Student Engagement in Learning and Teaching Quality Management

A Study of UK Practices, commissioned by the Quality Assurance Agency

Project Report

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Foreword

QAA has been working at the forefront of engaging students in quality assurance and enhancement now for a number of years. We firmly believe that by doing so we can play a positive role in ensuring that students get the best possible educational experience. We do this by working in collaboration with students wherever we can, from the work of our Student Advisory Board influencing directly the work of the Agency, through the involvement of student reviewers in reviewing providers' quality and standards, to the issuing of national expectations agreed by the sector through the UK Quality Code.

Much has happened in this area in recent years, with more attention and more focus put by providers and sector bodies on this topic than perhaps at any other time. It was with that in mind that we commissioned the team at the University of Bath to examine the state of current practice in this area, and help develop a strong evidence base and good practice guidance for student unions and providers as they develop their own approaches to this agenda.

We are extremely grateful to Gwen Van Der Velden and her team for the work they have undertaken in these reports which we believe shed new and important light on this area and look forward to seeing them stimulate debate and discussion.

Anthony McClaran
Chief Executive
Quality Assurance Agency

Introduction

1. This report has been prepared for the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) by a project team based at the University of Bath. The research this report is based on aimed to:
    -   Explore current practice of student engagement in learning and teaching quality management, within the context of a newly published UK Code of Practice Chapter B5 on Student Engagement (QAA, 2012c).
    -   Provide insights to inform future practice developments for institutions, students' unions and other stakeholders.
    -   Inform future policy development in relation to student engagement in learning and teaching quality management.

2. This report is informed by research findings from surveys and interviews, the details of which can be found in the accompanying *'Research Findings'* report. Examples of innovative, original and inspired student engagement practice have been collated and presented in an associated guide entitled *'Student Engagement in Quality Management Practices: a good practice guide for institutions and students' unions'*.

3. The project team wishes to thank the many colleagues in institutions and students' unions, who were kind enough to complete our survey and above all, those who were willing to be interviewed. Their support and input has been crucial to the team's research. Thanks also go to the QAA for commissioning this research, with particular appreciation extended to Chris Taylor and Sarah Halpin from the QAA's Student Engagement team for their practical support and encouragement. Finally, the team wishes to express their gratitude to Nadine Grimmett and Sarah Turpin for their administrative and editing work.

Context

4.   This project was undertaken within a context of prior research into institutional practices in relation to student engagement with quality management. Within the specific context of quality assurance, a new Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework was introduced in 2001, which recognised the importance of student involvement in institutional quality and governance. This led in 2003 to the establishment of the Student Participation in Quality Scotland unit, known as SPARQS, funded by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) and hosted by the National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland. This unit's remit was to enhance student involvement in the quality assurance and enhancement of the student learning experience. A research report on student engagement in Scotland shortly followed (Cockburn, 2005).

5.   Scotland's early and formal recognition of the importance of student engagement in a quality context also saw related developments taking place in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Initially in England a strong focus was placed on gathering student opinion through surveys, as evidenced in research commissioned at the time (HEFCE, 2003). This research was instrumental in the introduction of the National Students Survey (NSS) in 2005. Since then the sector's interest in student engagement through representation and other means has grown (QAA, 2005. Little et al, 2009). Wales followed suit with Higher Education Funding Council Wales (HEFCW) commissioning their own research (York Consultancy, 2006) into student engagement. More recently, the QAA has provided regular overviews of institutional student engagement practices in Northern Ireland and England, drawn from their own Institutional Review findings (QAA, 2009. QAA 2012b). These findings have shown that institutions adopt a wide range of approaches to engage students in quality management and have reported many benefits.

6.   In 2012, the QAA published for the first time a separate statement (chapter B5) within its policy (UK Quality Code) on student engagement (QAA 2012c). Within the context of quality management, research into institutional student engagement practices can now be undertaken with a common set of reference points in mind. Whilst the introduction of this statement (chapter) is still very recent, it has enabled the development of a baseline of sector-wide institutional practices. These practices can inform both future policy development and provide a point of comparison for future research.

7.   Although this research project is set within the quality management context, there are developments from outside the quality sphere which have further influenced the way in which institutions engage with their students and students' unions. The Browne Review (2010) and consequent government White Paper (BIS, 2011) led to changes in fee structures reviving discussion regarding student rights and entitlements. This was illustrated by the National Union of Students' (NUS) publication of their partnership manifesto which argued for a move from student engagement to full partnership for students in institutional governance (NUS, 2012).

8.   Influenced by these national developments, individual institutions have developed new forms of engagement with students and forged relationships with their students' unions (or similar bodies) which also influence student engagement in quality management. In this research, the project team has tried to be sensitive to a wider set of influences, with specific exploration of the nature of the relationship between an institution and its students. Inevitably, exploration of this relationship extended beyond that of strictly quality management considerations.

Research focus and methodology

Research focus

9.   In line with part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality, of the QAA's statement on student engagement, , the main focus of this research considers the domain of student engagement within the following definition: *'the participation of students in quality enhancement and quality assurance processes, resulting in the improvement of their educational experience'* (ibid.: 2), which *'includes but is not restricted to representation of the student view through formal representation mechanisms'* (ibid.: 2). The research explored some aspects of student engagement which whilst unrelated to the Quality Code were also considered to be of potential interest to the sector. Detailed findings can be found in a separate report.

