

RAISE 2026 Elections

The candidates listed below have put themselves forward for election to the RAISE Committee.

All RAISE Conference 2026 delegates who have agreed for their details to be added to the Choice Voting Platform will receive a link to vote during the week of the conference (7th-11th September).

There will also be an opportunity for in-person conference delegates to register to vote whilst at the conference.

Information for each candidate has been grouped by position and in alphabetical order.

To maintain fairness and impartiality, the returning officers have filtered the candidates within their chosen category using alphabetical order (using the first letter of the first name of each candidate).

Candidate list:

Vice-Chair

- Ellie Mayo-Ward
- Gina Fox
- Tadhg Blommerde
- Zak Evans

Buddy Scheme Co-ordinator

- Ethan Sales
- James Cantwell
- Nelson Chong

Professional and Learning services staff committee member

- Melanie Wellsley
- Nichola Connolly
- Samuel Farag

Candidate Overview:

Vice-Chair

Ellie Mayo Ward

Outline your interest in student engagement and any relevant experience.

My interest in student engagement started when I was elected Vice President Education at my Students' Union over a decade ago. It sparked a passion that has shaped my career ever since.

It has always made sense to me that students should be at the heart of decisions about their education. They are the experts in their own experience, and the best decisions are made when their voices are genuinely listened to.

I've since built my career around student engagement, working in SUs, education providers, national bodies, and now at NUS Cymru, supporting learner engagement across higher education, further education and apprenticeships.

What I enjoy most is working at a national level to create meaningful opportunities for students to influence policy and decision-making, helping ensure learner voice leads to real change rather than becoming a passive exercise.

Why would you like to nominate yourself for the role?

I have been Vice Chair of RAISE for the past four years and would welcome the opportunity to continue in the role, I have ideas and ambition for RAISE's growth and what it can become.

I am passionate about advancing student engagement across the UK, recognising the individuality and context of each nation while creating opportunities for shared learning. I also value the international perspectives that RAISE brings and the opportunity to learn from colleagues around the world.

Through my role at NUS Cymru, I bring together national stakeholders to strengthen learner engagement across tertiary education including colleges and apprentices. I would like to support RAISE through its continued growth, exploring how we can broaden conversations beyond higher education and strengthen engagement across the wider tertiary sector, and across the nations.

As Vice Chair, I bring enthusiasm, collaboration and commitment to the student engagement community. I enjoy connecting people, encouraging new ideas, and

helping create a network where we can learn from one another and improve outcomes for students!

Outline your relevant experience in regard to the position/s you wish to be considered for.

I have worked in student engagement for over a decade, across roles in education providers, the Office for Students, and NUS Cymru. This has given me a broad understanding of learner voice from different perspectives, from supporting engagement within institutions, to shaping approaches at a regulatory and national level.

I have been Vice Chair of RAISE for four years, contributing to the growth and development of the network, supporting the committee and helping shape its future direction. During this time, I have supported the development of the Buddy Scheme into a sustainable programme embedded within the committee structure, introduced a sponsorship approach for the conference, and contributed to the wider strategic and operational work of the network.

In my current role at NUS Cymru, I work with students' unions, education providers and national stakeholders to strengthen learner engagement across higher education, further education and apprenticeships.

I bring extensive experience of designing and delivering engagement projects, consultations, campaigns and training, and a commitment to ensuring student voices are meaningful, valued, and able to influence decision-making.

Gina Fox

Outline your interest in student engagement and any relevant experience.

Student engagement has been at the heart of my work as an educator and academic leader. I am passionate about creating learning environments where students are genuine partners in shaping their educational experience, contributing not only feedback but also ideas, solutions and innovation. Throughout my career, I have championed initiatives that strengthen student voice, foster belonging, support inclusion, and reduce barriers to participation and success. My particular interest lies in ensuring that engagement opportunities are meaningful, equitable and accessible to all students, regardless of background, discipline or mode of study. I believe that effective student engagement is fundamental to improving student outcomes, enhancing the learning experience, and developing confident graduates who feel connected to their university community.

