



Changing the state of campus

From interest to action: a practical toolkit for piloting State to increase meaningful student political participation on university campuses.

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For

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Toolkit overview



This toolkit translates findings from an interdisciplinary mixed-methods research project on student political participation (Winchester, 2026). It draws on survey responses from 386 students and six focus groups with 32 students, including feedback on a State demo, to identify participation barriers, design opportunities, and conditions for a credible campus pilot.



01

**Campus
context**



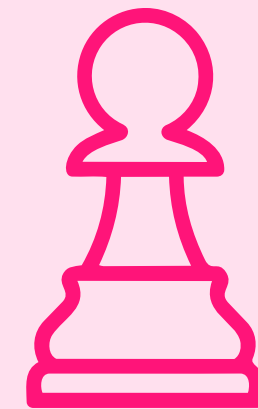
02

**Focus group
insights**



03

**Student
Archetypes**



04

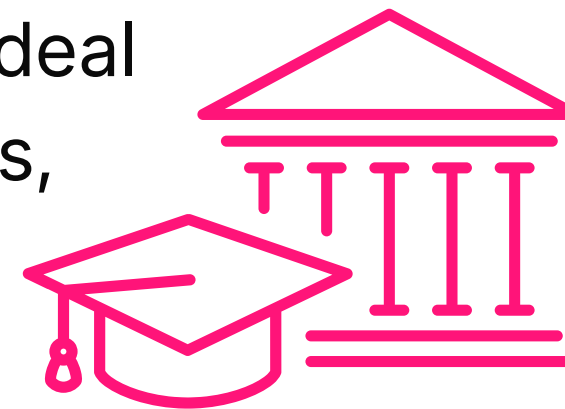
**Implementation
Strategy**



01

Campus context

Why university campuses are ideal places to build democratic skills, plus an overview of students' current participatory habits.



Why start with campuses



Campuses are places where students can develop key democratic skills. They:

Function as '**micro publics**' for fostering **tolerance** and bridging the gap of differences (Harris, 2012)

Bring together **similar views** and enable the formation of **political networks** (Crossley and Ibrahim, 2012)

Act as **critical spaces** where scholars can 'conduct rigorous group inquiries using **deliberative democracy principles** to address issues in human experience that are relevant across national borders' (Mourad, 2022)



What the facts say

Students care: they just don't trust the route to change. These findings suggest a clear participation gap: interest exists, but current routes to action are ineffective. This creates a strong case for testing a low-friction, collective, and visibly responsive civic-tech intervention.

