social stressors to their lives.

Approaching the end of the first year under this reality and with some experience under its belt, the School of Law did not yet know the conditions for the coming year yet needed to begin at least initial preparation.

In planning for the coming year, student input was seen as important for several reasons, including them having a rightful stake in the decisions made, the potential for them to improve decision-making, and to help mitigate student frustrations. Typical methods of student involvement were seen as unrepresentative, brief, isolated from decision-makers, and often poorly informed about university realities.

Creating the Calling Question

When thinking about a good calling question, pitch it in a way that is neither too narrow nor too broad. It should be clear, open, accessible and brief. Avoid jargon, nuance, value statements or solutions. A good question will invite curiosity and exploration. It will allow space to consider trade-offs.

Consider holding a Question Creation Workshop to pool ideas on how to structure the SMP calling question. More heads are better than one here, so that you can bounce ideas around and test them collectively.

Case study

A question-creation workshop

Democracy Summit, London School of Economics Students' Union (LSESU), 2022

LSESU wanted to tackle how their democratic structures worked, given the recent history of disproportionate engagement across their student population. They were aware that the

union was not serving as an effective voice for students and wanted a broad and deep review to address this from an innovative student-led perspective.

With LSESU, we collectively worked together to create the calling question for their SMP.

“LSESU is a democratic organisation run by students for students. Many students feel that the Union doesn’t represent them as well as it could. How can we reimagine and strengthen the future of LSESU democracy so it can work better for everyone?”

Here is an outline of the process used to arrive at the question:

- 1. Problem statements:** Discover and define the problems and challenges you are facing.
 - What is the SU wrestling with? The big challenges? The problems we are trying to solve?
 - What are the questions attached to this problem?
- 2. Prioritisation:** Agree on the most important one of the above
 - Why is this happening (drivers)
 - How can the SMP contribute to tackling this challenge?
 - What else is happening that we need to take into account?
- 3. Crafting the calling question:** Use the problem statement as a starting point.
 - Round one - create a list of possible questions.
 - Review the questions attached to the problem and provide rapid feedback, what does this question feel like to different student groups?
 - What is useful about this question?
 - Is the question focused enough? Does it encompass everything needed?
 - Refine the question and agree on it.
- 4. Testing:** Test the question with others
 - Think about the invitation and messaging: what does the question mean to others? What kind of narrative might it create?
 - Share with others and gather feedback
 - How does the question translate to and for wider engagement?

Workshop session plan created by Mel Stevens and Pandora Ellis

Mapping the decision-making pathway

It is important to think about and decide where the SMP recommendations will go, and why they are important to share. Think about the degree and kind of influence you envision them having, and how the group's recommendations will be implemented. Understanding this will help you design the overall timeline, the scope of the SMP's decision making and its required outputs. Be sure to involve the ultimate decision-makers and/or -implementers in this conversation to ensure that expectations and commitments are clear.

Aim to design with desired decision-making impact and outcomes in mind. How will you establish whether or not the recommendations have played their desired role? Make sure that

there is a clear destination for SMP outputs, recommendations and decisions. These will need to be visible, so that everyone involved is aware of what will happen to the work that has been done. Think of this as closing your impact loop.

Case study

A clear decision-making pathway

Democracy Summit, London School of Economics Students' Union (LSESU), 2022

LSESU had a clear pathway and timeline for how recommendations would be processed into action, through their governance structures.

The pathway for making decisions started with the SMP students, who arrived at 24 recommendations for a new democratic structure for their Students' Union. This was written into a motion for change and approved by the student body, by vote. It was also approved by the Students' Union Trustee Board and then implemented.

Having a clear direction kept everyone on track, with a pre-agreed, defined pathway for taking recommendations forward.

Case study

Needing to clarify the decision-making pathway

Students' Dialogue on Democratic Engagement, University of Victoria, 2020⁶

This pilot project was focused on two main topics: civil political discourse and youth political participation. Given the organisers' focus on proving the overall concept of SMPs in the campus community, they did not create clear connections between the students' recommendations and resultant policy changes on or off campus.

In their feedback, many student participants felt that a clear mandate was lacking. They recommended that future SMPs involve a clearer mandate and a closer connection between the students' deliberations and recommendations, on the one hand, and commitments to action on the part of those receiving the recommendations, on the other.

Plotting the timeline

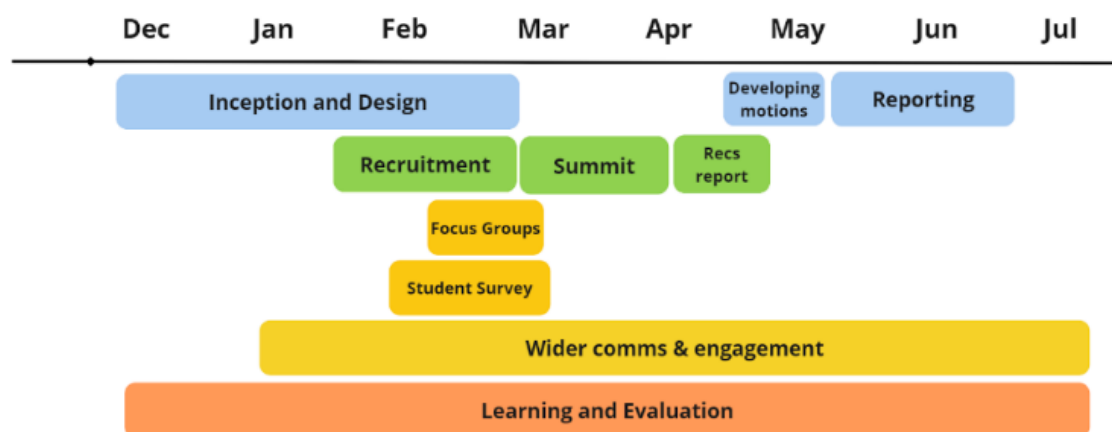
Deciding what needs to be on an SMP timeline is about making sure there is time to do everything, including design, recruitment, SMP delivery, and report writing. All of these need to be factored into the decision making pathway. Creating an end-to-end timeline is useful: one that has time built in to prepare, with a long lead-in for gathering stakeholders, wider engagement, sourcing experts and suitable materials and resources.