10.   Chapter B5 provided a set of 'indicators of sound practice', which have been used as a guide for this research. Whilst researching all aspects of these indicators might have been attractive, due to the limited size and timescale of this project, the focus has been on specific aspects of each indicator as detailed below. These aspects were selected because they related to new developments in the sector such as the introduction of student charters, for example, were known challenges to institutions (representation and engaging with all groups of students) or represented a topic of current debate (the role of students as partners/consumers/stakeholders/experts etc.).

11.   The first indicator in Chapter B5 reads *'Higher education providers, in partnership with their student body, define and promote the range of opportunities for any student to engage in educational enhancement and quality assurance'*. The research explored specifically the role that students and students' unions are perceived to have within their institutions. As Student Charters were intended to clarify and define the relationship between students, staff and their institutions, institutions were also invited to express their views and experiences of recent debate and development of these.

12.   The second indicator of sound practice in student engagement *reads 'Higher education providers create and maintain an environment within which students and staff engage in discussions that aim to bring about demonstrable enhancement of the educational experience'*. In relation to this indicator, the project concentrated on the

means and mechanisms provided by institutions for their students to engage in quality management, their perceived effectiveness and the extent and nature of change to the student (learning) experience that resulted from student engagement.

13.   The third indicator states that *'Arrangements exist for the effective representation of the collective student voice at all organisational levels, and these arrangements provide opportunities for all students to be heard'*. For this indicator, the research focused specifically on the relationship between students' unions and their institutions, the challenges faced by institutions to ensure effective representation including the engagement of the more hard-to-reach student groups using traditional forms of student representation.

14.   The fourth indicator states that *'Higher education providers ensure that student representatives and staff have access to training and on-going support to equip them to fulfil their roles in educational enhancement and quality assurance effectively'*. Against this indicator the training, support and development opportunities for students were explored together with how staff are developed and supported to ensure student engagement activity is both effective and appropriate.

15.   The fifth indicator of B5 suggests that *'Students and staff engage in evidence-based discussions based on the mutual sharing of information'*. The sixth indicator of sound student engagement practice states that *'Staff and students disseminate and jointly recognise the enhancement made to the student educational experience, and the efforts of students in achieving these successes'*. Both these indictors introduced relatively new angles on student engagement activity for which very little previous research exists. In light of this, the research started by mapping the information shared and how enhancements are communicated, moving on to then exploring how student contributions are recognised in such communications.

16.   Finally, the seventh indicator of good practice reads that *'The effectiveness of student engagement is monitored and reviewed at least annually, using pre-defined key performance indicators, and policies and processes are enhanced where required'*. The research considered the performance indicators used by institutions in relation to student engagement in quality management and how these have been used to enable future enhancement and development of student engagement.

Research methodology

17.   The research was undertaken using desk based research and online surveys of UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), including large, small, specialist and private institutions, and their students' unions. These methods were further supported by telephone interviews of a selected group of institutional staff with oversight of quality management in their institution. The main part of this empirical study was undertaken during April, May and July 2013.

18.   The online survey was sent to institutional staff responsible for quality management in 260 institutions and representation officers and sabbatical officers in 199 students' unions. Seventy-five institutions and 26 students' unions responded and completed surveys. The survey was constructed around the indicators of sound practice identified in Chapter B5, as listed above.

19.   Telephone interviews were carried out with institutional staff responsible for quality assurance provision in their institutions and, in two cases, with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor responsible for learning and teaching. The main aim of these interviews was to explore in more detail some of the answers respondents provided in the survey and to record examples of good practice. These in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with representatives of 14 institutions, each of whom had indicated availability for interview in their survey return. Of the interviewed institutions, seven were pre-1992 institutions, five were post-1992 and two were specialist institutions. Of these, one was a mixed higher education and further education institution, two were private, five had substantial distance learning or provision based fully abroad (Transnational Education), two were Welsh and 12 were English. Regrettably no Scottish or Northern Irish institutions were available for interview. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and then analysed against the indicators of sound practice and the findings of the surveys.

20.   A full report of research findings including an extensive literature review was produced and has been published separately (Botas et al). The open comments from the survey and transcribed interviews were further scrutinised to collate an overview of, innovative, original or inspired practice. These examples of good practice have been reported separately in a guide for institutions and student bodies entitled: *Student Engagement in Quality Management Practices: a good practice guide for institutions and students' unions* (van der Velden et al, 2013)

Project findings

Higher Education providers, in partnership with their students body, define and promote the range of opportunities for any student to engage in educational enhancement and quality assurance (Indicator 1)

Perceptions of students' roles in their institutions

21.   Whilst the overarching expectation of Chapter B5 relates to HEIs and students collectively or individually) '*as partners'*, the perception of the students' role held most strongly by both institutions and students' unions, is that of stakeholders. According to the survey, institutional respondents' second most common perception of students' roles in institutions was as an equal partner, followed by that of customer/consumer. Students' Unions prioritise the final two in the opposite order. Alternative roles described by institutions were 'expert', 'fellow practitioner/ participant', 'young professional' and 'vital contributor'.