50%

of students are at least somewhat interested in campus politics

But the average number of methods of participation per student is just

1.4

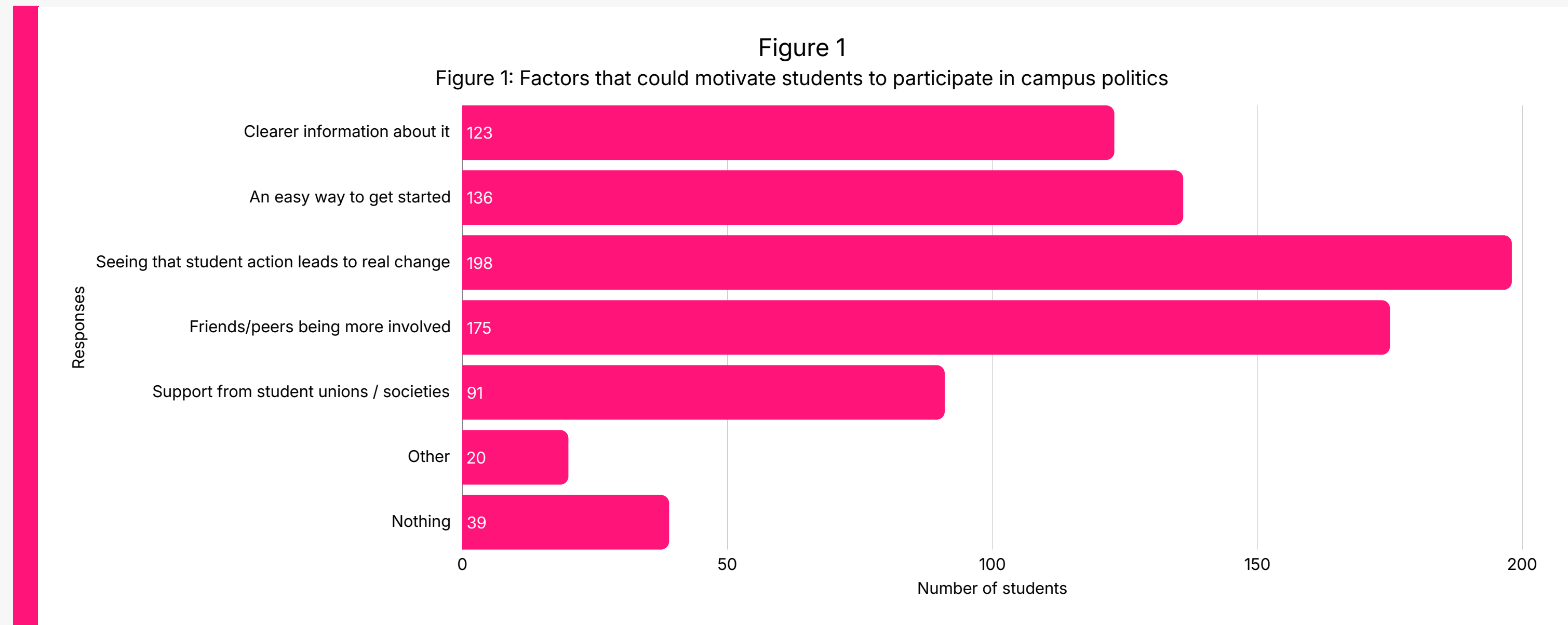
78%

would be at least somewhat likely to use a civic tech tool if their university introduced one

Motivators for engagement



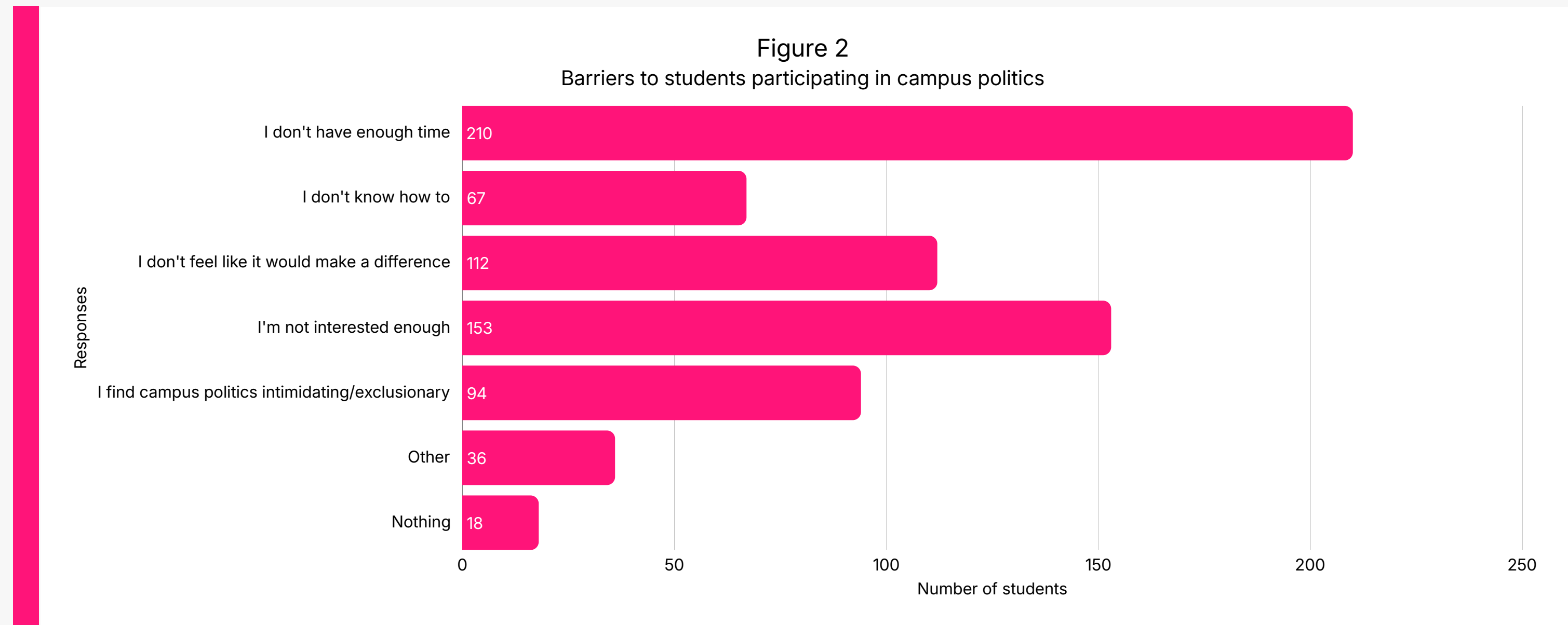
The most significant motivator was seeing student action leads to real change, reported by over half (51%) of respondents. In order to act, students need to believe their voices matter.