Consciously planning when to hold the SMP is also fundamental in the design. Finding moments when students are not very busy or checked out for term breaks. Students have a lot

on their plates, but good decisions take time. You'll have to find the right balance, taking into account the size of the task, and the time of year.

Working backwards from the decision-making point, you need to take account of the time needed to recruit and select students, find experts, create information and briefing materials, run the SMP and produce the recommendations report. Post event time will need careful planning too, so that there is time to review and analyse outputs properly.

Try mapping a timeline against steps. For example:



Created by Mel Stevens and Pandora Ellis

Sourcing speakers, materials: 3-4 weeks

Recruitment: 6-12 weeks

Onboarding: 2-3 weeks

SMP delivery: 20-30 hours over X sessions)

Synthesising outputs, reporting: 2 weeks

Sharing results and evaluation: 1-2 weeks

You will need to ensure that the time given for student deliberation is enough for the participants to become thoroughly informed on the topic, consider options, generate ideas, find common ground and make decisions.

A SMP's time together can be loosely broken down as follows, though this may vary:⁷

- 10% working through the purpose, question, and definitions
- 10% building relationships
- 5% developing skills around group process, critical thinking, and unconscious bias
- 20% providing information and content
- 30% facilitating dialogue and deliberation
- 20% making group decisions
- 5% presenting results and formally closing the forum

Case study

Planning for sufficient deliberation time

Students' Jury on Pandemic Learning, Queen Mary University of London's School of Law, 2021

Students have a lot on their plates, but good decisions take time. You'll have to find the right balance, taking into account the size of the task, the time of year, and things like compensation. Mini-publics are more intensive than most student voice tools, and you might be tempted to keep things too brief. But despite giving over 10 hours over five sessions, many students in the QM Students' Jury said they wished they had had more time for particular aspects, like Q&A with the experts, and the deliberation and refining of their recommendations.

Planning for Impact and Legacy

Clarify in your mind the desired outcomes, impacts, or 'legacy' of the SMP. Manage and design the process in a way that maximises these. Both what you do and how you do it can create different kinds and degrees of positive impact, so keep this in mind when making different decisions. This guide will offer some prompts, but there are any number of ways to do this.

SMPs can have a variety of forms of impacts, in a variety of ways, and can be short- or long-term. These impacts might be on decisions, on the participants and organisers, on the institution, and on the public more broadly. Plan for these, but revisit them after the fact as well.

On Decisions

Most obviously, impact can come by way of the recommendations that the SMP puts forward to decision-makers. The hope here is that the SMP makes a difference to the decision-making process, whether that be by influencing the ultimate decision or at least by creating a more informed, fairer process by being considered. As noted above, plan the decision-making pathway to ensure this goes as intended.

On Participants and Organisers

The experience of participating in an SMP can be an educational and developmental one. Done well, research suggests that students can learn a lot about the issue at hand, develop certain skills, build confidence and community, and increase their readiness to get involved elsewhere.⁸ Given that universities are spaces of learning, SMPs further universities' own educational and civic objectives. This may be a fact that helps sell the idea to administrators supplying you with resources. Organising an SMP, as you might imagine as you read this, is also an act of learning and capacity building for organisers. Keep in mind that while SMPs are usually disbanded after they present their recommendations, there might be ways to keep participants and organisers involved on that topic going forward.

On Institutions

SMPs can also have more indirect effects on institutional life and culture. Informed contributions of SMPs can lead to better decisions that improve the institutional environment over time. A fair, informed, and inclusive process might also affect trust levels or implementation; and the modelling of deliberative approaches might inspire more deliberative approaches in other contexts. SMPs can leave behind materials of ongoing use, or establish relationships with outside experts or community groups that continue to bear fruit.

On the Public

Universities hope that what they do inside the university contributes positively to life outside it. Depending on the nature of the topic, SMP decisions might also benefit those outside the university; involving community members as experts might offer them other benefits. Ultimately, it may be that participants' experiences within an SMP will be formative, and this will impact their participation in society and public affairs thereafter.

Promoting the SMP

Getting the word out about the SMP will make people aware it is happening and generate interest. Planning communications for promoting the SMP can be adapted to suit each university context and resources. For example, in some universities students may get their news primarily from social media, whereas in others they may do so through the campus newspaper or at the pub. Aim for a range of channels and reach across as many groups as possible as part of communications planning.

Case study

Developing an in-depth communications plan

Democracy Summit, London School of Economics Students' Union (LSESU), 2022

LSE SU built a detailed Engagement and Communications plan, to reach and include the University Senior Leadership Team and staff, wider Students' Union, student media groups, societies and sports clubs, academic reps, and all students.

Information about the Democracy Summit was published on the Students' Union webpage, a range of newsletters and podcasts. Though coming later on, they also worked with the student newspaper for a feature on the SMP.

