

UK University Campuses as Micro-Democracies: An Investigation Into Student Political Participation, Efficacy and the Potential for a Civic Technology Intervention

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Dedication and Acknowledgements

I'd like to dedicate this paper to Michael Pairpoint and Barbara Joyce Buckle – whilst they may not be around to see the woman I've become, I would never have become her without them.

This paper also wouldn't have been possible without the incredible network of people I have around me, with special thanks to:

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Abstract

This study examines whether UK university campuses can function as micro-democracies by exploring the relationship between student political interest, efficacy, and participation, alongside the potential of a civic technology intervention. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the project combines a survey of 386 UK university students with six focus groups involving 32 participants. The findings show that while political interest is present, participation remains limited and is significantly shaped by political efficacy. Students responded positively to a civic technology prototype that made information easier to access and participation easier to enact, provided it was paired with clear institutional accountability. Overall, this study suggests that university campuses can function as micro-democracies when political efficacy is strengthened through making participation more accessible and consequential.

Introduction

Youth disengagement with politics has long been a concern. Although many young people express an interest in a wide range of political issues, their participation in formal political processes such as voting or party politics remains low globally compared with older age groups (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). In the UK, this pattern is especially pronounced: Abrahams and Brooks (2018) found that youth political participation is notably lower than in many other European countries. University students are not exempt from this pattern. Brooks et al. (2020) note a perceived decline in conventional forms of collective political engagement among students, arguing that many feel their political efficacy is constrained by social actors and politicians who tend to ignore or infantilise them. At the same time, students may possess a distinct capacity to function as agents of social change if their universities were to support and facilitate their political participation (Neary, 2016).

Accordingly, this paper asks whether UK university campuses can function as micro-democracies by examining students' current levels of and feelings towards their political participation on campus. More specifically, it seeks to investigate participation through the core explanatory concept of political efficacy, and assess how a civic technology intervention might impact this. In doing so, this study treats campus life not only as a backdrop to political participation, but as an active democratic environment where students may develop, negotiate, or lose confidence in their ability to meaningfully participate in politics.

To investigate this phenomenon, an explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design is utilised. A quantitative survey is first used to examine UK university students' levels of political interest, methods of engagement, perceived levels of internal and external efficacy, barriers and motivations to participation, and openness to using a civic technology tool, in order to build a broad picture of student political participation on campus. Qualitative focus groups are then leveraged to explore how students feel about their political participation on campus at a deeper level: first through a creative collaging activity designed to surface latent feelings of political efficacy, then through a demonstration of a civic technology tool prototype to consider what impact such an intervention may have.

Literature Review

This literature review follows a funnel structure, moving from the broader picture of youth and student political engagement, to a deeper look at the core explanatory concept of political efficacy, the potential of university campuses to function as democratic environments, and finally the potential of civic technology to positively impact this.

Youth & Student Political Engagement

People are politically disengaged if they do not ‘know, value or participate in the democratic process’ (Uberoi & Johnston, 2017). One salient group that exhibits these characteristics is young people, among whom political disengagement has persisted for several decades and remains especially pronounced in the UK (Sloam, Henn, and Nunes, 2025). Most notably, this is evidenced through low electoral turnout, with the 2024 general election only receiving an estimated 37% youth turnout, a significant decline compared to an average youth participation rate of around 65% between the 1960s and the early 1990s (Sloam, Henn and Nunes, 2025). Several reasons for this have been identified, from 49% of young people being dissatisfied with how democracy works (Borghi et al., 2024) to the belief that there are relatively few opportunities available for them to effectively intervene in formal politics (Henn and Foard, 2014). More recent evidence suggests that young people do value democracy and want to engage, but need stronger opportunities to build political knowledge and confidence (Electoral Commission, 2026).

However, while young people may be less engaged in conventional politics, they remain active in a variety of non-conventional political and civic forms of participation (Chrysoschoou and Barrett, 2017). For example, young people are highly active in issue-based forms of participation, including petition signing, boycotting, protesting and online activism (Sloam, Henn and Nunes, 2025). This theme is even more prevalent amongst university students, many of whom are young people, and of which the body of research into their engagement is substantially smaller. Globally, students have often been at the forefront of various protests, taking a prominent stance on a variety of issues (Brooks et al., 2020). Yet, as of late, a worrying trend of students disengaging entirely from the UK electoral system has been observed (Hanlon, 2026). The failure to convert student action into conventional political participation represents a possible failure of the wider UK democratic system, calling into question why students remain disengaged despite showing an active concern and care for politics.

Political Efficacy

One explanation for this may be their perceived levels of political efficacy. Originally coined by Campbell et al (1954, p. 187), political efficacy refers to how much an individual believes their actions have the power to impact the political process. Over time, this term evolved and split into two distinct components: internal and external efficacy. Internal efficacy refers to individuals’ sense of their own ability to understand and engage in political processes (Niemi et al., 1991). External efficacy refers to individuals’ assessment of the degree to which they are able to have an impact on political processes and outcomes at an institutional level (Oser, 2025). Together, they shape whether individuals feel capable of engaging in politics and whether they believe that political institutions will respond positively to their actions. This suggests that low engagement among students may not reflect apathy, but a more specific belief that conventional political action is either beyond one’s own ability or unlikely to make a meaningful difference.

Campus Politics

Although political efficacy has been extensively used to examine democratic engagement at the governmental level, it has not yet been applied to the university campus as a microcosm of this. Campuses offer particularly valuable sites for analysis, especially in light of the divergent scholarly views on whether they function as a politically unifying or divisive spaces. Some see the campus as an important political site – a ‘micro public’ for fostering tolerance and bridging the gap of differences (Harris, 2012), or bringing together similar views and enabling the formation of political networks (Crossley and Ibrahim, 2012). On the other hand, a more critical body of literature argues that campuses do not always function as productive democratic spaces, since they can reproduce wider social divisions, narrow political debate, and shift student representation away from collective advocacy towards bureaucratic consultation (Abrahams and Brooks, 2018). This study considers both perspectives, treating the campus as an opportunity site with high potential rather than a fully-fledged democratic environment.

Furthermore, university campuses are uniquely placed to be critical spaces – places where scholars are able to ‘conduct rigorous group inquiries using deliberative democracy principles to address basic problems or issues in human experience that are relevant across national borders’ (Mourad, 2022). Adversely, many universities fail to achieve this, with a US based study finding they often lack a stakeholder governance structure which could permit the development of democratic values and citizenship (Hemel and Pozen, 2026). Hemel and Pozen (2026) further argue that including students in the decision making process at the campus level could lead to improvement in the democratic culture of universities and subsequently students’ democratic contributions to wider society. Reiley (2022) further notes the importance of maximising opportunities for democratic practices on campus, asserting that ‘fostering an environment where dissent and discomfort can coexist with institutional order can elegantly reproduce the essential ingredients of a thriving society. It will help make students comfortable with the inherent tensions of democracies, with the necessity of speaking up and accepting fair but undesirable outcomes.’.

Civic Technology

Civic technology may offer one means of engaging younger people, whose everyday lives are deeply mediated by technology, in political processes; this research explores its potential as a campus-based intervention. Theocharis (2015) emphasised the importance of understanding young peoples’ digital participation as a core part of their social agency and empowerment. Furthermore, a study of young people in Poland and Slovakia concluded that ‘digital engagement of youth would serve as a strong catalyst for enhancing democratic processes, promoting transparency, citizen participation, and responsiveness in governance, by helping sustain and strengthen democratic governance and its processes.’ (Elmasllari, 2023). Students in particular frequently gather information and publish their own content online, facilitated by the advances and development of social media (Biddix, 2010), making it a space with immense potential for facilitating their political engagement.

In sum, the literature suggests that while many students are politically aware and even politically active, this often fails to translate into sustained conventional participation due to a variety of complex factors. It also suggests that university is more than a place where these attitudes are reflected; it is a site where they may be actively formed through shared governance, democratic practice, and exposure to disagreement and decision-making. This creates a clear space to investigate what factors – especially political efficacy – contribute to students’ levels of democratic participation on campus, and whether a civic technology tool could be used to strengthen this, ultimately strengthening student engagement within the wider democratic sphere.