Why would you like to nominate yourself for the role?

I would like to serve on the RAISE Committee because of my strong commitment to advancing meaningful student engagement within and beyond my institution. I see this as an important forum for influencing sector-wide conversations, sharing effective practice, and supporting innovation in student partnership and engagement. Through my leadership roles, I have developed a particular interest in how institutions can create cultures where students feel heard, valued and empowered to shape their educational experience. I would welcome the opportunity to contribute my experience while learning from colleagues across the sector. The Committee's focus on collaboration, inclusion, scholarship and enhancement aligns closely with my own values, and I am

keen to help strengthen RAISE's impact, support its members, and contribute to its future development.

Outline your relevant experience in regard to the position/s you wish to be considered for.

I have extensive experience leading strategic student engagement and educational enhancement initiatives at institutional, College and School level. As Dean of Education and former Deputy Dean of Education, I provide leadership for student experience, curriculum transformation, assessment and feedback, employability, academic development and flexible learning across a large multidisciplinary College. My work places student partnership at its core, involving close collaboration with Students' Union representatives, programme representatives and student panels to co-create meaningful improvements informed by student feedback, learning analytics and sector evidence. I have led major University-wide initiatives including the HyFlex pilot, academic professional development framework and student success projects, and regularly contribute to national conversations on student engagement, belonging, inclusion and educational innovation through conference presentations, publications and professional networks.

Tadhg Blommerde

Outline your interest in student engagement and any relevant experience.

My commitment to student engagement is driven by Students-as-Partners (SaP) principles, moving beyond passive learning to treat students as active knowledge co-creators. This ethos is demonstrated through a proud track record of co-authoring peer-reviewed articles and book chapters with undergraduate and postgraduate students, exploring how universities can ethically embrace Generative AI. I consistently partner with diverse learners, including a substantial international student cohort, to co-design inclusive curricula, foster a deep sense of academic belonging, and demystify critical analysis. By co-presenting research at national education conferences and successfully nominating student partners for a SEDA Student Partnership Impact Award, I ensure the student voice remains central to pedagogical innovation, future-readiness, and institutional policy.

Why would you like to nominate yourself for the role?

Having successfully established and grown the AI in HE Special Interest Group, I am eager to transition my leadership to a strategic level, contributing directly to the network's long-term vision as Vice Chair. I will utilise my extensive national experience in disseminating innovative teaching practices to expand the network's reach, foster multi-institutional collaboration, and build a robust repository of shared pedagogical resources. Grounded in my practice as an active researcher and co-author alongside students, I am deeply committed to ensuring that the student voice remains a driving force in all strategic decisions, from national policy influence to planning the annual conference. My expertise in innovation strategy (my PhD topic) and navigating

technological shifts like Generative AI equips me to help RAISE lead sector-wide pedagogical innovation.

Outline your relevant experience in regard to the position/s you wish to be considered for.

My leadership within RAISE includes co-founding and expanding the Artificial Intelligence Special Interest Group to over seventy-two members. I was the first speaker at the first event in 2025. This direct experience aligns with the Vice Chair portfolio, particularly regarding marketing, external relations, and publication coordination. I possess a strong national profile for sharing good practice, including delivering keynotes, presenting at major Higher Education conferences, and managing an educational media channel with 400,000 views. As a Senior Fellow, I have a sustained record of mentoring colleagues across multiple UK universities on curriculum and assessment redesign. My collaborative institutional experience as a Programme Leader and Academic Board member equips me to manage external partnerships and financial sub-committee duties effectively.

Zak Evans

Outline your interest in student engagement and any relevant experience.

Student engagement has been the central thread of my career, spanning sport and volunteering, belonging, co-curricular learning, employability and student-staff partnership.

As Associate Director for Belonging & Engagement at King's College London, I lead institution-wide work designed to help students build confidence, connection, skills and agency.

I am particularly interested in how engagement can move beyond participation counts to become inclusive, developmental and meaningfully connected to students' identities, aspirations and wider lives.