Monitoring Throughout

As you plan the SMP, it is good practice to monitor how it is unfolding from both organiser and participant perspectives in order to make adjustments or improvements to the process as needed along the way. For example, learning and reflection sessions after each SMP session to gather participant feedback can be extremely valuable. This can be achieved with participants through simple and interactive exercises, like emoji-based feedback, or post-it note reflections.

2. Selection and Recruitment

The membership of the SMP will be a microcosm of the student body (a particular kind of 'public') – hence, 'a mini-public'. Every person in the chosen population of interest should have an equal chance of receiving the invitation to participate.

The overarching objective here is to ensure that a broad representation of the student population is achieved. Practitioners and technical experts often refer to the process to achieve this as 'civic lottery' or a 'democratic lottery' and offer extensive guidance about different steps and considerations.⁹

To do this, you'll need to first choose the broader population or 'public' from which you want to create a 'mini-public' is: Is it the whole University? A particular Faculty, School, or Unit? Are there any categories within that body of students you want to exclude (e.g. those on leave)?

Next, you will need to randomly select your mini-public from that body, doing so either in a one-step or two-step process, outlined below. Before then, however, you must first choose the size of the SMP and the criteria with which you will establish the representativeness of the mini-public, which are two closely related considerations.

Selecting the size of the SMP

There are many factors to consider when deciding on the size of your SMP. There is no consensus on the ideal size of an SMP, and you will inevitably have to consider a variety of factors when making this decision. All things considered, the bigger the group, the better able you will be to reflect the diversity of your chosen population. At the same time, you will have to consider things like your budget, how complex the remit is, and how much time you have so that all participants will be able to deliberate effectively together.

Selecting the criteria for the lottery

Decide the most important stratification criteria you need in your SMP. Usually, a core of selection criteria like age, gender, and location are used, along with a small number of additional criteria deemed necessary in light of the remit and context. Sample demographic criteria that may be relevant include fee status or program of study. It is also possible to include attitudinal stratification criteria, like attitudes toward free speech or climate change. For each criterion, you will need to have the relevant student population statistics to measure your selection against, which universities typically collect as a matter of course.

Case study

Setting Recruitment Criteria

Democracy Summit, London School of Economics Students' Union (LSESU), 2022

To recruit participants for the LSESU Democracy Summit, invitations were sent to 3000 students. This represents approximately one quarter of the student population, with the aim to achieve a 5% response rate and create a pool of around 150 students to recruit from.

The process of randomly selecting a group of students who broadly represent the student body of LSE was led by the Sortition Foundation,¹⁰ who used a stratification framework with the following demographics: gender, ethnicity, disability and whether a student was in receipt of a bursary or not to ensure a diverse and equitable representation.

LSE also included level of study, which included undergraduate, postgraduate, overseas and UK based students. A final criterion was included to gauge levels of democratic activity among students who had previously voted in an LSESU election.

Sample selection criteria		Target percentage based on the demographics of the focal population	Percentage of the final student panelists	Difference between target percentage of final student panelists
Student's fee status	UK	29.8%	28%	-1.8%
	Overseas (non-EU)	52.4%	52%	-0.4%
	EU (home and overseas)	17.8%	20%	+2.2%
Whether student voted in an LSESU election	Yes	18%	36%	+18%
	No	74%	60%	-14%
	Don't know	8%	4%	-4%

Figure adapted from LSE Students Union, *Democracy Summit Recommendations Report*, p.12

Selecting the students from the wider student population

Participants are randomly selected and stratified to be broadly representative of the wider student body. There are two main ways to do this overall process: with either a one- or two-step lottery.

Option 1: The One-Step Lottery Process

For sufficiently small populations, especially where you have good data and greater confidence in successful recruitment, it may suffice to select your mini-public in one step, without first soliciting a pool of willing participants. The democratic lottery used to do this can happen in a number of ways, so see the broad categories below and choose which is right for you.

Case study

Recruitment method: One-step lottery

Students' Jury on Pandemic Learning, Queen Mary University of London's School of Law, 2021

The QMSJ involved 12 randomly selected students from the School of Law student body.

With a smaller population to sample from (a specific School rather than the whole University), the QMSJ team did not send out initial invitations to gather a pool to then select from. Instead, they randomly selected 12 jurors *directly* from all 1,000 students, and then used more intensive and direct recruitment strategies to encourage them to participate. All 12 students first contacted said yes!

To do this, the School requested its full student demographic data from the University, which ordinarily holds that information. It then chose the criteria that it wanted to select based on (gender, programme year, specialism, disability, fee status, and racialised statuses) and partnered with the Sortition Foundation to run a selection process using its digital algorithmic process.

Option 2: The Two-Step Lottery Process

Recruitment is usually done via a two-step 'civic' or 'democratic' lottery.

1. To create an initial pool of willing participants, an agreed number of invitations—by email or letter—are sent to students from your contact list, randomly selected from the student population database to facilitate diversity. Invitees are asked to register their interest to participate and provide their demographic details. The invitation should include key details such as the calling question, key dates and times to commit to, and any remuneration that will be paid to value students' time.
2. From those who register, a 'random-stratified sample' is built to match the demographic criteria you selected above. The democratic lottery used to do this can happen in a number of ways. See the three broad categories below.

Case study

Recruitment method: Two-step lottery

Students' Dialogue on Democratic Engagement, University of Victoria, 2020

24 students from all walks of life met to participate in the Students' Dialogue on Democratic Engagement (SDDE). Approximately 7,500 randomly selected students received an email inviting them to put their name in the hat to serve in this dialogue.

Of those who expressed interest and completed a brief demographic questionnaire, the final group of 24 was selected through a stratified lottery intended to reflect the student population of the university in terms of demographic characteristics like gender and academic level of study.