Mixed Methods Methodology

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed methods research design, which involves two distinct phases – quantitative numeric data collection and analysis, followed by qualitative textual data collection and analysis (Ivankova, Creswell and Stick, 2006). The quantitative data is used to identify broader patterns, while the qualitative data is used to generate richer insights to help deepen understanding of the quantitative findings (Creswell et al., 2003). This study further operates within a pragmatist paradigm, drawing on Dewey's conception of inquiry as a process through which problematic situations are investigated by considering the likely consequences of action and the meanings generated through experience (Morgan, 2014). In the quantitative phase, a novel survey instrument was designed and deployed to investigate student political participation on campus and assess the factors which influence this through the core explanatory concept of political efficacy. In the qualitative phase, a series of creative focus groups were held in order to ascertain a deeper insight into how students' political efficacy affects their participation and receive feedback on how a civic technology intervention may positively impact this.

Ethical considerations were embedded throughout the research design, with informed consent obtained from all participants. Survey and focus group data were also fully anonymised prior to analysis. Given my positionality as an LIS student and the use of convenience-based recruitment, I remained aware that access, familiarity, and self-selection may have influenced participation, and I therefore approached interpretative analysis reflexively and with particular attention to confidentiality and participant welfare.

Quantitative Methodology

Sampling and Recruitment

The target population for this phase was university students studying on UK campuses. To improve representativeness, the target sample size was set at 385 participants, which was calculated to estimate the population proportion with 95% confidence and a margin of error of 0.05 (the industry standard). Various sampling techniques were employed in order to maximise reach – notably, convenience, as the survey was shared first with friends and colleagues who are students, and snowballing, as it was requested they circulate it in their own relevant networks. It was also promoted across a plethora of personal and professional social media channels and through the website SurveySwap, with the use of their paid function to garner a required additional two hundred responses. An optional incentive of entering into a raffle to win two free tickets to any Pints of Knowledge event of the winner's choice was provided.

Design

The survey instrument – the UK University Campus Political Participation Survey (Appendix 1) – was initially built from a survey designed and administered by Winchester (2025a), which probed at London students' engagement with the wider political system. This informed the use of questions to assess baseline levels of interest and engagement, and the factors used for barriers and motivators to engagement were also adapted to a university politics context.

An important addition was that of questions to measure internal and external political efficacy, which were directly adapted from the European Social Survey's Round 8 question design template. These were framed as questions and assessed on a scale of 1-5 – they were directly adapted to campus

context-specific statements assessed across Likert scales (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) (Appendix 2, Table 1).

A final question was included to assess students' openness to using a civic technology tool to participate in campus politics if it were adopted by their university. All questions were either demographic, multiple choice, or Likert scales. The survey was limited to only seventeen required questions, with ten of these being demographic. As such, the average response time was less than five minutes. A final, optional question allowed participants to elaborate on anything they felt the survey didn't give them ample opportunity to share.

Data Processing

Prior to analysis, all survey data was cleaned and recoded in Excel. Invalid responses and incomplete cases were excluded where necessary (for example, non-student responses were removed), age was converted to numeric format, and categorical variables were recoded into binary indicators where appropriate for ease of later regression modelling (notably whether respondents lived on/off campus and were home/international students). Engagement count and barrier count were derived by summing the number of multiple-choice survey items selected by each respondent, while internal and external political efficacy were operationalised as the average for each across both statements, following the conversion of response categories into numerical values (Strongly disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, and so on). Political interest and attitude towards trialling a civic technology tool were similarly converted into numerical measures. Descriptive statistics were then used to summarise the broad findings of the sample, before an OLS regression model¹ was used to more closely examine the factors associated with the engagement count.

Qualitative Methodology

Sampling and Recruitment

The target population for this phase was again university students studying on UK campuses. All participants were directly recruited from the previous phase – a final optional survey question asked participants to leave their email address if they were willing to take part in a follow-up focus group. Given the convenience of LIS students as a population, the decision was made to run three internal sessions with exclusively LIS students (Groups #I01-3) and three external sessions with exclusively non-LIS students from various universities (Groups #E01-3). All of the sessions were held on the LIS campus, bar one of the latter sessions which was held online to incorporate non-London based UK students. An optional incentive of two free tickets to any Pints of Knowledge event of each participant's choice was provided.

Design

The focus groups were designed to last no more than ninety minutes and structured in two forty-five minute stages – stage one focused on understanding students' feelings about their ability to participate in campus politics and stage two focused on how a civic technology intervention could positively

¹ Although engagement count is a non-negative integer measure, the OLS regression model was selected for its interpretive simplicity – alternative count models such as Poisson or negative binomial regression could be explored in future work to assess the robustness of these findings.

impact this. Participants were also asked to fill out the internal and external political efficacy Likert scales from the survey again, once before and once after the session in order to establish a baseline level of their political efficacy and consider what their future level of efficacy could look like if their campuses were established as micro-democracies through the use of a civic technology tool. The sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed using an inductive thematic approach, where particular attention was paid to identifying both convergent experiences and outlying cases in order to avoid overstating consensus.

Stage one used the political cut-outs collaging methodology developed and piloted by Winchester (2025b). Collaging was chosen strategically as a mode of inquiry to allow participants to creatively express emotional textures that are difficult to express verbally (Butler-Kisber, 2007). Participants were first asked to sum up how they felt about their ability to participate in campus politics in one word and to write a short reflection on this. They were then prompted to create an individual collage representing this. Finally, they were asked to work together to cut up and incorporate parts of all of their collages together into one collective collage showcasing the assortment and interaction of different feelings towards political participation on campus. Participants were each provided with a standard set of collaging materials, including white A3 sheets, coloured A4 paper, an assortment of newspapers and magazines, coloured pens, scissors, and gluesticks.

Stage two used a demonstration of State (<https://state.com/uk>), a civic technology tool designed to streamline and simplify democratic engagement, adapted specifically as a prototype to represent a university governance system. Participants were given a short walkthrough of the key features, then asked to discuss their thoughts and feedback, and consider how it may impact their feelings towards political participation if their campus were to adopt it. Participants were finally asked to sum up how they would feel about their ability to participate in campus politics in an imagined future with the use of State in one word and to write a short reflection on this.

Quantitative Findings

The survey yielded 386 valid responses, providing a substantial sample for analysis and allowing for cautious generalisation across UK university students. Of an estimated 260 higher education providers in the UK (Universities UK, 2026), the survey obtained at least one response from over 150 unique institutions. Respondents also represented the full span of higher education, from undergraduate to post-doctorate level, alongside more than one hundred distinct subject areas. The average age of respondents was twenty five, ranging all the way from eighteen to fifty seven. Taken together, this breadth suggests that the sample captures a wide range of student experiences and provides a useful basis for examining broad patterns of political participation on UK university campuses.

In terms of political interest, 50% of respondents indicated that they were at least somewhat interested in campus politics (Figure 1). However, the engagement data (Figure 2) suggests a pronounced gap between interest and participation. Although a majority of respondents expressed at least some interest in campus politics, far fewer reported engaging through multiple forms of participation, with the average number of methods of participation for each respondent being 1.4. This indicates that interest does not consistently translate into a broad repertoire of political activity. Instead, engagement appears to be concentrated in more limited and accessible forms, most notably voting, which was selected by 59% of respondents. Contrastingly, the next most common category was “Other” which was reported just over half as many times (30%). More conventional and arduous institutional forms of engagement – attending student union meetings (16%) and contacting university representatives (17%) – were even less frequently reported. This pattern may indicate that students are more inclined towards alternative forms of participation than towards using more established university channels, potentially reflecting limited confidence in their external political efficacy.



Figure 1 – Interest Levels

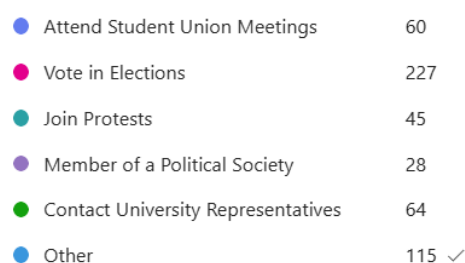


Figure 2 – Methods of Engagement

Building on this, the efficacy data suggests that respondents occupy an intermediate position between empowerment and powerlessness. Although both the internal and external efficacy scores sit above the midpoint of the scale (Figures 3 and 4), neither are especially high, implying that students may feel moderately capable in principle without feeling fully enabled in practice. This helps begin to explain why political interest does not consistently translate into action: a baseline sense of efficacy is present, but it may be insufficient to sustain more active participation. Notably, the mean external efficacy score was 3.5, compared with a mean internal efficacy score of 3.2. This finding was somewhat unexpected, as it suggests that respondents were slightly more likely to believe that institutions would respond positively to their participation than to feel confident in their own political competence. This may point to a more nuanced form of political uncertainty in which students recognise the possibility of institutional responsiveness, but remain unsure of their own ability to access or use formal campus channels effectively.