My practice is informed by mixed-methods research into belonging, self-efficacy and enrichment, alongside sustained student voice and co-design.

I am committed to translating evidence into practical approaches that colleagues can adapt, evaluate and share across the sector.

Why would you like to nominate yourself for the role?

I would like to serve as Vice Chair because RAISE is uniquely positioned to connect rigorous research, effective practice and a generous professional community.

I would bring strategic leadership, energy and a strong commitment to making the network's work visible, accessible and useful. I am particularly excited by the

opportunity to strengthen RAISE's profile and communications, coordinate publications, support external partnerships and help ensure its activities form a coherent and compelling offer for members.

The role would also allow me to contribute beyond my own institution: supporting practitioners and researchers to exchange ideas, develop collaborations and influence the sector's understanding of student engagement. I would work reliably with the Chair and committee, while bringing constructive challenge, creativity and a clear focus on delivery.

Outline your relevant experience in regard to the position/s you wish to be considered for.

As Associate Director for Belonging & Engagement at King's College London, I lead a substantial institutional portfolio spanning student engagement, belonging, enrichment, employability, student voice and partnership.

I have established governance structures, shaped institutional strategy and led complex programmes involving senior leaders, academics, professional services, students and external partners.

I oversee budgets, evaluation, communications and delivery, ensuring activity is evidence-informed, inclusive and aligned with wider institutional priorities.

My research and sector work focus on belonging, self-efficacy, social impact and co-curricular engagement, and I regularly contribute to conferences, publications and professional networks.

I bring experience of chairing groups, influencing across organisational boundaries, building productive partnerships and turning ambitious ideas into visible, sustainable programmes with measurable impact.

Buddy Scheme Co-ordinator

Ethan Sales

Outline your interest in student engagement and any relevant experience.

As a Student Voice Manager, I am able to see the power of a student community working and acting together. As a former student who did not feel connected to my peers or student body, I now work to try and create the opportunities which I did not take.

Why would you like to nominate yourself for the role?

I would like to nominate myself for this role as I see student support as the catalyst for a healthier, brighter student experience and lifecycle. The merits found within support coming from alongside a peer, as opposed to delegated from above, are not yet fully realised. I would want to support the furthering of this project so that these elements are never lost when supporting others.

Outline your relevant experience in regard to the position/s you wish to be considered for.

I am the Student Voice Manager for the Union of Students, Derby, and within this role I oversee the Peer-Assisted-Learning Scheme alongside democracy, campaigning, and governance of the student body. Seeing and supporting the successful implementation of the PAL system across the organisation has been a rewarding and exciting experience. I know what is required to implement change within both paid and voluntary opportunities for students thanks to my role.

James Cantwell

Outline your interest in student engagement and any relevant experience.

I have a deep, avid passion for student engagement. From attending my first RAISE conference as an undergrad in 2014, I got the bug. Realising that I could play a role in steering my own learning and the learning of my peers, was a real turning point in my life. Since then, I have attended and presented at numerous student engagement conferences about student-staff partnerships, advocating for how to do student engagement better. My main view is that student perspectives are UNDENIABLE and the practice of equitable student engagement is how learning and institutions improve.

Why would you like to nominate yourself for the role?

I am the current RAISE Buddy Scheme Coordinator and would love your support to continue in this role. In the scheme and committee, I passionately advocate for us to push ourselves to be more inclusive and innovative. In the past three years, the Buddy Scheme has been a great way for people to make new friends, learn about student engagement and be a part of something meaningful. It has been a joy to coordinate that and I would love the opportunity to continue to improve how the scheme operates.

Each year, shortly after RAISE conference, it gets going! In the scheme, I match likeminded buddies based on their shared interests and aspirations. Some buddies have went on to do student engagement projects and write articles, some just come for a chat at the monthly 'All-In meetings' where we share how we all are. It has been a real joy to be the Buddy Scheme coordinator and I hope I can continue in the role.

Outline your relevant experience in regard to the position/s you wish to be considered for.