Barriers to engagement



The most significant barrier was lack of time, reported by over half (54%) of respondents, followed by lack of interest (39%). In order to act, students need quick ways to engage and reasons to care.





02

Focus group insights

Key opportunities and concerns identified from the State demo, plus an overview of students' current feelings about their participation and the possible impact of State.



How students feel



Students' feelings towards participating in campus politics spanned five recurring themes, derived from Figure 3 and the accompanying reflections participants gave in the focus groups:

01

Limited influence

02

Cautious expression

03

Frustrated disengagement

04

Disconnection

05

Conditional optimism

Figure 3

Words participants used to describe their feelings towards their political participation on campus



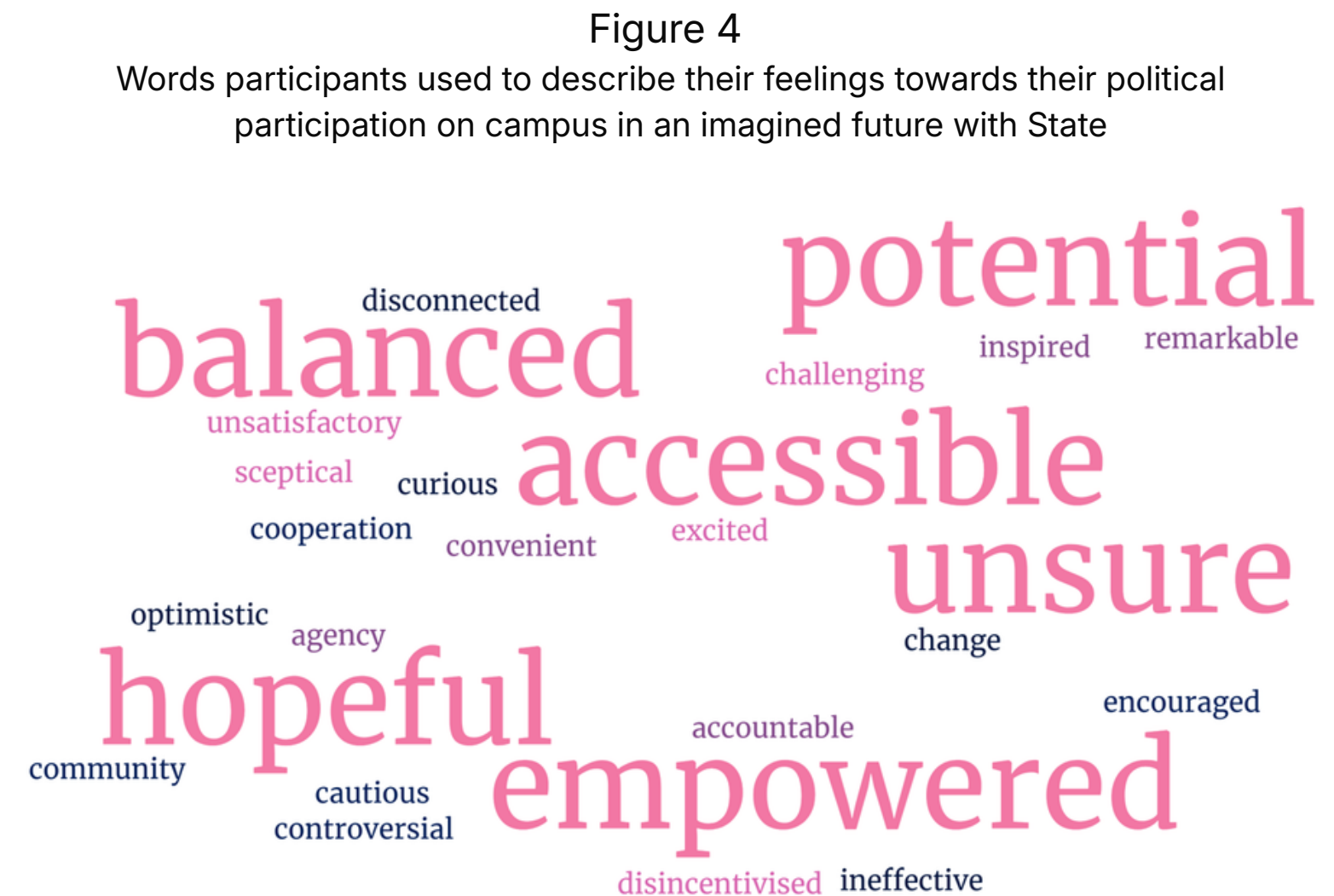
How students could feel



Figure 4 shows how students' feelings towards participating in campus politics evolved after the State demo:

While the picture is not yet fully positive, it is **promising compared to Figure 3**. The overall tone is significantly more **hopeful and enthusiastic**.

This potential is reflected in the opportunities students identified that follow.



Opportunities



Participants saw potential in State because it appeared to lower effort, consolidate fragmented information, and make participation on campus more collective and visible. The following opportunities were highlighted:

It's **accessible, quick, and mobile-friendly**

It creates one **unified platform** for all information and feedback

It lowers the threshold for **speaking up and acting**

It makes concerns more **visible and collective**

It builds **community, connection, and collaboration**

It could improve institutional **accountability and responsiveness**

