

Beyond the 'Optional': Student-Led Societies, Belonging and the Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education

Amal Elamin

University of Greenwich

Abstract

Student-led societies play a central role in delivering outcomes that universities prioritise, yet they continue to be treated as optional within higher education. This creates a structural misalignment, as access to the skills, relationships and development shaped through the hidden curriculum remains uneven, risking the reinforcement of inequality. This article calls for a more deliberate and integrated approach that recognises, supports and embeds student-led societies within the learning ecosystem.

Key words: student organisations, experiential learning, belonging, student engagement, inclusion

Introduction

Student-led societies (also referred to as student organisations, clubs or associations) are often positioned as extra-curricular activities – valuable, but ultimately optional – and that's how they are commonly organised (through students' unions and extra-curricular structures), rather than being embedded within academic programmes, assessment or formal learning outcomes. They may be defined as student-managed groups formed around common academic, professional, cultural, recreational, charitable or social interests (Gallagher and Gilmore, 2013). Typically, they provide opportunities for students to participate in activities, initiatives and communities beyond the formal curriculum. Examples include subject-specific societies, cultural associations, volunteering groups and other communities organised around shared interests or causes. Yet, despite being on the periphery, student-led societies contribute to outcomes that universities increasingly seek to evidence via institutional strategies and sector measures, including the National Student Survey (NSS), Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), access and participation plans and the Graduate Outcomes survey (Thomas, 2012). These outcomes include fostering belonging, enhancing learning, supporting mental health, developing employability skills and enabling inclusive student engagement. By means of these societies, students exercise agency in shaping their education, engaging in projects that enhance both employability and personal growth (Dewanti *et al.*, 2025).

Despite this, universities often present student-led societies as optional social activities or as add-ons to university life. Despite their positive contributions, student-led societies are commonly organised as part of extra-curricular provision, separate from academic programmes and formal learning structures, rather than as integral components of the educational experience. To sideline

them like this underestimates both their value and their potential. Furthermore, to segregate students' lived experience from institutional practice raises an important question: if student-led societies are central to belonging, engagement and learning, why are they still treated as optional? Universities should therefore reassess their value and status.

'Belonging' in higher education (HE) is complex and multidimensional, encompassing connection to peers and staff, a recognition of identity and a sense of safety and inclusion (Gieg, 2016). Formal curricula may contribute to students' sense of belonging, but may fall short in providing opportunities for students, particularly those from diverse cultural backgrounds, to negotiate identity, develop their voice and build meaningful relationships. Research on inter-cultural engagement and belonging in HE highlights the importance of opportunities for informal interaction in fostering social connectedness, cultural understanding and inclusion within increasingly internationalised learning environments (Jose and Satar, 2025). For international students in particular, 'belonging' involves processes of adaptation within unfamiliar academic and social contexts (Glass and Gesing, 2018). Research suggests that participation in student organisations may support international students' sense of belonging within the university community (Gieg, 2016). In this context, student-led societies provide spaces (beyond the competitive dynamics of the classroom) where cultural identities may be expressed and negotiated through peer interaction.

Student societies also promote social support, enhancing both mental health and academic performance. Research indicates: 1) that strong, trusting relationships and a sense of belonging significantly reduce psychological distress among students, positively influencing academic outcomes (Gallagher and Gilmore, 2013); 2) that social support operates both directly, by improving emotional well-being, and indirectly, by fostering resilience, self-esteem and life satisfaction (Wilcox *et al.*, 2005). Accordingly, student-led societies have the potential to cultivate inclusive and supportive communities that help mitigate academic pressures and strengthen interpersonal resilience.

Additionally, student-led societies enhance the sense of belonging and wellbeing and encourage successful learning. Borges *et al.* (2017) argue that student-led societies can be understood as part of the hidden curriculum within HE, offering opportunities for leadership, networking and professional identity development that are not always embedded in formal curricula. In HE, the 'hidden curriculum' refers to the informal learning, values, behaviours, norms and skills that students acquire through experiences and interactions beyond the formal curriculum (Rossouw and Frick, 2023). Through organising activities, leading initiatives and collaborating on projects, students engage in experiential learning that formal teaching often cannot replicate. Practical examples include serving on society committees, chairing meetings, organising networking and volunteering events, engaging with external professionals, planning and delivering initiatives, managing resources, coordinating members and volunteers and undertaking designated leadership roles. These societies also foster creativity and innovation, allowing students to test ideas, take risks and apply learning in practice (Dewanti *et al.*, 2025).