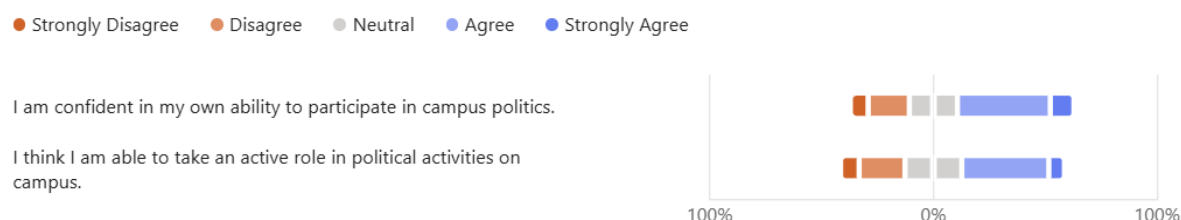


Figure 3 - Internal Efficacy



Figure 4 - External Efficacy

Time (54%) and interest (39%) were identified as the most significant barriers to participation (Figure 5). However, other barriers were also notable: 29% of respondents felt that their participation would not make a difference, while 24% reported that campus politics felt intimidating or exclusionary. These responses suggest that participation is constrained not only by practical limitations, but by a broader sense that it may be inaccessible or ineffectual. Only 5% of respondents indicated that nothing prevented their participation, implying that barriers to participation are widespread. In this sense, any assumption that universities are already functioning as effective micro-democracies is challenged. This interpretation is reinforced by the finding that the most significant factor that could increase students' involvement in campus politics was evidence that student action leads to real change, selected by more than half (51%) of respondents. This suggests that students are not necessarily disengaged because they are indifferent, but rather because they require clearer proof that their

participation is consequential. More broadly, it points to the centrality of visible impact and high external efficacy in shaping political motivation.

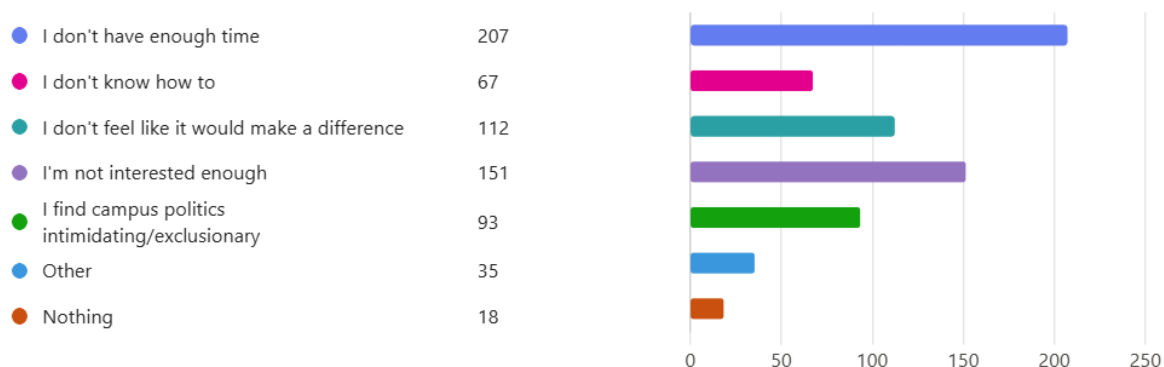


Figure 5 - Barriers to Participation

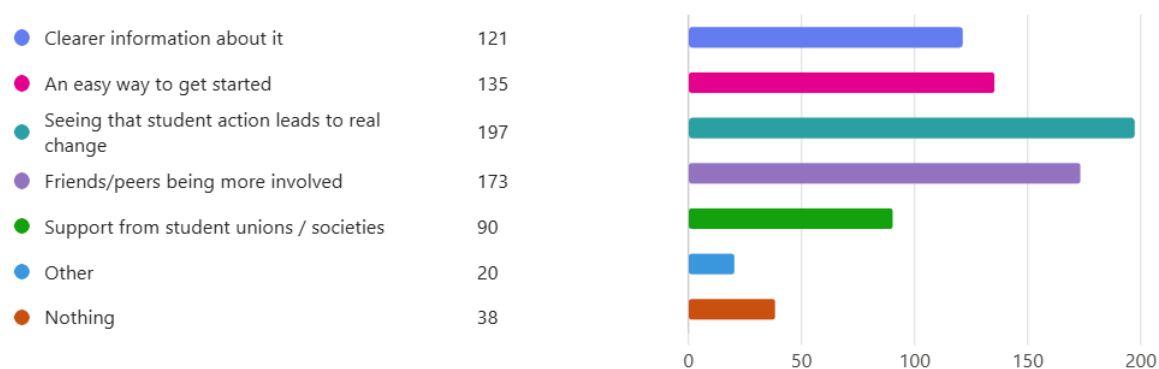


Figure 6 - Motivators for Participation

As such, it is unsurprising that an overwhelming majority (78%) of respondents reported to be at least somewhat likely to use a new civic technology tool to help facilitate their engagement if their university were to introduce it. Despite the limitations evident in students' current political participation, there remains an appetite for tools that could help ameliorate it.



Figure 7 - Likelihood to use a Civic Technology Tool

To develop this analysis further, an OLS regression model (Appendix 3, Figure 8) was then used to examine which factors were associated with the number of different ways students engaged in campus politics to better understand predictors for participation. The model was statistically significant overall, $F(7,377) = 14.21, p < .001$, and explained 20.9% of the variance in engagement count ($R^2 = .209$, adjusted $R^2 = .194$). Political interest was a strong positive predictor of engagement ($b = .206, p < .001$), and internal political efficacy also had a smaller but significant positive association with engagement ($b = .082, p = .025$). By contrast, external efficacy was not a significant predictor ($b = .054, p = .171$), nor were the number of barriers students faced, their age, whether they lived on or off campus, or whether they were home or international students. Taken together, these results suggest that students who are more interested in politics and who feel more capable of participating are more likely to engage through a wider range of methods, while the belief that institutions will respond does not appear to independently increase engagement in this model.