Concerns



Participants' concerns highlight the importance of strong governance, communication, and accountability features required for State to function credibly on campus. The following concerns were raised:

Possible lack of real **follow-through**

A need for clear **rules, governance, maintenance and safeguards**

Risk of becoming **another layer of bureaucracy**

May not be taken seriously and result in **misuse**

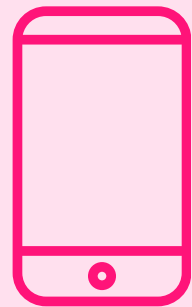
May mainly attract **already engaged students**

AI-generated writing was seen as **unreliable and agency-reducing**



Key principles and safeguards

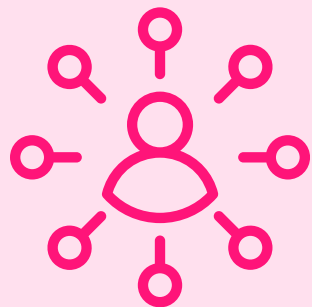
State for universities needs to capitalise on the opportunities identified by students and mitigate against their concerns. As such, it should be designed to be:



Accessible and mobile-first



Governed by **clear rules** and moderation



Collective in surfacing shared concerns



Designed to support, not replace, **student voice**



Transparent about who responds and when



Embedded cautiously with **optional AI features**



03

Student archetypes

3 core student archetypes (A1-3) built from the themes identified in the focus groups, plus their motivators, barriers and tailored messaging to reach them.



A1: Interested but hesitant



This student cares about campus politics. But they are unsure how to act, or worried about saying the wrong thing.

Motivators

Simple first steps

Low-pressure participation

Seeing others' views

Barriers

Unsure how to act

Afraid of saying the wrong thing

Worried about social risk

Messaging

"Start small"

"See what others care about"

"Add your voice"

A2: Frustrated former participant



This student used to care about campus politics. But their past experiences of being involved have left them skeptical.