22. In interview some respondents contrasted their preference for students as stakeholders to their perception of the view often expressed by the sector that suggests that students are partners and a government that is seen to promote students as consumers (Naidoo et al, 2011). As the following quotes illustrate, some institutions view the stakeholder notion as an intermediate position between partners and consumers: *'Well, they are definitely stakeholders. They are consumers and we're moving towards equal partners.'* and *'it is stakeholder, but we're moving towards partnership, but there is still definitely an element of consumerism'*, and also *'I think somewhere in that territory between equal partner and stakeholder.'* In interviews it became increasingly clear that the student as stakeholder concept presents institutions with a realistic compromise between consumerist interests and partnership values. This finding was considered to be of particular interest as not previously noted in the literature reviewed.

23. Just over a third of interviewees felt it had to be recognised that students were consumers as well as stakeholders or partners: *'there is a consumer element to that and we mustn't ever neglect that'* and *'I know they are encouraged by the government to see themselves as customers and I guess they are ultimately.'* Or *'I guess they seem much more as customer consumer in this type of* [private] *organisation.'* And also: *'I think colleagues are rapidly beginning to recognise that we are moving into a fundamentally changed university environment where there will be a fundamentally different relationship with students. And even though we don't like to call them 'customers' because that implies some sort of […] customer service provider relationship, and I think we recognise that we need to ensure that our customers get a very high quality product and if they feel that something should change, their voice should not only be heard, but also taken very seriously indeed'*.

24. About a third of interviewees firmly rejected the idea of viewing students as consumers: *'Well, partly it's stakeholder and I think that's just because of the culture of the institution that we're trying to have –that we're all part of the community and that they're with us. Definitely not –on the academic side- definitely not consumer. We've got a sort-of institutional ethos that treating a students as a consumer is actually disrespectful'* and *'we've had discussions with the tripling of the tuition fees, about you know, are they a customer, are they consumer, and we're quite clear they are not.'*

25. A third of interviewees reported that their institution viewed students as partners, albeit it mostly alongside perceptions of other roles. One respondent described clearly how the partnership role played out in relation to their institution's quality management: *'It can be a collaborative learning experience and because of that it's important that we work with them in partnership to achieve whatever change it is that we feel is important at institutional level. Sometimes changes and initiatives are sponsored and initiated by the institution itself, either from the ground up or top down, sometimes of course they're sponsored and initiated by the students through the Students' Union and I think in both of those ways, very positive changes have come about.'*

26.   Some interviewees were unable to relate at all to a single way of typifying the students' role in their institutions: *'It differs by level of study […] they are members of the university community. I think PGR level they would be recognised readily as members of the academic community.'* Or *'I went to a university where we were called from day one members of the University and I'm still regarded as a member of the university, a senior member of that university. I like the model that we're all in it together, it doesn't mean we all have the same expertise, but it does mean that we're part of an organic community.'*

27.   This finding differs from earlier research by Little et al (2009: p4.) which concluded that *'Institutions view student engagement as central to enhancing the student experience, but more emphasis seems to be placed on viewing students as consumers and rather less on viewing students as partners in a learning community.'*

Engagement at different levels within institutions

28.   Intending to gauge how embedded student engagement is within institutions, the research identified which engagement mechanisms were most commonly used according to institutions and students' unions and to what extent these were used at all levels of the institution (see below). There was also some exploration of the nature of change that institutions and students' unions perceived to have been achieved through student engagement activity (see below). There was a generally high level of agreement by institutions and students' unions about the extent to which student engagement activity has been embedded effectively, particularly at institutional programme and discipline level. The only type of provision where students were considered to be less well engaged at institutional level in particular was within private institutions, though it should be noted that only two of these were part of the interviews.

29.   Previous research reports indicated that student engagement at the intermediate level of an institution (faculty/school/college) was more challenging than at institutional or programme level (Little, 2009). This was also recognised in the QAA's own overview of outcomes of institutional reviews (QAA, 2012a). The project's research confirmed that engagement at this level had continued to pose challenges. One respondent expressed the issue as follows: *'They are on the [intermediate] school committees, but what they say to us is [that] it's much more useful when I'm talking to the Psychology professors about the Psychology degree than sitting there and you've got the person from International Relations and the person from Religious Studies and all the rest of it. […] They don't have the same sense of need to engage at that particular structure but then the next level up, the policy level, where we're making attendance policy or setting assessment policy –that they find very useful.'* This observation agreed with those of other respondents who reported encountering a lack of interest from students to represent at the intermediate level. Feedback had also been received from those who had engaged at intermediate level that the quality management matters they engaged with were often beyond the students' understanding unless there were specific support structures in place for these

students. The research concluded therefore that in future these limitations would need to be considered in relation to the organisation of quality management mechanisms. Furthermore, the support and development needs of student representatives at the intermediate level may need more attention.

30. Institutions and students' unions demonstrated the development of various approaches to address this issue. Most common was that 'credible' students were selected by staff and rewarded to take on such roles by the institution itself, whilst there were also examples of course level student representatives being encouraged by their students' union to take on faculty/school/college level roles. In either approach, specific efforts were also made to offer specific support and training for student representatives at the intermediate level, as highlighted in the point above, provided by either the students' union or the institution. Where students were selected and sometimes also 'appointed' by institutions, as opposed to elected and support through students' unions, questions regarding the independence and representative nature of the student voice were reasonably asked.