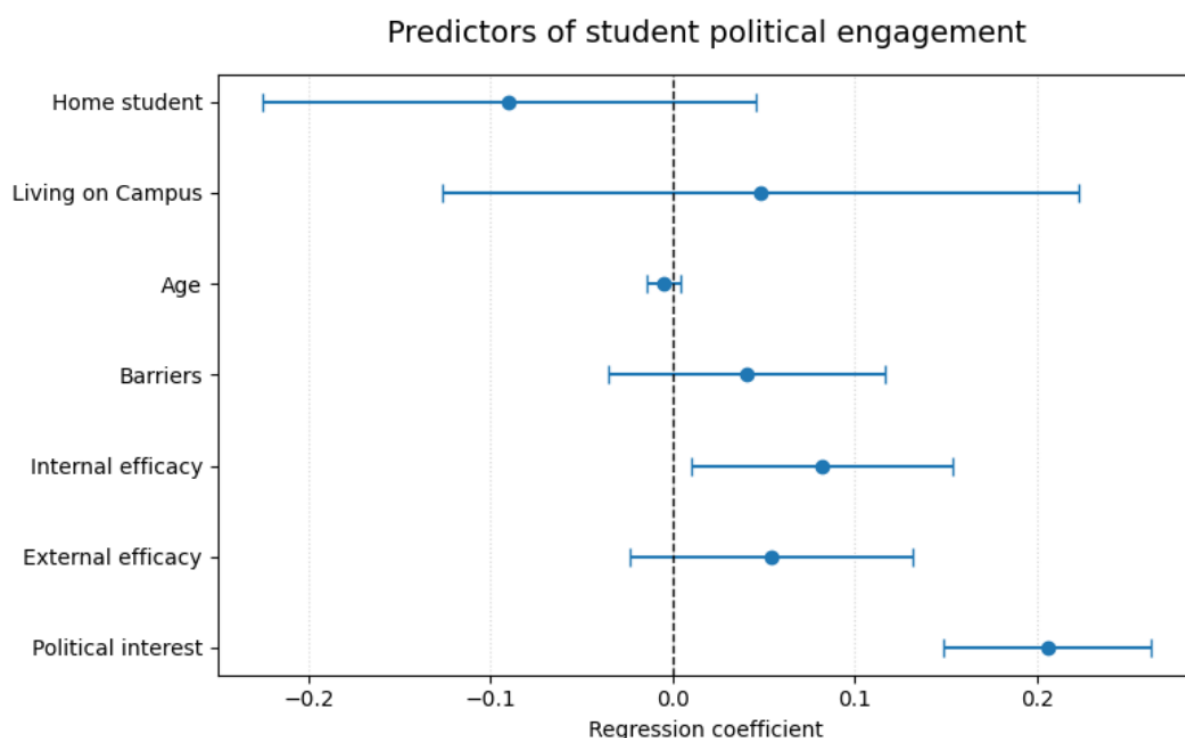


Figure 8 – OLS Regression Model

While these quantitative findings identify broad patterns of student political participation on campus, highlighting both interest and internal efficacy as key predictors for how much a student will engage, they cannot reveal how the latter is felt or experienced in practice. The subsequent qualitative phase was therefore designed to investigate how students' feel about their political participation in greater depth. Focus groups were thus used to explore how students understand the conditions under which they feel able or unable to participate politically on campus, and why participation may remain fragile despite political interest. The qualitative findings thus provide the interpretive depth needed to explain the quantitative participation patterns identified.

Qualitative Findings

Six focus groups were conducted, each comprising between four and eight participants, resulting in a total sample of thirty-two. The findings are organised around five key themes, developed from participants' initial one-word descriptions and reflections on their ability to participate in campus politics: limited influence, cautious expression, frustrated disengagement, disconnection, and conditional optimism (Table 2, Appendix 4). These were then deepened through a visual analysis of a selection of the collages (Appendix 5). The themes were retained as the most analytically robust categories because they recurred across internal and external groups, captured a broad spectrum of experiences of participation, and mapped closely onto the conceptual distinction between internal and external political efficacy. Two themes represented internal efficacy, while two further themes represented external efficacy, showing how students' willingness to participate politically was tied not only to confidence in themselves, but also to expectations about whether institutions would respond. As such, although external efficacy did not emerge as a statistically significant predictor of participation in the quantitative phase, the following findings suggest that whether engagement felt consequential remained central to how students judged its value.

1. Limited influence

Participants frequently described their political participation in terms of limited influence, characterising campus politics as “tokenistic”, “ineffective”, and “constrained”. These reflections suggest a perception that student participation is possible in theory but rarely has an impact in practice. As one participant noted, “If I don’t align with the university financially what I say is worthless”, while another observed that “Discussion is encouraged but has no effect in practice.” This theme was reinforced in the collages, particularly through the image of a raised red hand being overtaken by a wave (Figure 9) and the separation of a lone figure from larger, dominant forms by a barrier (Figure 10). Together, these collages reflected a sense that political participation is constrained by institutional barriers and external efficacy limited.

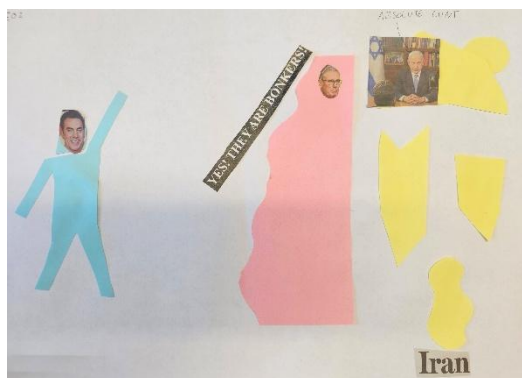


Figure 9

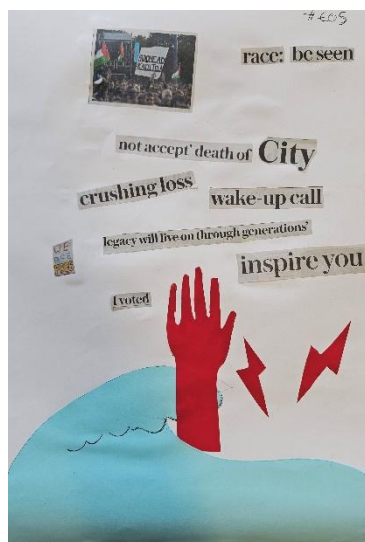


Figure 10

2. Cautious expression

A second theme concerned the caution with which participants approached political participation on campus. Words such as “afraid”, “wary”, “unsure”, and “cautious” pointed to self-protection rather than simple reluctance. Participants described political participation as socially risky, shaped by the

possibility of being misunderstood, judged, or “villainised”. This was reflected visually through imagery of fragmentation and threat, including confrontational language such as “judge me” and “like an animal” (Figure 11), and phrases such as “why are you so provocative?” and “ruined by capitalism” alongside jagged forms and dense layering (Figure 12). These collages suggest that political participation on campus is often experienced as something requiring careful self-censorship, indicating a limited sense of internal efficacy.



Figure 11

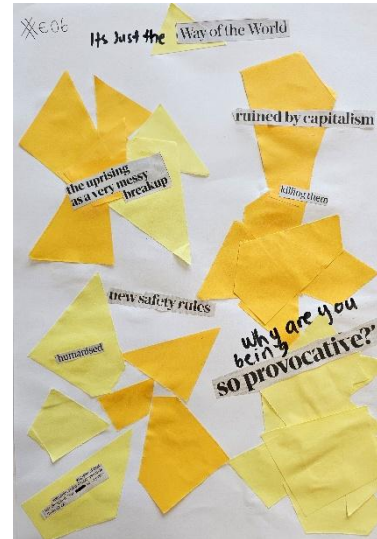


Figure 12

3. Frustrated disengagement

The third theme captured frustration with the slow, performative, or ineffectual character of campus politics. Participants' reflections suggested that participation demands disproportionate effort relative to the impact it could achieve. Statements such as “In order to have an impact you have to be insanely high agency” and “It’s just play-pretend – why should I bother?” indicate that disengagement often reflects disillusionment rather than indifference. Visually, in one collage a spiral form and words such as “supremacy” and “promised” suggested an overwhelming and unresponsive system (Figure 13). In another, phrases such as “UK will crash & burn” and “Don’t ignore”, combined with waves and jagged forms, conveyed a sense of urgency without resolution (Figure 14). Together, these collages suggest that disengagement is shaped by frustration at the perceived futility of participation, indicating a limited sense of external efficacy.



Figure 13

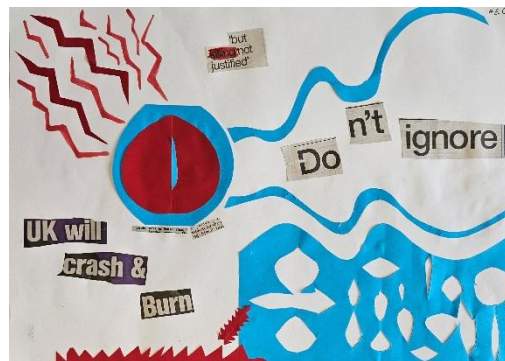


Figure 14

4. Disconnection

Participants also described a more detached relationship to campus politics, reflected in words such as “separate”, “disconnected”, and “unwilling”. These responses suggest that politics on campus are experienced as external to everyday student life rather than embedded within it. Reflections such as “Draining to discuss” and “I am reluctant to partake for the fear of being seen as abrasive” further indicate that political engagement feels emotionally costly and socially distancing. This theme appeared in the collages through fragmentation and spatial separation, particularly in scattered compositions with dispersed text and isolated symbols lacking a clear centre or coherent narrative (Figures 15 and 16). Together, these collages suggest that campus politics is often experienced as fragmented and removed from participants’ own sense of belonging and participation, indicating a lack of internal efficacy.



Figure 15



Figure 16

5. Conditional optimism

Although most accounts were shaped by negative feelings, there was also evidence of conditional optimism. Words such as “positive”, “involved”, “committed”, “productive”, and “agile” suggest that some participants still see meaningful participation as possible, albeit under particular conditions. This was reinforced by reflections such as “The opportunities are there” and “We have productive conversations”. It was further reflected in the collages through imagery of movement, openness, and connection, including an arrow moving from a dark and stormy scene towards a sunny one (Figure 17), as well as an open blue background, happy figures, and a more balanced visual composition (Figure 18). These collages suggest that participants can imagine meaningful engagement, but only where the surrounding environment is supportive and responsive.