For both Options 1 and 2, there are different ways to do the lottery to select participants:

- A. **Professional Partners:** There are specialist organisations that run democratic lottery or “sortition” processes (the random selection of people). These organisations can often support the entire recruitment process from designing and sending out the invitations, to running the algorithm to select the participants.
- B. **Digital DIY:** A more efficient and less resource-intensive (though likely more time-intensive and possibly less rigorous) approach might also be taken by undertaking the selection process using available digital technologies like Panelot or Excel's random generation functions.
- C. **Analog DIY:** Finally, it is also possible to use a more analog approach using tools like lottery draw machines or a simple set of similar yet distinguishable items that could be manually drawn from a container. For example, an approach used in several schools that used democratic lotteries to select members of their student governments involved students publicly picking beans with different colours numbers out of an urn.¹¹ Analog approaches can be more transparent and can have greater symbolic value.

Case study

Using your existing datasets

Democracy Summit, London School of Economics Students' Union (LSESU), 2022

LSESU had a cohesive student population database which provided most of the data used in their recruitment process. The database was used to reach out and communicate with students, using their university emails to send out information to allow students to register interest. With support from an external organisation—the Sortition Foundation—LSESU then used an algorithm to select students that would achieve the stratification criteria and send a follow up letter of invitation to those selected.

Contacting successful and unsuccessful candidates

Once you have selected your mini-public, it is now time to contact them with the good news. When you have selected participants through the one-step process, without them expressing willingness in advance, you will need to take extra care to explain the SMP to them and make a pitch as to why their participation is important. They have won the 'lottery', so help them feel like it! Explain how important they are to this initiative as well as what support or compensation they can expect to receive.

Preparing those selected to take part

It is important to get in contact with people as soon as they have been selected to help prepare and retain SMP members. Often called 'onboarding,' this process is the start of relationship building. This dedicated phase of communication provides support for students ensuring the SMP is as inclusive and accessible as possible by ascertaining any needs they may have. Examples include, providing translators, ramps, childcare provision, or travel costs to help mitigate individuals' barriers to involvement. It is also advisable to ensure any venues used have access to quiet spaces and a prayer room, and that there is flexibility and dispensation for students to leave early for other obligations.

Contacting those who responded but were not selected

It is good practice to reach out to those who were unsuccessful in being selected for the SMP. This courtesy acknowledges the effort students made to register interest. It is also a chance to offer other ways to get involved in similar events, or follow the progress of the SMP.

Checklist

- Do** set up communication systems to support onboarding and the SMP process while it is live. Think about a dedicated email in-box, group texting, and one person with good people skills to oversee SMP messaging to students throughout the process.
- Do** monitor demographic uptake during onboarding. If someone drops off prior to the start of the SMP, match a similar replacement so that you maintain representation.
- Don't** forget to plan for honoraria, so that you, or your independent provider, have a robust system in place for valuing students' time. This needs to follow GDPR (in the UK) or other relevant privacy considerations to gain consent for taking part and collecting bank details.
- Don't** underestimate the time it takes to onboard people and make sure that they fully understand what they have signed up to. The more barriers you can overcome to enable students to take part, the richer and more diverse your SMP will be.
- Don't** assume that students will remember key details like venue and starting times. Remind them in the lead up to and just before the SMP.

3. Learning

Once a microcosm of students has been selected and onboarded, the deliberative process begins.

Crucially, this involves participants exploring relevant information and evidence about the question and remit that is being deliberated. The information should be presented in a clear and accessible manner to ensure all participants have a common understanding of the topic. There should be a wide range of information so that it is unbiased, and participants should get an opportunity to ask 'experts' questions, or cross examine them for further clarification.

Briefing materials and documentation

Working from the calling question, identify what materials will be relevant reading for the participants, whether before or between sessions. Aim for a range of material in different formats—from reports, academic papers, video and infographics—so that participants can process information when and how it suits them. Briefing materials should be sent out well in advance so as to maximise students' opportunity to read and digest. Given that some students may be unable to sufficiently engage with the briefing materials, it is important to cover all essential information in the SMP sessions themselves to ensure that everyone has the same baseline of key information.

Case study

Ensuring access to sufficient briefing materials

Students' Dialogue on Democratic Engagement, University of Victoria, 2020

These students met together for four evening sessions. Two of these sessions were devoted to learning about civil political discourse and democratic engagement. The students had the chance to hear from leading scholars and practitioners on these topics and collectively generate questions for subsequent follow-up.

Improvements for the future were suggested, for instance, slowing down the pace to give students more time to process their learnings and engage with each other and the guest speakers in a more relaxed manner.

Additionally, participants pointed to the benefits of providing participants with a broader array of resources that they could consult to inform their deliberations.

Preparing participants for learning

Students may need input to prepare them for their involvement in an SMP, as this is likely to be a new experience.

A starting point is for them to learn how to work together, for instance coming to a shared understanding of how to listen and respond to each other. Setting 'conversation guidelines' or 'engagement etiquette' together can aid and encourage respectful dialogue, active listening, and the inclusion of all participants' perspectives.

They may need input to encourage them to think differently, build critical thinking skills, and understand bias in the early stages of an SMP.

Think about how to foster an environment that encourages active participation from all participants. One (positive) consequence of involving a more representative group of students is that it is more likely that quieter, less confident, and more shy students will also be involved. Provide opportunities for individuals to express their views, ask questions, and respond to others' perspectives. Encourage participants to challenge assumptions, seek common ground, and explore different solutions.