The status of students' unions within their institutions

31. Throughout the interviews particularly, a clear divide appeared between those institutions with independent arrangements for a collective representational student voice, and those which organised their student representation as a function of their institutional arrangements. In the research, where institutions did not have collective representation systems such as a students' union, this was the case either because there was no intention of encouraging collective representation or efforts to establish collective representation had been unsuccessful. In the case of the latter, the institutions tended to be small, highly vocational often with a strong intake of students from non-traditional backgrounds. In those cases, interviewees suggested that work was underway to establish independent representative arrangements and that this would be their preferred model of supporting student engagement. In those cases where no collective student voice representation was sought, the respondents were relatively new entries into the higher education sector, private institutions or institutions with a strongly developed delivery of their programmes (distance learning, accredited courses).

32. This finding poses considerable challenges for currently commonly held concepts of student engagement (participation in committees for instance) which often assumed some level of independent collective student representation. Alternative mechanisms of engaging the student voice may well emerge in the coming years, informed ideally by peer comparison and exchange between institutions and on-going practice reviews at national level.

33. From the survey and interviews it appears that in those institutions where students' unions or similar organisations for of collective student representation exist, the status of students' unions within the institution is changing towards a more mature and accepted stakeholder in institutional governance than has previously been the

case. In several institutions the training for student representatives was provided by their students' union with less institutional involvement than previously. Specialist quality related training, such as for panel membership of periodic programme reviews was rarely found to be offered by institutions without at least some involvement by students' union staff, and was often delivered as a collaborative effort. Institutional respondents also indicated numerous examples of where students' unions had proposed discussion and debate on learning and teaching aspects that were not already on the institutional agenda and which had subsequently led to major changes in institutional (teaching) practices and policy. In line with findings of earlier research (Little et al 2009), regular formal and informal access to senior institutional managers by sabbatical officers was relatively common place and such contact was described as influential. An emerging involvement in strategic planning and oversight was arising in parallel to the learning and teaching related engagement. These developments, as well as comments made in interviews particularly, suggested that students' unions, at institutional level, were increasingly viewed as mature partners in institutional governance.

34.   Analysis of interviews suggested that a change in status for students' unions gradually occurs whilst they develop substantial representational credibility and build a reputation for well evidenced and informed participation in institutional debates. In recent years, students' unions were perceived to have invested more strongly than before in creating their own information gathering structures, representative training and internal governance structures to achieve a high level of independence and representational effectiveness. Those institutional quality management staff and Pro-Vice-Chancellors interviewed recognised independence, credible representation and the informed nature of the student voice as important enablers of students' union influence within institutions. Interviewees from institutions where a collective student representative structure was still under development were without exception eager to support such emerging structures, convinced that this would strengthen the institution's quality management of learning and teaching.

Explicit clarity of expectations: the use of Student Charter or similar Staff-Student Agreements

35.   The concept of Student Charters was developed to enable institutions, in collaboration with their students' union, to communicate to students and staff the nature of student engagement intended to occur within that institution. Within the QAA Quality Code, charters are suggested as a way of communicating the institutional understanding (definition) of student engagement (QAA, 2012c). The final report of the Student Charter working group (BIS, 2011b) states that *'Charters should be important communication tools for HEIs to establish clear mutual expectations, and help monitor the student experience and how relationships are working. […] Charters will do this by acting as a 'front page', or the top of a pyramid, of the information which a HEI makes available to its students.'*

36.   According to institutions and students' unions (on this aspect 100 in total), the majority of institutions have a charter or similar statement in place. Eleven institutions were found to not have one at the time of the research. Accepting that there has been no stated expectation on institutions to have such a charter, it was interesting to note that several institutions believed it was a formal requirement. Nonetheless, the high take-up level suggested that institutions and students' unions were interested in communicating explicitly how student engagement occurs within their institutions.

37.   On exploring the process of establishing a charter or similar statement, institutional respondents noted some concerns and highlighted some contentious issues, including addressing the balance between staff responsibilities or obligations and those of students. This was also related to the type of language used in charters. Further questions appeared to have arisen regarding the choice between describing rights and responsibilities or expressing partnership values. Students' unions echoed these concerns. Where student charters or similar existed, a majority of institutions and students' unions perceived that the interests of students and staff were well balanced in such documents.

38.   Almost a third of students' unions that had a charter in their institution, wondered whether a charter would have impact over existing efforts to promote student engagement that institutions and students' unions had already made. Taking note of similar remarks from institutions, it is worth noting that as charters have only recently been introduced a full evaluation of their use, influence and effectiveness would only be realistic in a few years.

'Higher education providers create and maintain an environment within which students and staff engage in discussions that aim to bring about demonstrable enhancement of the educational experience' (Indicator 2)

39.   In relation to this indicator the research concentrated on the means and mechanisms institutions provided for their students to engage in quality management, the perceived effectiveness of the most common mechanisms and the level and nature of change to the student (learning) experience that had been brought about through student engagement.

Means and mechanisms in support of student engagement

40.   Much in line with previous research by Cockburn (2003), HEFCE (2003) and Little et al (2009), the survey findings showed that the student voice had become well embedded in many of the sector's commonly used quality assurance and enhancement processes and procedures. Core mechanisms such as feedback questionnaires, staff-student liaison committees and participation on other committees were used by almost all institutions. . However, the pervasive use of the most common mechanisms does not mean that institutions are engaging students in the processes in the same way. There were implications for the level of student engagement and student influence that actually occurred in relation to quality management. Below the most commonly used

mechanisms to engage students have been described together with some of the differences in the level of student engagement enabled through use of these mechanisms.