Figure 17



Figure 18

Taken together, these themes show that students' political participation on campus is shaped by more than interest; it relies on both internal and external political efficacy. The following civic technology demonstration therefore provided a concrete way to explore what might strengthen students' sense of political efficacy and increase their participation. The notes taken from the discussions of the tool in each focus group were converted into a table of insights (Table 3, Appendix 6), including both opportunities and concerns.

Overall, the demonstration was received positively, and appeared to help address the participatory limitations previously identified. Across the groups, participants repeatedly valued features that would make information easier to access, concerns easier to see, and participation easier to enact. Discussions in group #E02, for example, emphasised the appeal of consolidating information, contacts, and policy details into one accessible platform, alongside anonymous voting and statement-writing that could make participation feel more visible and collective. Similarly, those in #E01 liked having everything in one place because it could reduce information overload and help students feel less isolated, while members of #E03 highlighted the value of a unified system that could connect otherwise siloed groups and make information easy to find. These responses suggest that the tool was attractive because it could strengthen internal efficacy by lowering the threshold for action and making participation feel simpler, and external efficacy by making institutional concerns more legible and easier to direct towards a response.

At the same time, the groups made it clear that accessibility alone would be insufficient. The strongest recurring concern was accountability: groups #I01, #I03, #E01, and #E03 all stressed that concerns would need real follow-through, otherwise the platform risked becoming another layer of bureaucracy or a space for discussion without change. This is important because it highlights that the positive reaction was conditional on whether visibility could actually be converted to action, speaking to the importance of external efficacy in facilitating participation. Participants also worried about moderation, misuse, and whether the tool would mainly be used by students who were already politically engaged. Groups #E02 and #E03 were especially sceptical about AI features, describing them as unreliable, context-stripping, and potentially agency-reducing if they replaced direct engagement rather than supporting it. Taken together, these findings reinforce the earlier themes: students were receptive to a tool that made participation feel easier and more collective, but only if it were to ensure external responsiveness and strengthen both internal and external political efficacy.

Integrated Findings

Discussion

Overall, the quantitative findings indicate that while political interest exists on campuses, it does not consistently translate into participation, suggesting that campuses only partially function as micro-democracies. The focus groups then clarify this pattern by revealing how key emotional themes that speak to internal and external political efficacy shape students' participation, and the civic technology demonstration builds on this by investigating how an intervention might be used to make participation feel more accessible and consequential.

This interpretation is strengthened by comparison with national data, sharpening the claim that participation on university campuses may reflect the wider democratic environment. In the Hansard Society's 2019 Audit of Political Engagement, 53% of the UK public described themselves as interested in politics (Hansard Society, 2019), while more recent evidence reported that 61% of adults say they are certain to vote, 67% report voting in elections, 54% sign petitions, and 27% contact MPs (Renwick et al, 2023). While the interest levels are consistent (50% versus 53%), this study shows a steeper drop-off between interest and action: only 59% of respondents reported voting in campus elections, and attending student union meetings or contacting university representatives were each selected by fewer than one in five students.

The efficacy findings help further specify how the gap between interest and participation works, and show that the campus micro-democracy is weakened when students lack confidence in their own political agency or in institutional responsiveness. Both the internal and external efficacy scores sat just above the midpoint, which suggests that students were not wholly disempowered but also not fully confident in their ability to act effectively. The regression model refines this picture by showing that internal efficacy had a significant association with the number of ways in which students participated. This pattern is further reinforced and developed by the focus group findings: themes of cautious expression and disconnection speak to limited internal efficacy, while themes of limited influence and frustrated disengagement speak to limited external efficacy. In sum, the survey identifies this relationship statistically, and the qualitative data shows how it is felt and experienced in practice.

The civic technology demonstration adds a final, vital layer to this study. The survey showed that 78% of respondents were at least somewhat likely to use a new civic technology tool if their university introduced one, and the focus groups explain why that appetite exists: participants valued the idea of consolidating information, making concerns visible, and lowering the threshold for action, all of which could strengthen their internal efficacy by making participation feel simpler. At the same time, they were clear that accessibility alone would not be enough, and the platform would need clear institutional accountability imbedded in order to strengthen their external efficacy. This is significant because it demonstrates that the intervention's promise lies in its capacity to support both internal and external efficacy at once.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study was time, resource and length constraints – given these, much of the gathered demographic data, the baseline levels of efficacy recorded before and after the focus groups, and the collective collages weren't fully analysed or incorporated. Secondly, the survey relied on convenience and snowball sampling, meaning the sample is unlikely to be fully representative of all UK university students. The focus groups were also relatively small and drawn from the same population as the survey, which strengthens continuity between phases but limits transferability across all campus contexts. Furthermore, half of these were conducted with solely students from LIS,

potentially overrepresenting the experiences of one campus, and five out of six only included students at London universities, limiting the generalisability of the findings. Thirdly, this study relies on self-reported behaviours and attitudes, so responses may be shaped by recall error or social desirability bias. In a similar vein, the research treats campus politics as a broad micro-democratic space, but in actuality university campuses can differ substantially in size, culture, governance structures, and student demographics, all of which may affect participation. Finally, the civic technology intervention was only demonstrated, not implemented, so its impact on actual political behaviour remains speculative rather than tested.

Further Study

Future research could use the data gathered in the research phase that has yet to be explored (see the first limitation above) to further investigate demographic variation in participation patterns, test the effect of the focus groups by examining how the baseline efficacy levels changed, compare participation across the internal and external groups, and use the collective collages to move beyond the experiences of individuals to examine collective political participation on campus. A longitudinal design could also be used to track students' evolving political participation across their university careers, such as in the ongoing Oxford study on whether higher education politicises today's students (Department of Education, 2025). This would help distinguish whether political efficacy strengthens gradually through university education and how participation changes given this. Future studies could also compare different types of institutions and student populations to test whether the patterns found here are specific to certain campus cultures, governance structures, or levels of student representation. It would also be interesting to pilot a civic technology tool such as State as imbedded into the university governance system on a few campuses to actively assess the impacts on political efficacy and participation.

Conclusion

Overall, this study shows that UK university students are not politically apathetic on campus, but their participation is constrained by their limited political efficacy. The quantitative findings established that political interest is present, but participation remains relatively narrow, while the focus groups showed that this gap is experienced through feelings of limited influence, caution, frustration, disconnection, and conditional optimism. Internal efficacy appears to be the most immediate predictor of broader participation both quantitatively and qualitatively, but external efficacy remains essential because students are unlikely to sustain engagement unless they believe institutions will respond positively. Civic technology offers one promising way to make participation feel more accessible and visible, but its success depends on it being embedded with accountable structures that can demonstrate real change. Ultimately, this study shows that UK university campuses have a high potential to function as micro-democracies if students' political efficacy is strengthened by making participation feel both more accessible and consequential.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Survey Instrument Questions

Section 1 – Consent:

1. I consent to take part in this research having read the above information. Required to answer. Single choice, options: *I agree, I disagree*

Section 2 – Demographic Information:

2. What is your full name? Required to answer. Single line text.

3. How old are you? Required to answer. Single line text.

4. What is your gender? Required to answer. Single choice, options: *Male, Female, Non-binary, Prefer not to say, Other*

5. Which UK University do you attend? Required to answer. Single line text.

6. Which year of study are you in? Required to answer. Single line text.

7. What subject are you studying? Required to answer. Single line text.

8. Where do you live? Required to answer. Single choice, options: *On campus, Off campus*

9. For the purposes of fees, are you classified as a home student or an international student? Required to answer. Single choice, options: *Home, International*

10. If you are a home student, what is the first part (3-4 characters) of your home postcode? Single line text.

Section 3 – Interest and Engagement Levels:

11. How interested are you in campus politics? This can range from student union elections, to opportunities for activism, to political societies. Required to answer. Single choice, options: *Extremely interested, Somewhat interested, Neutral, Somewhat not interested, Extremely not interested*

12. How do you engage with politics on campus? Required to answer. Multiple choice, options: *Attend Student Union Meetings, Vote in Elections, Join Protests, Member of a Political Society, Contact University Representatives, Other*