Experts

Live (i.e. in-person) experts are an important part of making the process both informed and engaging. It is important that there is a good mix of expertise. Expertise might include:

- ✓ Views and positions that cover more than one angle to avoid adding bias to participants knowledge and ideas.
- ✓ Diversity, so that different life experiences and knowledge can be drawn upon and no one demographic dominates.
- ✓ Lived experience of the issue(s) at hand.
- ✓ A range of perspectives on potential policy options.
- ✓ Global ideas and innovation to bring an added dimension to an SMP.

If you are struggling to source experts or a depth of evidence, feel free to go back to the independent Advisory Group (outlined in the section on things to consider before embarking on an SMP) for problem-solving and advice.

Case study

Including expertise rooted in lived experience

Democracy Summit, London School of Economics Students' Union (LSESU), 2022

In addition to hearing from experts on democratic structures within students' unions, the LSESU project used interviews and focus groups to gather views and experiences of democratic processes from a variety of student cohorts prior to the SMP.

This enabled wider student views (international and postgraduate students) and communities (LGBTQ+ and BAME students), commuter students and disabled students to share their lived experiences as valuable evidence for consideration as part of the deliberation process.

Allowing for Additional Information to be Requested

During the process, participants themselves should be given the opportunity to request further information. They may have identified gaps in the information presented or experts provided, or want to explore other, relevant areas. It is important that participants have all the information they need, so build in time in between sessions to provide time to do this.

Case study

Giving participants opportunity to help shape the process

Students' Jury on Pandemic Learning, Queen Mary University of London's School of Law, 2021

In the Students' Jury on Pandemic Learning, student jurors were provided with an information packet in advance of the Jury, and over the course of five online sessions, engaged with a number of stakeholders and experts—including participatory democracy experts, School staff and leadership, public health experts, digital education experts, and leadership from national student and staff unions.

Key decisions, including which speakers to invite, were made in advance by the academic and student co-organisers. Yet, after the fact, research found that some student jurors would have liked to have been able to call upon some speakers of their choosing.

Checklist

- Do** respond to questions that arise during each session which don't get answered, whether for lack of time or because they are off-topic. Ensure you have a process for this so you can go back to all questions raised, with an answer. For example, you can send an email to all participants after the meeting with the necessary information.
- Do** design for a range of learning styles. Ensure you mix your methods to provide a wider array of opportunities for learning and to keep participants energised, e.g. speakers carousel, Q&A, small group discussions.
- Do** source a suitable space to hold and inspire the SMP to remain engaged. This should be large enough to hold the whole group as it works together, while also having flexible spaces for smaller group work.
- Don't** be afraid to innovate and try new approaches to learning.
- Don't** cram too many speakers into your SMP. It's tempting to overfill a session with evidence, but this can be counterproductive if this makes your SMP too dense. Design in plenty of learning space for assimilation, thinking and discussion so that students get to dig into evidence properly.

4. Deliberation

The aim with deliberation is to bring people together in ways that they not only provide their views, but also listen so as to really *hear* each other. The idea of 'exchange' is key, with no voice being louder or more domineering than others. Deliberative processes enable students to explore the pros and cons of different options collectively. It is an active process of testing and weighing up ideas, thinking about trade-offs, and considering all possibilities. This is all oriented toward arriving at *collective* decisions (explored specifically in the next section).

An emphasis on finding solutions that consider everyone's needs fosters a learning experience where contentious and opposing ideas are teased out, and minority needs and opinions are respected and taken into account. Consensus is not always easy to reach across a group. Within deliberation, compromise may be needed to take ideas forward.

Facilitation

Deliberation processes should be facilitated to ensure maximum involvement from all participants. Dedicated and trained facilitators help ensure a neutral stance for managing group dynamics, encouraging participation, and ensuring that everyone's voice is heard. External, professional facilitators are especially skilled at keeping discussion focused and productive. Having some distance from the university helps ensure the neutrality of the process. However, for cost-saving, there are options for training university staff or students in these skills. Having students involved in this way can also create further learning and developmental opportunities.

Incorporate various deliberative techniques to encourage thoughtful discussion. These techniques may include small group discussions, structured brainstorming, deep root analysis, scenario planning, 'dot-mocracy' and feasibility testing.¹² Choose techniques that align with the goals of the deliberation and promote a balanced exchange of ideas. Enjoy the process of experimenting and don't worry too much if a technique doesn't work - be open about this and find out what would work better.