41. **Student feedback questionnaires** were one of the most commonly used mechanisms to engage students according to the survey of institutions and students' unions undertaken. The interviews revealed that in some institutions student representatives were involved in setting survey questions, whilst for others this was strictly a matter for staff discretion. Similarly, although the sharing of module feedback outcomes with student representatives, usually at SSLCs, was common practice in some institutions, this was still under discussion in others. It was noted, therefore, that the use of student questionnaires especially at unit/ module level itself may be ubiquitous, whilst the nature of such common use has not (yet) converged.

42. The **National Student Survey** has also been managed in different ways within institutions. NSS data was actively shared with students, but from interviews it appeared that the sharing of information had not necessarily led to student involvement in action planning. Some respondents suggested that, in general, the NSS was a driver for increasing student engagement in quality management in their institutions. Yet in the interviews only four institutions involved students in evaluating and action planning as a result of the NSS outcomes. Of these four, two institutions involved their students' union in the evaluation of results, whilst the two others involved the students' union as well as students based within the disciplines covered by the NSS. Interestingly, the latter two institutions both related their emphasis on working in partnership with students to their high ranking in national league tables.

43. **Student representation on committees** was almost as commonly used to engage students in quality management as feedback questionnaires, according to the institutions. It was also found that in most institutions students were fully involved in discussions and had voting rights in the same way as applied to other committee members. In some institutions students could voice their concerns but did not have a vote, whilst in a very few institutions students could participate only when invited to do so. Where full participation was the norm, interviewees noted that ensuring that student representatives were able to contribute as extensively as other members on the committee, sometimes requires effort on behalf of both the chair and those supporting student representatives in advance of committee participation.

44. Many institutions had a permanent member of staff in their students' union providing support to student representatives in preparation for committee participation, although there were equally institutions where such support was either not available, or provided by staff within the institutional quality remit. Here there was evidence of consequent concerns regarding independence of the student voice. All these various forms of engaging students in committees lead to varying levels of engagement and influence of the student voice within the governance of an institution.

45. Almost half of respondents (48 of 100) suggested **Periodic Programme Reviews** as a further mechanism where students were engaged in the quality management of learning and teaching. This mostly took the form of student panel memberships, though during interviews differences in the level of student involvement again became clear. The role of the student representative in some institutions was limited to quality matters with academic standards (explicitly or implicitly) excluded from their judgment. Participants highlighted that although input through feedback surveys and direct meetings of the panel with students had already been in place in their institutions, the quality of feedback from these direct meetings with student representatives had particularly benefited from having a student panel member to lead discussions with students.

46. Whilst most institutions described having one student member on the panel, some had a sabbatical officer or appointed student as well as a current student from within the discipline. One participant illustrated how their institution is trialling an extended student review of programmes, whereby a similar number of staff and students initially participated in a half day of programme review separately, to then meet and compare findings. According to this interviewee, this innovative practice had so far led to a higher level of engagement by staff and students, resulting in a review of better quality. Engaging such different numbers of students in the review process in various different ways, can safely be assumed to lead to differences in the nature of the outcomes of reviews.

47. **Student Affairs Fora** were a relatively new mechanism of engagement which emerged from the research under many different names. The remit of such a forum was reported to be wider than issues relating to learning and teaching and usually addressing the whole student experience within institutions so reaching beyond quality management interests. Items for discussion and consideration were put forward by both student representatives and staff, including the evaluation of major surveys relating to institutional or professional services. Although there was often overlap with more traditional quality management committees, not all such fora were part of the formal committee structure. Hence, the membership of these fora also included core professional service leaders, thus allowing direct communication and exchange between student representatives and the leadership of all providers. Interviewees provided some examples of various (service) enhancement activities that had resulted from these fora discussions. Although student affairs fora take different forms in different institutions, they were considered by interviewees to be particularly influential in quality enhancement, policy development and strategic planning in relation to the student experience, more as a result of their informal nature than not.

48. The five examples given of commonly used mechanisms for engaging students were by no means the only mechanisms used. Institutions also referred to staff student liaison committees, focus/working groups, discussion groups and informal networks. Notably, several of the interviewees referred to enhancement specific mechanisms for student engagement, such as students as researchers (of the student experience), students as co-creators on development projects and students as co-producers of

learning resources, guidance materials and similar. Here too the level of independence students have when engaging through such mechanisms varies. Where some student representatives developed their own research briefs to inform or even propose future policy questions, other students became interns in educational development or quality assurance teams to inform decision making within a pre-set institutional agenda.

49.   The research methodology did not enable for the identification of a direct correlation between the level of student involvement and engagement when using the mentioned mechanisms and the level of learning, teaching and related policy enhancement that took place in institutions. However, having noted the differences in engaging students in commonly used quality and governance mechanisms, it is proposed that it may be in the best interest of institutions and students' unions to take deliberate decisions regarding the desirable level of involvement of the student voice in fewer or more phases of quality procedures, and perhaps in lesser or more equal measure to the involvement of staff.

The perceived effectiveness of student engagement efforts

50.   Ninety-six institutions and students unions responded to a survey question investigating where changes had taken place. Eighty-one respondents from institutions and students' unions combined (84%) considered there had been change at institutional level; 61 (64%) considered there had been change at faculty/school level; 78 (81%) considered there had been change study programme level; 53 (55%) considered there had been change at discipline/department level, and 54 (56%) considered there had been change at unit level. The level of recognised change that is attributed to student engagement through committee participation and surveys is generally high. However, it is interesting to note the somewhat lower level of student engagement influence at faculty/school level as opposed to institutional and programme level, which appears to be in line with the earlier described finding that students are less willing to engage at that intermediate level. Though it could be tempting to ascribe the lower level of student engagement driven change to a lower level of engagement, it may equally be the case that the awareness of a lesser potential to achieve change at intermediate levels is what influenced the limited willingness of students to engage.