If elected, I will use my experience from RAISE and my role at the University of Cambridge to improve the scheme for all. I have evaluated the scheme with participants over the past couple of years and each year have evolved the scheme based on members feedback and ideas.

As the coordinator, it's very much our thing and not my thing. Last year, following feedback, I introduced the 'All In' sessions for all people to join a lunch meeting once a month and have a chance to connect with others, in an informal, casual way. This year, your feedback has led to there being a second round of buddy pairing for people to have another buddy during the year, if they would like to! Your ideas help improve the scheme and that helps make it right for everyone, and I hope you elect me to do that again.

Nelson Chong

Outline your interest in student engagement and any relevant experience.

My interest in student engagement is centred on creating inclusive, active collaborative, and authentic learning experiences that enables all students to thrive and succeed. I am passionate about inquiry-based learning, student co-creation, simulation and gamification and relational pedagogy to foster peer-peer learning, participation and sense of belonging and becoming. I have embedded scenario-based immersive simulations (designed and written a top Labster simulation entitled “Viral gene therapy”; designed clinical scenarios for my Apollo patient simulator mannequin), work-based learning and horizontal teaching practices with external employers, to transform students from passive recipients of knowledge into active contributors to their learning and promote student agency. Key outcomes included enhanced student experience and closing the disadvantaged and ethnicity attainment gap.

Why would you like to nominate yourself for the role?

I emigrated to England as a child and grew up in a low IMD and POLAR4 area in North London. My English was of low standard, and I was overlooked in class activities. I was labelled as “disengaged” but in reality, I just needed support. I do not want this to happen to anyone else. I have a strong longstanding experience and commitment in student engagement, inclusion, and peer-support, underpinned by a sustained record of leadership and impact. I would want to put this into good use to support learners and peers.

Outline your relevant experience in regard to the position/s you wish to be considered for.

Inaugural appointed EDI Champion (Sept 2023-) of the school of science and technology (five departments) with over 1000 colleagues and 8000 students.

I established and chaired a buzzy EDI working group (17-members), creating a sustainable structure for collaboration, engagement, and institutional change.

I designed and maintained an internal EDI webpage to build community and belonging, signpost colleagues to relevant information, and provide a platform to connect.

I created the EDI Buddies network (Sept 2023 -) -recruited five Buddies (academic and non-academics), some of which are coaches and mentors (EMCC), to provide support for whoever needs it. I coordinate regular coaching sessions on campus and would be amazing to connect the NTU EDI Buddy system with the RAISE Buddies scheme and other Education/scholarship communities.

I organised vibrant in-person EDI-enrichment celebratory events/symposiums where participants and external stakeholders can interact in a safe environment (e.g. Pride at Clifton, 2025, IUPAC Global Women's Breakfast event, 2025; International Women's Day 2026).

I founded the monthly "Neurodiversity café", a safe space to share their challenges, foster community, enhance energy and mattering. All departments in the school were recently awarded by the Athena Swan Gender Charter.

Professional and Learning services staff committee member

Melanie Wellsley

Outline your interest in student engagement and any relevant experience.

My interest in student engagement was born from my own university experience, where I encountered challenges relating to belonging, direction, and representation. These experiences inspired a commitment to supporting students that has continued throughout my career, from working as a Student Officer at Derby Students' Union and a Progression Coach at Derby College, to my current role as an Educational Developer at Nottingham Trent University. I design and deliver professional development on curriculum decolonisation, student transition, and engagement, drawing on insights from colleagues across NTU and the wider sector. My practice is informed by a decolonial lens, with a particular focus on power dynamics, intersectionality, and amplifying the voices of marginalised students within engagement and partnership initiatives.

Why would you like to nominate yourself for the role?