Case study

Testing stations

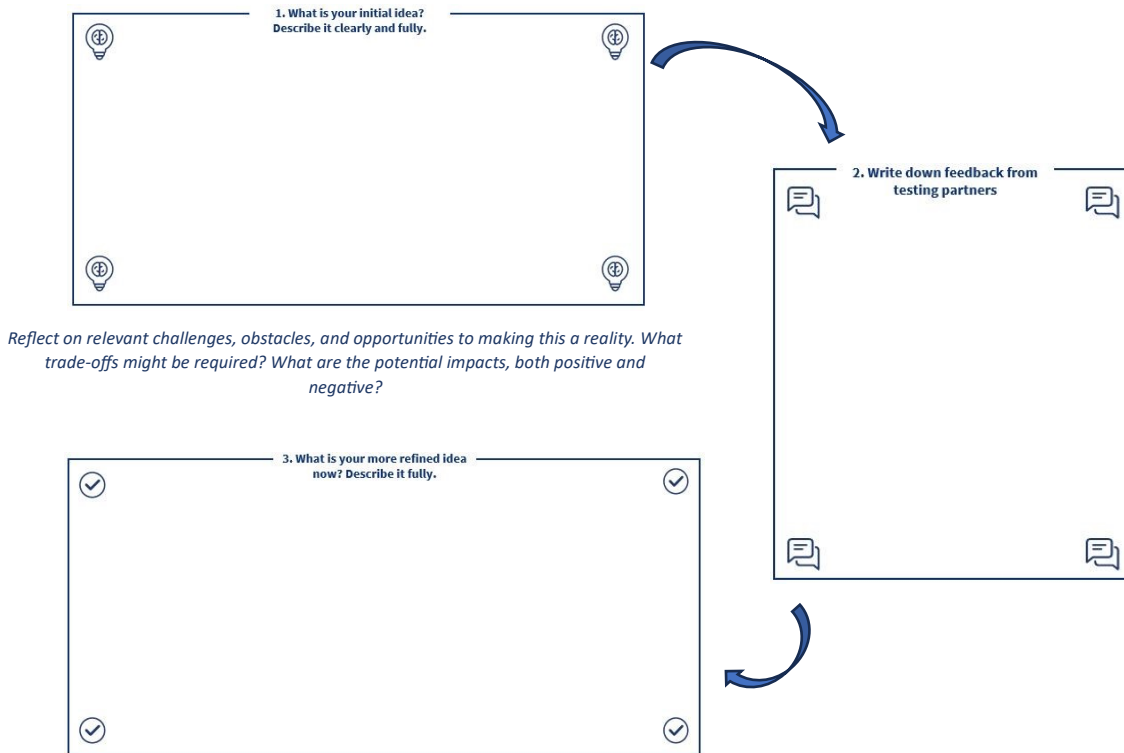
Democracy Summit, London School of Economics Students' Union (LSESU), 2022

A deliberative activity used at LSESU SMP was the use of 'Testing Stations.'

Participants took ideas to a range of 'testers' - people with expertise from different fields positioned around the room - to gather feedback on their ideas. This feasibility testing supported deliberation, drawing from a range of ideas that started with students, and developed with the testers, and back to students for deeper discussions.

After testing their ideas with one or several practitioners, participants had time to refine the ideas and think about how its success could be measured and why it might fail. From here, participants prioritised a set of ideas to further develop into recommendations.

An example template for refining your top ideas with experts serving as 'testing partners'



Adapted from a template created by Mel Stevens and Pandora Ellis

Case study

Small-group and plenary deliberation

Students' Dialogue on Democratic Engagement, University of Victoria, 2020

Two of the SDDE's four sessions were devoted to student deliberation. These deliberations took place in several cycles of small-group and plenary sessions. In a typical cycle, student panellists joined their pre-assigned groups, each of which had a dedicated facilitator, to discuss a predefined set of topics. These topics included, for example, obstacles to youth engagement in democracy and suggestions for those obstacles could be surmounted. In these small-group deliberations, student panellists drew on their own experiences and takeaways from the learning phase. Upon concluding their small-group discussions, the student panellists came together in a plenary session, in which a representative from each group shared their key takeaways from inter-group learning.

In their feedback, student panellists noted that some more variety in these sessions would facilitate their deliberations. For example, they highlighted the potential benefits of changing the makeup of the small groups across different cycles, assigning different tasks to different groups, and undertaking more in-depth collective deliberation in the plenary sessions.

Decision-making throughout

Students' deliberations will ultimately be about arriving at decisions. Throughout the process, the group should be supported to refine its ideas and reach agreement, bearing in mind the outcomes that need to be achieved. Group decision making should be part of the participant journey for reaching conclusions on both intermediary questions and an overall response to the calling question.

There are many different types of decisions to make along the way. Throughout, group(s) can be prompted to come together and

- explore potential trade-offs and win-win solutions;
- evaluate the generated solutions or options based on the established criteria and goals, exploring the strengths, weaknesses, and feasibility of each option;
- prioritise a number of ideas based on their merits and potential for consensus; and/or
- negotiate and find compromises when there are differing preferences or conflicting ideas.

Use appropriate methods to capture and document the insights, ideas, and recommendations generated during the deliberation process. This may involve note-taking, audio or video recording, or utilising digital tools for collaborative documentation.

A template for testing initial ideas for recommendations with other participants:

Draft Recommendation
Resources and Actions Necessary to Make it Happen
How to Ensure Fairness and Equity

Adapted from a template created by Mel Stevens and Pandora Ellis

Checklist

- Do** prepare facilitators to help students navigate deliberation, with care and respect in order to hear all voices.
- Do** allow students to explore their differences and conflicts. This will bring diversity and vitality to their thinking.
- Do** make enough space for deliberation. By now, people have had all the relevant information they need and have been able to ask questions. It's time to weigh everything up now.
- Do** make sure the physical and environmental conditions are conducive for deliberation - for example, having a circular table with sufficient time and no distractions. Splitting into smaller groups can be helpful.
- Do** be clear when particular decisions have been reached, so that there is a shared understanding of what has been agreed.
- Don't** allow your participants to stray off topic. Instead, make space for off topic ideas - for instance, "park" them on a flipchart so that you can steer back to the ideas for deliberation.
- Don't** forget that deliberation leads to the next stage of being able to make recommendations. Keep an eye on whether your SMP needs more time to deliberate before moving on to this stage.

5. Making Recommendations

While some forms of mini-public do not result in collective recommendations (for instance, creating a new baseline for more informed opinion polls instead) many focus on developing collective recommendations and takeaways. Given that the vast majority of SMPs we are aware of to date have used the latter approach, we focus on this model here.