Section 4 – Internal and External Efficacy:

13. Internal Efficacy: Required to answer. Likert.

14. External Efficacy: Required to answer. Likert.

Section 5 – Barriers and Motivations:

15. What are the main barriers you face to getting involved in campus politics? Required to answer. Multiple choice, options: *I don't have enough time, I don't know how to, I don't feel like it would make a difference, I'm not interested enough, I find campus politics intimidating/exclusionary, Other, Nothing*

16. What could motivate you to be more involved in campus politics? Required to answer. Multiple choice, options: *Clearer information about it, An easy way to get started, Seeing that student action leads to real change, Friends/peers being more involved, Support from student unions / societies, Other, Nothing*

Section 6 – Intervention:

17. If your university were to provide access to a digital tool designed to increase ease of engagement with campus politics (where you would be able to easily raise your concerns, see other student's concerns and support these, and contact official representatives) how likely would you be to use this? Required to answer. Single choice, options: *Very likely, Somewhat likely, Neither likely nor unlikely, Somewhat unlikely, Very unlikely*

Section 7 – Conclusion:

18. Is there anything else you'd like to add regarding any of the themes discussed in this survey? Single line text.

19. Please leave your email address if you'd like to enter into the raffle to win 2x tickets to any Pints of Knowledge event of your choice! Single line text.

20. Finally, if you'd be willing to participate in a 90 minute focus group within the next 2 weeks about your political agency on campus with the opportunity to do some creative collaging and trial a new civic technology platform, please leave your email address here. Single line text.

Appendix 2: ESS Questions Conversion

Table 1 - ESS Questions Conversion

European Social Survey Questions:	UK University Campus Political Efficacy Survey Adapted Likert Statements:
Internal Efficacy: “And how confident are you in your own ability to participate in politics?”	Internal Efficacy: “I am confident in my own ability to participate in campus politics.”
Internal Efficacy: “How able do you think you are to take an active role in a group involved with political issues?”	Internal Efficacy: “I think I am able to take an active role in political activities on campus.”
External Efficacy: “And how much would you say that the political system in [country] allows people like you to have an influence on politics?”	External Efficacy: “Political action by students like me has the power to influence campus politics.”
External Efficacy: “How much would you say the political system in [country] allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?”	External Efficacy: “My university allows students like me to have a say in what political decisions are made.”

Appendix 3: OLS Regression Code and Results

```
import pandas as pd
import statsmodels.api as sm
import statsmodels.formula.api as smf
import matplotlib.pyplot as plt

df = pd.read_csv("CODING CLEAN UK University Campus Political Agency Survey.csv", encoding="latin1")

df['Age'] = pd.to_numeric(df['Age'], errors='coerce')

model_p = smf.ols('Engagement_Count ~ Interest_Num + EE_Av + IE_Av + Barrier_Count + Age + Location_Bin + Type_Bin', data=df).fit()
model_p.summary()
```

OLS Regression Results

Dep. Variable:	Engagement_Count	R-squared:	0.209			
Model:	OLS	Adj. R-squared:	0.194			
Method:	Least Squares	F-statistic:	14.21			
Date:	Tue, 02 Jun 2026	Prob (F-statistic):	2.14e-16			
Time:	11:19:57	Log-Likelihood:	-367.49			
No. Observations:	385	AIC:	751.0			
Df Residuals:	377	BIC:	782.6			
Df Model:	7					
Covariance Type:	nonrobust					
	coef	std err	t	P> t	[0.025	0.975]
Intercept	0.4110	0.227	1.807	0.072	-0.036	0.858
Interest_Num	0.2059	0.029	7.109	0.000	0.149	0.263
EE_Av	0.0542	0.040	1.371	0.171	-0.024	0.132

IE_Av	0.0823	0.037	2.252	0.025	0.010	0.154
Barrier_Count	0.0406	0.039	1.047	0.296	-0.036	0.117
Age	-0.0048	0.005	-1.055	0.292	-0.014	0.004
Location_Bin	0.0483	0.089	0.544	0.587	-0.126	0.223
Type_Bin	-0.0898	0.069	-1.300	0.195	-0.226	0.046
Omnibus:	106.968	Durbin-Watson:	2.007			
Prob(Omnibus):	0.000	Jarque-Bera (JB):	259.038			
Skew:	1.372	Prob(JB):	5.63e-57			
Kurtosis:	5.936	Cond. No.	191.			

Notes:

[1] Standard Errors assume that the covariance matrix of the errors is correctly specified.

```

coef = model_p.params.drop('Intercept')
ci = model_p.conf_int().loc[coef.index]

labels = {
    'Interest_Num': 'Political interest',
    'EE_Av': 'External efficacy',
    'IE_Av': 'Internal efficacy',
    'Barrier_Count': 'Barriers',
    'Age': 'Age',
    'Location_Bin': 'Living on Campus',
    'Type_Bin': 'Home student'
}

coef.index = [labels.get(i, i) for i in coef.index]
ci.index = coef.index

plt.figure(figsize=(8,5))
plt.errorbar(coef, coef.index, xerr=[coef - ci[0], ci[1] - coef], fmt='o', color='#1f77b4', ecolor='#1f77b4', capsize=4)
plt.axvline(0, color='black', linewidth=1, linestyle='--')
plt.title('Predictors of student political engagement', fontsize=14, pad=15)
plt.xlabel('Regression coefficient')
plt.ylabel('')
plt.grid(axis='x', linestyle=':', alpha=0.5)
plt.tight_layout()
plt.show()

```

AI Declaration: Perplexity AI was used for debugging and enhancing the above code which was initially compiled using Stack Overflow.

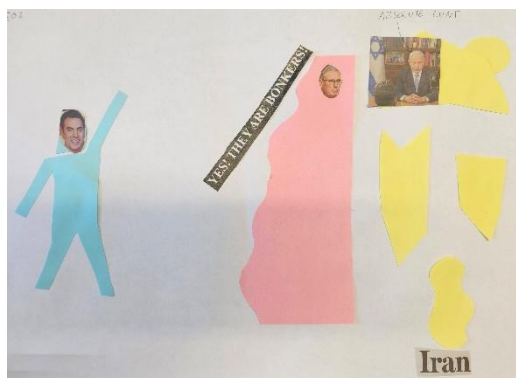
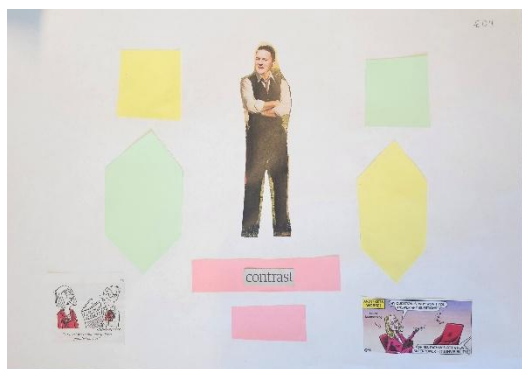
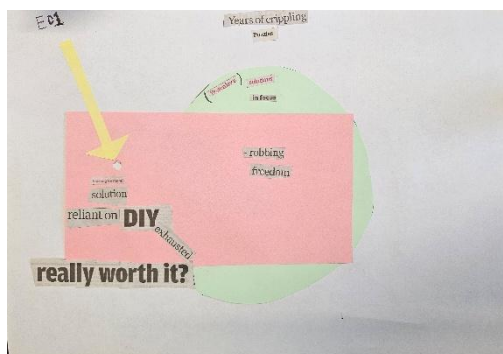
Appendix 4: Thematic Table

Table 2 - Themes

Theme	Words	Reflection Extracts
Limited influence	Pointless, limited, tokenistic, ineffective, negligible, insignificant, constrained, conditional	“If I don’t align with the university financially what I say is worthless”; “Very discouraged about the amount of change I can implement”; “The serious workload gets left behind”; “Discussion is encouraged but has no effect in practice”
Cautious expression	Afraid, wary, unsure, cautious	“I fear I will be misunderstood or villainised”; “Voicing political thoughts is like giving a slab of meat to a cage of tigers”
Frustrated disengagement	Frustrated, disincentivised, unsatisfactory, challenging	“In order to have an impact you have to be insanely high agency”; “It is just noise for me; it is not affecting real change”; “It’s just play-pretend – why should I bother?”
Disconnection	Separate, disconnected, unwilling	“Draining to discuss”; “I am reluctant to partake for the fear of being seen as abrasive”,
Conditional optimism	Positive, involved, committed, productive, agile	“The opportunities are there”; “We have productive conversations”