51.   Institutions and students' unions were also asked in the survey to indicate the level of effectiveness of various mechanisms to engage students. From the responses it emerged that students' unions rated the effectiveness of staff student liaison committees higher than the effectiveness of questionnaires, whilst institutions rated questionnaires higher than staff student liaison committees. This may be explained by the more immediate level of change that can occur in response to staff student liaison committees in comparison to the response time normally required to act upon – especially large scale- questionnaires.

52.   Some of the interviewees also noted that the student voice was at times a more effective driver of change than previous efforts steered from within their institution. One of the respondents stated: *'And this is one of the great things we discovered is that departments or sections which had a reputation for being very hard to govern and never taking things very seriously and always moaning, when there are students in the room they tend to behave more professionally {…} and actually they have been fantastic.'*

Learning and teaching enhancements achieved through student engagement

53.   In the survey a large number of learning and teaching changes were reported by institutions and students' unions to have resulted from student engagement in quality management, with the most common area of change reported to be feedback. Interviewees confirmed the strong interest their students had in matters relating to feedback to students. However, they invariably described the changes they made in their institutions as also affecting the broader aspect of assessment, due to the inextricably linked nature of assessment and feedback. Some respondents felt that the student voice on this aspect had been supported or even inspired by NSS results which showed each year across the sector lower scores on assessment and feedback than other aspects. Other participants strongly emphasised the powerful drivers of assessment related change that student representation and internal surveys were in their institutions. One respondent stated: *'I think they influence our painstaking, agonising reflection on assessment, which has led to all kinds of things going on here including our involvement in setting up of national projects and international activity and that kind of thing. That came from the student voice and student dissatisfaction with what we were doing. […] We wrestle continuously about assessment, in a way the students won't let us rest on that one.'*

54.   Feedback and assessment related changes were the largest group of changes listed, with a clear distinction made between changes to transactional aspects (feedback turnaround times, online submission, marking and feedback arrangements, agreements regarding amounts of feedback, revised assessment regulations) and changes made with transformational intentions (guidelines for good practice on feedback and revised feedback policies). In relation to assessment and feedback, transformational changes were notably fewer than transactional changes, and this was also the case in relation to learning and teaching related changes (other than those relating to assessment and feedback). Transformational changes here included the review of specific modules and programmes, extended support for final year projects to enhance student achievement, improved guidance and expectations on academic practice and the recognition of teaching excellence.

55.   Other changes also reported to result from student engagement in quality management included transactional matters such as time tabling, teaching spaces, learning resources and facilities, shape of the academic year, Graduate teaching assistants' working conditions and access to equipment, facilities, fee waivers and bursaries. A further set of changes reported on related to student engagement

practices, such as providing access to data for students (external examiners, student feedback), inclusion of students in committees, reviews and working groups, introduction of student led projects, the development of a Student Charter and support for the creation of student associations or a students' union. A further set of changes related to quality management, where reference was made to changes in the quality code of practice, the sharing of external examiners reports, introduction of a progression committee and anonymous marking policies.

56.   From analysing the institutional and student' unions' listings of changes as a result of student engagement, transactional changes were mentioned considerably more frequently than transformational changes. Noting the interest from interviewees in actual educational change as an outcome of student engagement, this suggested that further focus on involving students in transformational considerations may be required (van der Velden, 2012b). Notably though, the enhancement related mechanisms described in the last section included the involvement of students as researchers, interns, co-producers and co-creators in transformational enhancement projects and processes. As such approaches allowed student input in educational development before policy drafting or committee based decision making was invoked, these approaches seem worth further consideration.

Arrangements exist for the effective representation of the collective student voice at all organisational levels, and these arrangements provide opportunities for all students to be heard. (Indicator 3)

Student representation in institutions

57.   Despite the earlier reporting that representation posed more challenges at the intermediate level (school/faculty), most institutions had some level of student representatives at all levels within their structures. However, according to both institutions and students' unions, the selection process of student representatives varied between levels. Election (through the students' union) was the most common means through which students become representatives at all levels. This was followed by nominations (usually by fellow students) at study programme level and discipline/ department level and finally self-volunteering and election (through institutional mechanisms) at study programme level.

58.   From interviews it became clear that most institutional respondents preferred election of student representatives over any of the other forms. Clarity was provided on why students were nonetheless sometimes hand-picked. In some cases students with particular characteristics (international background, for instance) were invited to join panels or meetings. In other cases they were invited because they had already fulfilled a specific and relevant role, for example, being a student researcher for a particular project or policy. Examples were also given of a lack of students willing to stand for elective positions, in which case staff had selected students they deemed suitable and invited them to take on a representative role. The reasons provided for students being hesitant to stand for such roles were mostly due to conflicting interests

with paid work or caring responsibilities, all consuming (vocational) educational demands, limited prior tradition of student representation or a lack of clarity of the role.

59.   Where students were selected, several institutions ensured that much support and steering were given to the selected representatives to ensure that these students gathered input from the students they were intended to represent.