Following on from the more decision-oriented deliberations discussed in the last section, students will now be focused on increasingly refined conclusions. At this point, participants return to the remit and calling question to ensure their decisions and recommendations are focused on answering it. Participants should analyse the outcomes of their deliberation and synthesise their findings into recommendations. This will be a summary of the key points of agreement and decisions made by the group.

Make sure that all participants have a clear understanding of the recommendations and any actions or next steps attached to them. They will spend time drafting recommendations, refining and redrafting, until satisfied with the wording. Participants are encouraged to do this in several rounds, so that each person has had input on each recommendation. This is important in ensuring that the recommendations are owned and valued by the SMP rather than individuals. This might involve starting with smaller groups and gradually transitioning to plenary decision-making. The step ladder technique is one possible strategy for doing this.

Case study

Step ladder technique

Democracy Summit, London School of Economics Students' Union (LSESU), 2022

An innovative decision-making activity was used at LSESU SMP.

Participants built consensus by adding membership to decisions about recommendation themes as part of this 'step ladder' technique. You might also visualise it as a 'pyramid' technique.

All SMP participants were separated into smaller groups of two or three. Each of these smaller groups was tasked with deciding upon a set number of recommendation themes (though this could be used for other types of decisions). Each of these small groups made these decisions separately, then joined with one other group, forming a larger group in which they added, removed, or revised themes based on a collective discussion. These larger groups then do the same. Groups continue to join together until all participants are in plenary to align on their decisions.

For example, if you had a group of 16 students, start with eight pairs of '2'. After a certain interval, each pair joins with one other, creating four groups of '4'. After another interval, each group joins with another, creating two groups of '8'. Ultimately, those two groups join to one whole of '16' to finalise.

Agreeing on Recommendations

Next is finalisation of the recommendations. This can be done in several ways, so that the SMP has a choice over what to adopt as a recommendation, what it might consider as a minority report, or what they want to leave behind.

If necessary, voting can be used to prioritise different recommendations, listing all in descending order of support, or instead to only endorse recommendations that meet a particular threshold of support (e.g. 75%). Voting can take different forms, for instance by ballot paper or using an online voting tool, e.g. Mentimeter or Slido, during the SMP. This creates excitement and a sense of achievement and closure for the SMP. Voting can also take place after the event, for example in an online survey.

Writing the Report

As a final stage, collect all the information and findings from SMP. Identify common themes, ideas, or recommendations that emerged during the mini-public. Summarise these in a concise and accessible format. This should be done by the SMP participants, or the independent facilitation team, to ensure its independent status. If the independent facilitation team writes the report, make sure the draft report is shared with the participants, so they can edit and ensure it is true to their work.

Sharing Recommendations with Decision-makers

Outputs and outcomes should be published for maximum impact. Share the final report with decision-makers and relevant stakeholders according to your decision-making pathway. Ideally, arrange for participants to present their final report at a meeting with the decision makers. This helps ensure that the insights and recommendations generated during the deliberation process are seriously considered or adopted in decision-making processes.

In all, distribution opportunities include things like:

- ✓ A recommendations report;
- ✓ Key outcomes summarised on website;
- ✓ Film clips of students talking about their recommendations and overall experience; and
- ✓ A launch event where the recommendations are shared more widely.

Case study

Arriving at recommendations

Students' Jury on Pandemic Learning, Queen Mary University of London's School of Law, 2021

The Jury developed a number of recommendations through deliberative processes, unpacking and shaping these recommendations together. But the ultimate decision as to whether each of these recommendations were to be put forward to School management

took place in a secure, anonymous online vote. Each juror was sent a unique link to a survey that asked them to separately approve or disapprove of each draft recommendation. Approved recommendations were then compiled into a formal report and presented by student jurors to School leadership at the Department Advisory Board (the key decision-making body).

Checklist

- Do** make time for drafting, gathering group comments and redrafting.
- Do** draw on previous learning and discussion, so each recommendation is well-informed.
- Do** encourage them to be written as clearly and as well-structured as possible.
- Don't** forget to involve all SMP participants in having input to all recommendations. Set up a process for participants to read, review, refine each others' work, and build ownership of the recommendations across the SMP.
- Don't** forget to get the SMP to ratify and adopt the set of recommendations. Introduce a system for SMP participants to vote and reach agreement on which ones will go forward.

6. Evaluation, Assessment, and Documentation

Following the completion of the SMP process itself, it is a good time to take stock of what has happened, is happening, or will happen. You should plan to have time and procedures for acting on this as well.

Taking stock after the fact can (and should) involve both *evaluating the SMP process*—that is, did the process go the way you wanted it to, or have the qualities you wanted it to have—and *assessing the impacts* that the process has had. *Documenting* both of these things can help maximise learning and leverage support for future initiatives.

Evaluating the Process

What about the process went well? What could have been better?

Evaluating the process itself will mean focusing on how well the process reflected the ideals of SMPs. For example, consider its inclusiveness, the quality and balance of the information participants heard, the quality of deliberations, and the degree of wider awareness of the initiative.

Assessing its Impacts

What came about because of the SMP? What has changed?

As was explored earlier, SMPs have the potential for a variety of positive impacts - on decisions, on the people involved, on institutions, and on the public. These can occur in the short- or long-term, be brief or long-lasting, and can take a number of forms. Because of this, assessments should take different forms and happen at different points in time. You might assess specific impacts and create opportunities to hear about others you didn't anticipate.