I am keen to join the RAISE Committee because I value the role that communities of practice play in helping us reflect, learn, and improve how we support students. Throughout my career, I have benefited from spaces that bring together people with different perspectives, experiences, and expertise, and I am passionate about creating those opportunities for others. As a professional services colleague, I particularly enjoy facilitating conversations, sharing practice, and encouraging critical reflection on student engagement and partnership. I am also interested in championing the perspectives of Professional and Learning Services staff, whose contributions to

student engagement and success are significant but are sometimes overlooked in sector conversations. I would welcome the opportunity to help colleagues connect, learn from one another, and influence the future of student engagement across the sector.

Outline your relevant experience in regard to the position/s you wish to be considered for.

As an Educational Developer at Nottingham Trent University for the past five years, I have developed a strong understanding of the opportunities and challenges faced by Professional and Learning Services colleagues in supporting student belonging, transition, success, and engagement. My role has enabled me to work across academic schools and professional service teams, both at NTU and beyond, collaborating with colleagues across the sector who play a vital role in advancing decolonisation, inclusivity, and partnership initiatives. This experience has given me insight into the diverse ways Professional and Learning Services staff contribute to the student experience and the institutional factors that enable meaningful engagement. Alongside this, governance experience as a Student Governor, Student Trustee, and Trustee has strengthened my understanding of representation, organisational development, and network leadership.

Nichola Connolly

Outline your interest in student engagement and any relevant experience.

To engage more diverse students into the work we do, including more students studying at a distance learning institution such as The Open University.

Student engagement is important to the student journey, and often an area that is overlooked by most universities.

Why would you like to nominate yourself for the role?

I would like to nominate myself for the role of, Professional and Learning Services Staff Committee Member as having been involved in championing student engagement for my own institution and students union, I would now like to put myself forward to continue this work and share my knowledge and experience on a bigger platform.

Outline your relevant experience in regard to the position/s you wish to be considered for.

Relevant experience in regard to the role of, Professional and Learning Staff Committee Member is, that for the last 5 years, I have been an elected representative on the Student Leadership Team at The Open University Students Association. In my time involved in this work over 3 terms, firstly, as Faculty Representative for Wellbeing Education and Language Studies. Secondly, as Vice President Student Representation. My experience has been vast whereby my roles, have been influential in shaping student engagement, student representation and student voice. I have led on many projects including advising and assisting student representatives and volunteers, to be able to execute

their responsibilities, on various committees and volunteer roles. I have been involved in facilitating, and leading a lot of events and initiatives including conferences.

Samuel Farag

Outline your interest in student engagement and any relevant experience.

By regularly engaging with students, it enables genuine and authentic student engagement. Student engagement can be seen through different lenses i.e. authentic student feedback.

By collecting honest student feedback, it can allow professional services to further their impacts to ensuring that the services offered are relevant to student demand/desires.

This can further student engagement as it enables professional services to maintain their relevancy with differing cohorts of students.

By maintaining relevancy to different cohorts whilst ensuring positive and regular student engagement, this can allow for improved overall student experience.

Alongside this, as we regularly face authentic student engagement, it can allow professional services to gain further insights into rather complex circumstances affecting students such as the awarding gap.

Why would you like to nominate yourself for the role?

As someone who is a placement student (working in a professional service), I have gained insights into what both students and staff experience in relation to challenges around student engagement.

By working in this setting, as well as working in a capacity to improve the student experience and reduce the awarding gap, it has allowed me to work constructively with both students and staff to ensure that professional services impact students in a positive way.

By being both a student and working with other students in my placement role, it has enabled me to offer a variety of student perspective, ensuring that initiatives and projects that are aimed to assist students are delivered to the best of their abilities.

Outline your relevant experience in regard to the position/s you wish to be considered for.

As a current professional service worker, I have worked frequently with a variety of professional service teams and students to understand and constructively progress towards improving student engagement and the student experience.

Alongside this, I have played key roles in various projects that have aimed to assist and further the impact of professional services in relation to student engagement around issues like the Male Awarding Gap, Academic English in relation to offering English Social Chat sessions and graduate outcomes around Public Speaking workshops.

It is through these experiences, as well as roles I have adopted as either a student or not via voluntary affairs, that I have been able to work with different stakeholders to enhance their impact.