60.   Whilst it may have been unclear from the survey initially, the interview findings indicated that the preferred method of electing student representatives was more common to some types of institutions than to others. In traditional and larger institutions student representatives tended to be elected, whilst in smaller institutions, and especially those of a strongly vocational nature, student representatives were more often selected. In smaller institutions representatives were not necessarily supported by the existence of a students' union or similar body, whilst in large institutions there was consistently a firm students' union presence.

61.   Several institutions where selection was commonplace, had put arrangements in place to stimulate more interest in standing for election onto representational roles ranging from increasing publicity and guidance about roles, to appointing election officers and working with the students' union to further develop their election arrangements. In one case, the institution took the opportunity to involve their international students in the organisation of social events around relevant international celebrations, where these students were encouraged to take their roles a step further and move into representative roles. The majority of the participants reported to envisage long term progression towards a more independent and elective student representation system. In some institutions, including the private institutions, a students' union or representational system did not exist and was not felt to be achievable (or desirable), so a student or recent former student was employed in the role of student representative.

62.   Several institutions reported that some level of payment for representation roles existed, most commonly for those areas where it proved harder to establish representative roles (faculty or school level, i.e. the level above the discipline) or for intensive temporary roles (curriculum review panel membership). Others took a firm stance against paying students. Where the arguments against related to safeguarding the independent nature of representational roles, the arguments in support of payment ranged from wishing to enable all students to stand for representational election, despite their financial situation, to insisting that if staff are rewarded for their contributions, this should also be the case for students. One institution had tried to overcome these issues by not paying the representatives, but rewarded their students' union for time spent on representational matters. The students' union was then responsible for finding representatives and paying these an annual honorarium.

63.   Although the UK Quality code clearly refers to '*the effective representation of the* collective *student voice'* these findings indicated that collective representational

systems were not yet in place across all parts of the sector. In some cases the practicalities of establishing a collective representative voice was clearly complex and alternative arrangements could perhaps justifiably made (see for instance arrangements for distance learning students below). However, there were some institutions who explained in interview that there was no intention of establishing a collective voice, or no intention to establish an independent representational voice. Leaving aside political views on the desirability of a strong student voice, in coming years this may result in substantial differences in both quality and governance arrangements which the sector may or may not come to value.

Student participation on committees

64. The interview findings reinforced the suggestion found in the survey that the student voice is widely accepted on committees. None of the participants reported their academic staff objecting to students being present at committees, nor was that student voice considered less relevant. There were some examples of particular efforts to ensure that student voice was given ample attention, such as adding 'Students' business' after 'Chair's business as a standing item on committee agendas. Training in relation to encouraging an effective student voice was also provided by students' unions or institutions, or sometimes jointly. Several participants referred explicitly to the need for both chairs and student representatives to ensure that a good balance was achieved in order to encourage a pro-active and constructive student voice. One interviewee described it in this way: *'So following that we drew up a new, more student friendly agenda and did some training for the chairs of those committees to think about how they might ensure that those meetings were more accessible to students and some of that was just small things like advising that it's wise to get maybe final year undergraduate students to speak first, rather than necessarily going to first years each time because they might not feel so confident about speaking in a forum.'*

65. Where institutions had committee-specific representative roles, interviewees reported there were difficulties in finding students willing to stand for such a role, unless they had prior understanding and experience of engaging in learning and teaching quality management. Two interviewees referred, as an example of this, to the role of curriculum representative at faculty level within their institutions. The faculty representative had the role of on-going involvement in all curriculum proposals, approval and review processes at faculty level. The roles were slightly different between the institutions, but in each case the student representative for this role was selected, where possible with guidance from the students' union, simply because none of the students understood the role sufficiently well enough to stand for the position.

Identified groups of students deemed less likely to engage in learning and teaching quality management

66. Part-time, working/work-based/placement, postgraduate, distance learning, mature, international, off-campus students and students in partner institutions were all deemed to be the groups of students who were less likely to engage in quality management. This was already known from previous research such as Little et al (2009), Cockburn (2005) and various QAA reports on student engagement with data derived from institutional reviews (QAA 2005, 2008a, 2009, 2012). The perceptions of both institutions and student' unions appeared to be related to the nature of provision, their student populations and their institutional priorities and ethos.

67. Several, but certainly not all, institutions and students' unions were taking actions to improve student engagement from these groups of students, for instance, through online support, induction for representatives, general promotion of engagement and participation and adapting representative systems to meet the needs of particular groups of students.

68. Interviewees spoke extensively about the engagement of groups of students deemed less likely to engage in quality management. Concentrating on the needs of these groups of students, institutions had tried to identify shortcomings of their existing mechanisms and were working with their students' union on finding new ways to engage. Strikingly, there appeared to be broad consensus across the interviews that improving representation of underrepresented groups was ultimately a matter for students' unions. This was an interesting finding, as it may be signifying a shift in views on who is responsible for ensuring student engagement in a quality context takes place. Perhaps it was also providing an indication that students' unions were increasingly being perceived to be part of the quality management system of institutions in the UK.

69. **Postgraduate Research (PGR) students** were reported to view the representational system as an arrangement for taught students, whilst they identify their own circumstances more closely to those of academic staff. The perception was that these students were looking for more direct ways of representing their own interests and were unlikely to commit to responsibilities outside their research commitments. A particular challenge appeared to be the use of SSLCs, with very little reference being made to the use of surveys for this group of students. Alternative approaches were therefore put in place such as scheduling informal meeting with all PGR students within a discipline around research seminars and internal conferences or establishing a single PGR student co-ordinator to represent students at faculty, school and college levels.