And this is where the problem begins.

If student-led societies offer significant benefits for belonging, learning and development, access to these benefits depends on which students choose – and are able – to participate. Participation in these societies is shaped by such factors as availability of time, student awareness of their value and individual confidence to take part; also, the theme-based nature of many societies may not seem equally relevant or accessible to all students. As a result, those who benefit most are not always those who would gain the most from joining in. Something fundamental to the student experience therefore becomes unevenly distributed (Montelongo, 2002). In this sense, access to the hidden curriculum – and so to the sense of belonging it fosters – remains unequal. This raises a broader concern: while inequality in HE continues to be shaped by a range of structural, social and institutional factors (Thomas, 2012, Reay *et al.*, 2005), unequal participation in student-led societies may also result in unequal access to developmental opportunities. Thomas (2012) highlights the close relationship between belonging, engagement and student success within HE. Building on this evidence, it may be argued that, when opportunities associated with belonging, engagement, leadership development and professional identity formation are accessed primarily through voluntary participation, some students may be better placed than others to benefit from them. From this perspective, student-led societies do not create inequality; rather, unequal participation may contribute to disparities in access to opportunities, networks and forms of social and cultural capital that support student success. Hence there is a need to consider whether reliance on voluntary participation aligns with institutional ambitions to promote belonging, engagement and employability across the student body.

If this is where the problem begins, this is where change must start.

Student-led societies cannot continue to sit on the margins of university life while delivering outcomes that institutions actively prioritise. If belonging, engagement and employability matter, then the spaces that support them cannot remain optional in practice. Belonging is not a passive outcome, but one shaped by access, opportunity and institutional priorities. Some of this work is already taking place. Many universities invest in societies through funding, training and students' union support structures. However, these efforts are often fragmented and uneven in reach, limiting their overall impact. What is needed is not more activity, but more consistency. Funding must be more stable, support more coordinated and access more equitable across the student body. Yet student-led societies remain under-recognised within institutional structures. Their role in shaping learning and graduate outcomes is rarely evaluated in a systematic way, leaving invisible most of their positive effects. If these societies are genuinely seen as authentic sites of learning, then their value cannot sit outside institutional frameworks; it needs to be embedded. Linking their contribution to institutional priorities and key performance indicators (such as student success, retention and employability) would help to ensure that their significant role is not only acknowledged but also acted upon.

Addressing uneven participation in student-led societies also requires making these opportunities more visible and accessible. Students are more likely to engage when they can clearly see how these experiences contribute to their development (Guo *et al.*, 2022). However, improving participation is not simply a matter of increasing awareness; it also demands recognition that students engage in different ways and face different constraints (Kahu, 2013). This means creating clearer pathways for participation, recognising leadership and engagement within programmes

and offering opportunities for reflection and applied learning that connect these experiences to academic study. More fundamentally, it may require re-imagining 'participation' itself. Rather than relying solely on traditional in-person models, universities and students' unions could support a wider range of engagement opportunities, including online communities, digital content creation, student blogs, peer mentoring schemes, hybrid participation models, virtual networking opportunities and digital discussion forums. Such approaches may enable students with competing commitments, caring responsibilities, employment obligations, accessibility needs or commuting patterns to engage in ways that better align with their circumstances while still accessing opportunities for belonging, connection, learning and professional development. By adopting such measures, universities may move beyond content delivery towards more facilitative, collaborative and applied approaches to learning.

Conclusion

Student-led societies may be optional within universities, but the outcomes they support are not. Belonging, engagement and skills development are central to student success, yet access to these experiences remains uneven.

Relying solely on voluntary participation risks perpetuating inequalities, particularly for students facing challenges in engagement. If universities are to advance inclusive and effective educational practices, they must move beyond provision and focus on access, recognition and integration. Institutional measures that explicitly give appropriate status to the contributory role student-led societies play in the learning experience and student outcomes do not mean that these societies must be other than voluntary, but that their value will be fully and publicly recognised and their benefits consequently more equitably shared.

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