You might ask, for example, do students feel more included, empowered, or motivated to participate in other areas, both inside and outside the university? Did their perspectives on democracy change? Did they learn or build skills in other ways? Did they behave differently in their classes, at their jobs, or on voting day? Did the SMP recommendations affect the decision-making process or change policy? Did the SMP create resources for future use? Were there positive consequences for services, resources, or activities? Did the non-participating student (or staff) body feel differently about the university or decision-making process as a result of the SMP? Was the greater support for the ultimate decisions made?

There are other resources that can help guide your evaluations and assessments in more rigorous ways, but feel free to adapt to your local context if there is good reason to do so, and to widen the potential impacts you assess for what's most valuable to you—or the unexpected!¹³

Case study

Assessing impacts

Students' Jury on Pandemic Learning, Queen Mary University of London's School of Law, 2021

Following the Students' Jury, a variety of approaches, from different actors, were taken to assess different kinds of impacts. This included, for example:

1. Asking the Director of Education to explain to participants which recommendations were or were not taken up in ultimate decisions, and to provide reasons for this;
2. Noticing the extent to which the Report and its outputs were referenced by staff members in other decision-making fora, or instances where they suggested similar initiatives for other topics;
3. Conducting formal empirical research projects on participants' experiences;
4. Hosting a 'dialogue' reunion call two years after the event to discuss what, if any, lasting impacts participation had on participants' feelings, perspectives, or behaviours;
5. Having University communications staff inquire regularly as to what else has come of the event, to be added to relevant web pages.

Documenting What You Find

When you seek out information about the process and its impacts, it can be very valuable to keep your findings well documented—for your and others' learning, and to evidence the quality and productivity of the process. This can help you rally support for future initiatives, including internal and external funding opportunities, or support applications for things like awards or accreditations.

Case study

Evidencing impacts

Students' Dialogue on Democratic Engagement, University of Victoria, 2020

Broadly speaking, participants learned a lot through the process, experienced a boost in their political efficacy, and felt that it was executed effectively. This was evident in the reflections students shared in follow-up surveys and interviews. For example, 73% reported that they would be very likely to participate in a similar dialogue if invited.

Their conclusions were collected in a report that was distributed to the project sponsors and the broader public. Finally, all participants were invited to participate in an informal closing session to celebrate their collective achievements.

Quotes from student participants also provided more personal insights into impacts of having participated, whether in terms of attitude, motivation, or learning. For example, students shared things like:

"The best part was probably the awakened sense of being able to make a difference in some way. Discussing big ideas with such a diverse crowd makes me hopeful that positive changes can happen."

"It was an excellent experience that has motivated me to become more involved in similar conversations. I learned so much and am motivated to learn more about the topics that we discussed."

"It was exhilarating to engage in conversations with guest speakers, organizers, and attendees. It was truly educational to be exposed to others' perspectives on democracy and the ways with which we participate in it."

Methods

A variety of methods can be used to evaluate and assess, with some more rigorous than others. If used, formal research should be planned well in advance to provide enough time for appropriate ethics processes. SMPs are a great opportunity for action research, and organisers might reach out to appropriate academics or research centres within their university to see if they would like to get involved in conducting parallel research - try those in areas like Politics, Education, Law, Organisation Development, Psychology, Sociology, or others. However, even informal discussions can be valuable for certain purposes; formal research is not necessary.

Somewhere between the two, you might organise discussion groups or use simple surveys. To measure changes in participants' attitudes or understandings—for instance, towards the SMP or its topic—you can run a *pre-* and *post-*SMP assessment, with the same questions asked before and after participation, then compared. Online surveys are ideal for processing and comparing this data, enabling deeper understanding of the "distance travelled" over the course of the SMP.

Checklist

- Do** design templates to capture recommendations, making it easier to record outputs along the way. This will help with consistency in how impact and outcomes are evidenced.
- Do** list opportunities for further involvement, so student energy and willingness to engage can continue.
- Do** maximise the reach and impact of SMP recommendations by linking them into relevant University policies and governance.
- Don't** forget to share your learning with others as part of impact work.
- Don't** overlook the power of communications - plan for how you will publicise what happened and keep updating what the outcomes are as a result of your SMP.
- Don't** skip this part. Remember what needs to happen so that your SMP has a long-lasting impact.

Final comments

While it is a huge amount of time, energy, frustration and laughter, we know that investing in a SMP is worthwhile, as do the students who take part. We wish you the best of luck with your own projects, and look forward to seeing the learning that comes out of it.

Further Reading and Notes

Further reading

Student Mini-Publics

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University of Victoria, [Pursuing deliberative democracy at the University of Victoria: Report on the students' dialogue on democratic engagement](#) (2021)

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Other Guides and Practitioner Resources

- White, Hunter, & Greaves (2022). *Facilitating Deliberation: A Practical Guide*. MosaicLab. Available at: <https://www.mosaiclab.com.au/the-big-book>
- Innovation in Democracy Programme (2020). *How to Run a Citizens' Assembly*. Available at: <https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/reports/2020/IIDP-citizens-assembly.pdf>

Endnotes

¹ Nicole Curato, Nicole, David M. Farrell, Brigitte Geissel, Kimmo Grönlund, Patricia Mockler, Jean-Benoit Pilet, Alan Renwick, et al. 2021. *Deliberative Mini-Publics: Core Design Features*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

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⁴ Learnings and details from this case study are based on the information contained in the following report: LSE Students Union, *Democracy Summit Recommendations Report* (2023)

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Version 1.0

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Please cite this guide as: Ellis, P., Stevens, M., Kennedy, J., & Pek, S. (2023) Student mini-publics: How to run democratic innovations in universities.

<https://doi.org/10.18357/HLPO1670>