Motivators

Visible follow-through

Accountability

Proof that participation leads to change

Barriers

Disillusionment

Slow or performative politics

Belief that speaking up changes nothing

Messaging

"Speak up"

"Be heard"

"Make change happen"

A3: Disconnected but issue-led



This student doesn't care about campus politics. But they do care about political issues.

Motivators

Issue-based action

Clear relevance to everyday problems

Practical collective movements

Barriers

Sees politics as separate from student life

Finds it draining

Doesn't identify with formal mechanisms

Messaging

"Identify the issue"

"Share your thoughts"

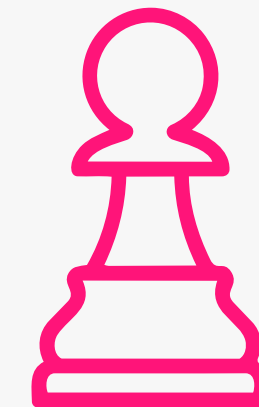
"Come together"



04

Implementation strategy

A proposed strategy for rolling State out on campuses, including a sales pitch for universities, a student workshop template, plus a pilot action plan.



The sales pitch

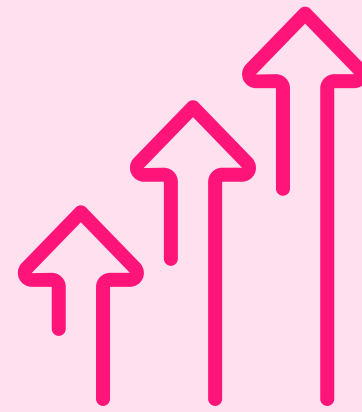


Show universities why adopting State is worthwhile and what value it adds for both staff and students. Universities will benefit in three key ways:



Accountability

Clearly shows who owns issues, what actions are being taken, and what still needs response.



Efficiency

Provides one clear place to receive, organise, and quickly review student concerns.



Inclusivity

Captures concerns from students who may not use institutional channels but still want change.



Workshop template

Show students the value of State for turning their concerns into collective action using this 90 minute workshop template:

01	Ask students to individually brainstorm which issues they care about on campus and note these down while getting them registered on the platform	10 min
02	In small groups, get students to come together to map all of the issues they care about by category	20 min
03	Demo State and show how concerns can be raised, supported, and tracked	20 min
04	Get each group to choose an issue and use State to turn it into a motion with supporting statements under the relevant category	30 min
05	Close with next steps, follow-up routes , and invite students to give feedback	10 min

6 month pilot action plan



Test whether State can make campus participation more effective.

1: Set Up

Secure one university for the pilot.

Agree response owners and moderation rules.

Recruit students reps.

1 month

2: Soft Launch

Test onboarding workshop with student reps.

Confirm features and categories.

Refine the process based on feedback.

1 month

3: Live Pilot

Run workshops to onboard students.

Keep the platform active with live updates.

Ensure the institution is responding to concerns promptly.

3 months

4: Review

Measure usage, participation, and response rates.

Run a short feedback survey and drop-in sessions.

Refine before expanding to other universities.

1 month

Success metrics



The pilot should assess whether State increases participation, broadens who takes part, and creates clearer institutional follow-through on student concerns using the following metrics:

Reach

Registrations
Active users
Workshop attendance

Inclusion

Participation beyond
already engaged
students

Activity

Concerns raised,
supported, and developed
collectively

Responsiveness

Named owners
Response times
Visible updates

Follow-through

Issues progressed,
resolved, or clearly
closed

Trust

Student feedback on
usefulness, credibility, and
return intention



Why State and why now

State can help tackle students' participation problem by making engagement more accessible, accountable, and collective. Win students early and help shape a lifetime of democratic participation by:



Meeting them where democratic habits are still being formed



Turning interest into action on campus



Becoming the platform they carry with them into the rest of their civic lives

References



Crossley, N., and J. Ibrahim. (2012). Critical Mass, Social Networks and Collective Action: Exploring Student Political Worlds. *Sociology* 46(4), 596–612. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038511425560>

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