Appendix 5: Collage Outputs

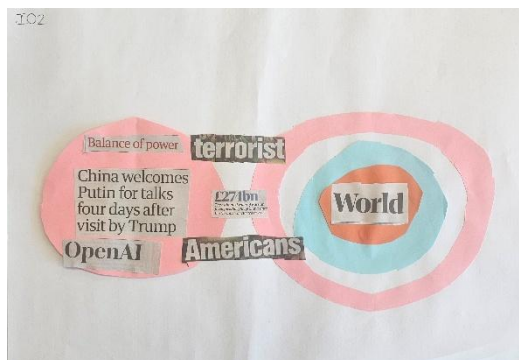
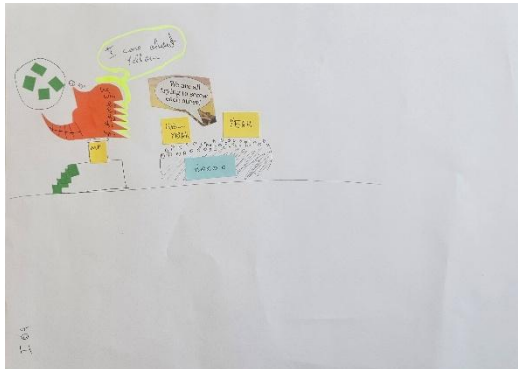
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#E03 Collective Collage:



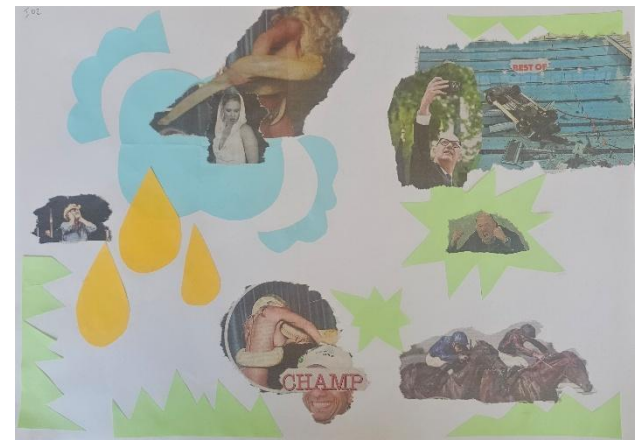
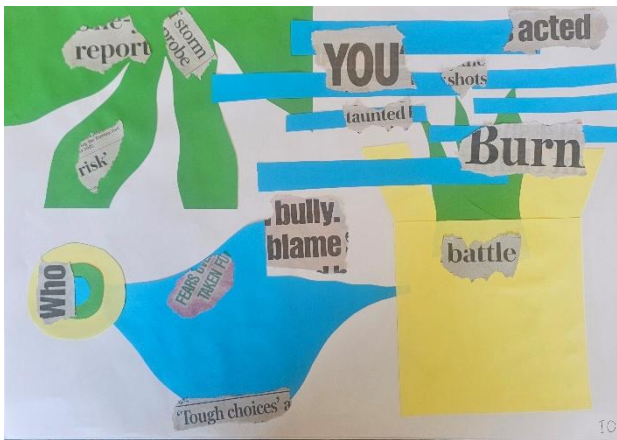
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#I03 Collective Collage:



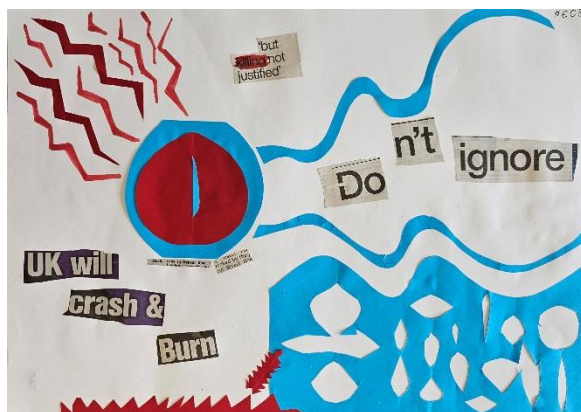
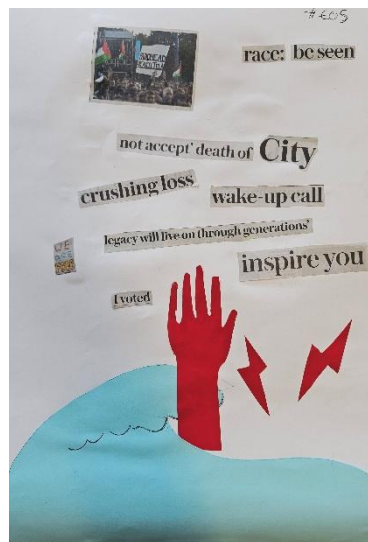
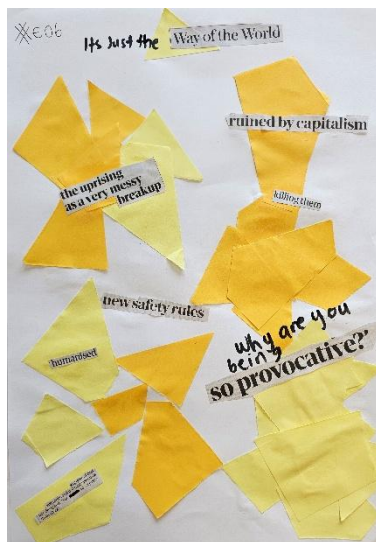
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#I02 Collective Collage:



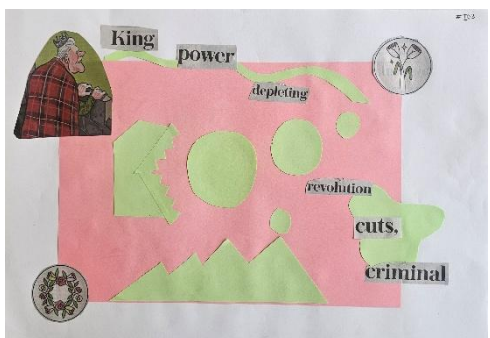
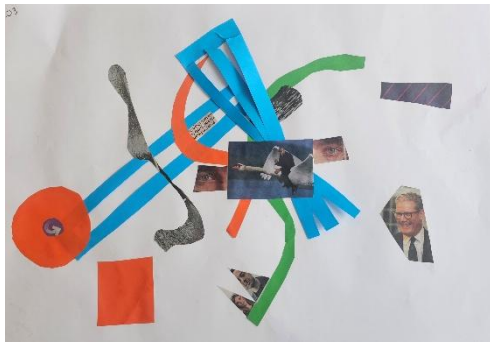
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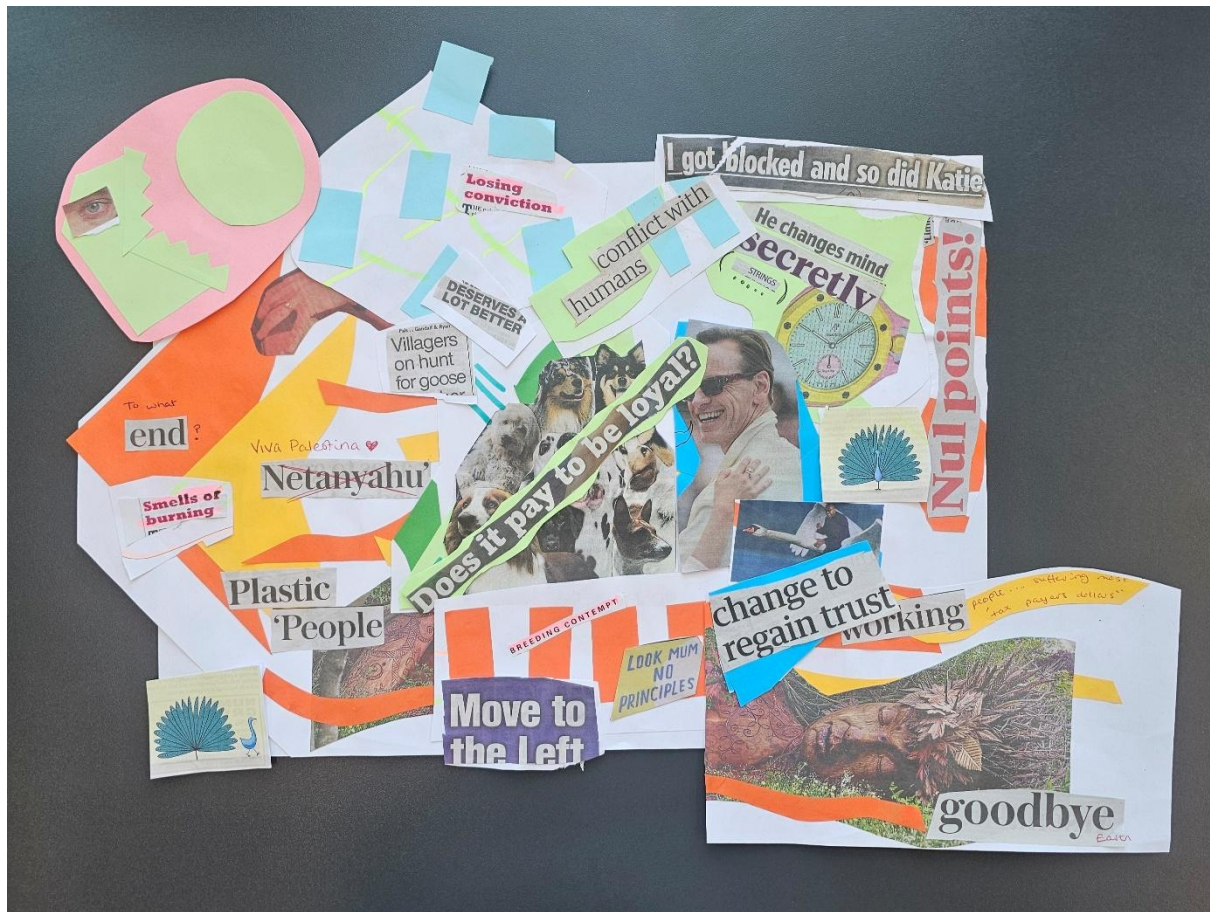
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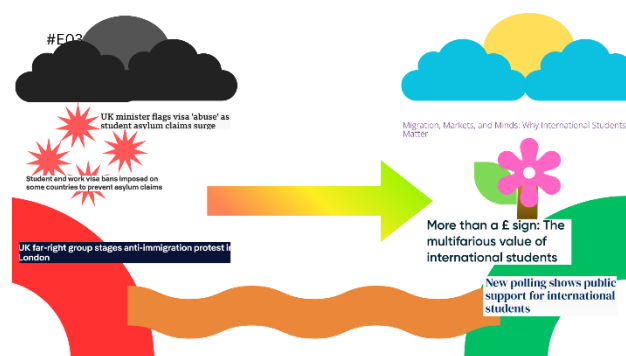
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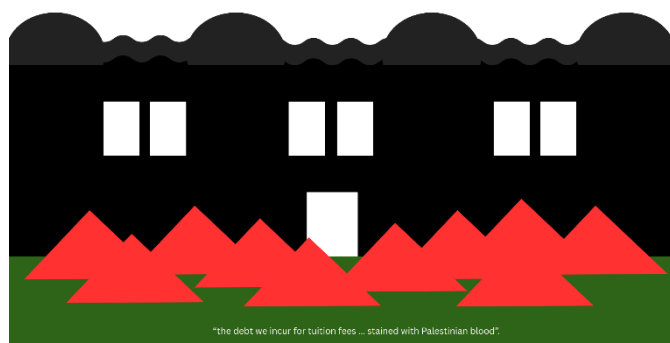
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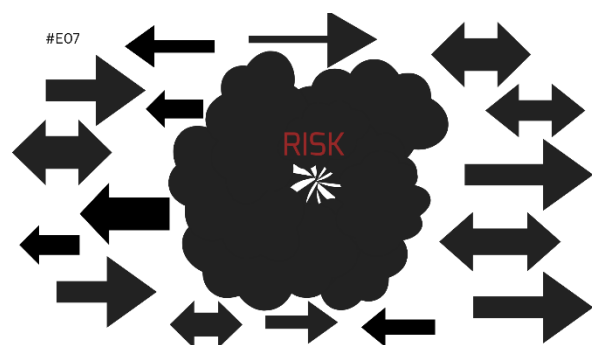
#E02 Individual Collages:



#E01



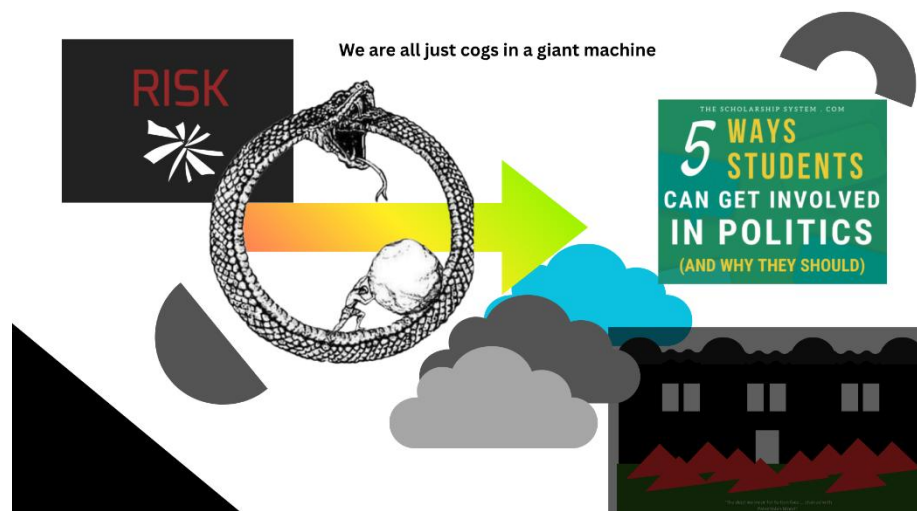
#E04



#E05



#E02 Collective Collage:



Appendix 6: Insights Table

Table 3 - Discussion Insights

Group	Opportunities	Concerns
#I01	Provides a clear method for giving student feedback as the current systems are disjointed; makes the uni governance system more receptive and accountable; collaborative motions and shared views would increase confidence in speaking up; highly accessible if it were an app as students use their phones all the time anyway; would improve accountability; would be useful at large universities to ensure all diverse views are heard	May be seen as arbitrary and lack any real follow through; would need regular updating and maintenance; needs clear rules and governance; may just be an extra layer of bureaucracy; needs checks and balances; needs to be paired with an in-person initiative to encourage more productive discourse; hesitancy with AI for writing
#I02	Makes speaking up simple; makes researching policies easy; encourages transparency; formalises and quantifies concerns so the uni can clearly see the scale of the problem; highly accessible; lowers the action threshold; creates a sense of community and collaboration	Adaptation and onboarding may be difficult; risk that only those who are already engaged will use it; needs some anonymity; hesitancy with AI for writing
#I03	Intuitive set-up; easy way to express concerns; creates a sense of collective action, unity and togetherness; promotes accessibility; streamlines communication	Which concerns are posted needs moderating; difficult to enforce accountability; must have clear rules; may create more bureaucracy
#E01	Having everything in one place helps with information overload; helps combat feelings of isolation and create more connection and collaboration; promotes ownership and accountability; could inspire other universities if adopted successfully by one; increases accessibility of information	Concerns might just be ignored; needs fail safes and commitments to ensure responses
#E02	Could consolidate relevant information, contacts, and policy details into a single accessible platform; enables anonymous voting and statement-writing, making participation feel more collective and visible; could help students compare across institutions and use other campuses as points of reference	AI was viewed as context-stripping and unreliable, as well as environmentally costly; it may reduce agency by substituting direct engagement with automated assistance; it may mainly attract students who are already politically engaged; concerns about misuse, lack of seriousness, and the need for moderation and restrictions on participation
#E03	Creates a unified system which is currently lacking; promotes connection across different societies and groups which are often siloed; improves institutional accountability; allows students to take charge; structured, simple, convenient, quick and accessible; easy to find information	Uni may dismiss concerns without resolutions; lots of info already available and organised through uni website; needs to personally resonate with and represent marginalised groups; concerns with AI for writing; too many features