70. Participants reported that **students enrolled in distance learning** also posed interesting challenges for their institutions, mainly in relation to the engagement of student representatives and the use of SSLCs. For distance learners, the interviewees reported that other commitments or a lack of identification with the institution or

student community were reasons for students not to be attracted to representational roles. However, ample work was undertaken to make alternative arrangements. Specifically in fully distance learning based contexts (i.e. without residential arrangements at any time) the use of surveys to make the student voice heard, sat firmly alongside representational systems and in some cases replaced it entirely. Where residential meetings did take place, irrespective of their regularity, such events were used by the institution or relevant programme teams to seek staff-student liaison engagement with all students present. Sometimes this was also when course representatives were (s)elected.

71. Virtual learning environments (VLE), and in particular discussion boards and blogs which are based within a closed environment (VLE or MLE), were also referred to as means of supporting student engagement in asynchronous staff-student liaison discussions. Reportedly, several institutions ran their SSLCs online **for part time, distance learning and mature cohorts**, either at a given time using a discussion forum, or more often opening a few strands of discussion for a given amount of time (week), for students to respond to. After closing the discussion a summary was made and taken further for evaluation and action by staff. There was rarely a particular student representative role discernible in online SSLCs and all students willing to participate could do so.

72. Institutions and students' union also made alternative arrangements for s**tudents on campuses abroad,** although one interviewee reported that their representational system abroad was deliberately the same as the UK system to emulate the same experience. In order to accommodate representation of students on key institutional committees from their Asian campus, video conferencing was used resulting in early morning meetings for all key committee meetings at the UK campus. Other interviewees pointed out that political circumstances of the host country could have considerable impact on how representation was organised. For example, in Malaysia unionising students would be against national laws, whilst in China, there may be political influences prohibiting unions developing in ways common to the UK. Yet, in both cases, alternative forms of collectively organised representation were put in place, either by developing social associations with some form of informal representation, or a greater reliance was placed on surveying the student voice. The same participants noted that the views of their locally recruited staff on how acceptable it was for students to provide frank feedback on their tutors' teaching could also influence the form that student engagement and representation would take.

73. In the context of **multiple campus provision**, one participant reported that their institution insisted on the same mechanisms being used across all campuses, wherever in the world they were located. Another institution which worked with multiple small units of provision abroad (Europe), had instituted academic liaison roles for staff that travelled to meet with staff and students allowing them to keep a close eye on student engagement and quality matters. In the latter case, no strict parity expectations on student engagement between delivery sites existed.

74. Although the research did not investigate engagement with part time, mature or work based learners specifically, other research has identified that similar approaches to student engagement are often arranged to involve these groups. The common strand across student engagement mechanisms for these 'non-traditional' students (in the broadest sense) appeared to be that the collective representative voice was either replaced by direct engagement with all students (meetings, online discussions) or the more indirect survey approach to capture the student voice. In light of the current policy emphasis on the *collective* representative student voice, these findings suggested that wider acceptance of engagement with the student voice other than through collective representation, may need to become more clearly recognised in institutional and national policy.

Higher Education providers ensure that student representatives and staff have access to training and on-going support to equip them to fulfil their roles in educational enhancement and quality assurance effectively (Indicator 4).

Supporting student representatives on engagement

75. Broadly three types of support to student representatives could be noted from the research undertaken. The first type of support and training was for specific quality management roles such as participation in periodic review panels or approval processes. This type of support and training was more likely to be provided by institutions to their student representatives than by students' unions, although it was not uncommon for sabbatical officers to be directly involved in the delivery of this training. One interviewee responded: *'We certainly train students. We don't send them in [to committees] cold. We will sit them down and go through the documentation with them and say is there anything you don't understand or you're unhappy about and the things to look at [...] we never say to them there are student type questions. That's never the case and say you can ask a question on anything. You are a full panel member. Yes the chair might say 'what is [...] the students' point of view?' But equally we like students making all kinds of comments.'*

76. The second type of support related to sabbatical officers and representatives in more 'senior' roles, i.e. those who represented students at institutional and intermediate (faculty, school, college) committees. As might have been expected, the interview findings showed that traditional institutions with well-established students' unions were more likely to base such training in their students' unions than those with less well-established students' unions. Often a specific support officer, usually based within the students' union, was available to support sabbatical officers and student representatives with their understanding, analysis and responses to the paperwork of major committee meetings. These officers also trained student representatives in order to contribute in an informed manner to discussions at formal meetings. The preparation for committee meetings most commonly related to institutional and sometimes faculty, school, college levels meetings, but very rarely to discipline level meetings. Interviewees rated the impact and influence of these representation

support officers very highly and gave examples of how their support helped establish a credible and effective student representation system within the institution.

77.   The third set of support and training efforts related to the much wider cadre of student representatives who tended to concentrate on programme and departmental levels of engagement with quality management (course representatives). Whilst support to representatives at this level did not occur in all institutions, there was is certainly a common understanding that such training was desirable. Some institutions interviewed were actively planning for training and support to become available in the short term. Where the support and training was available, student representatives were usually trained at the start of the academic year. Many students' unions supported course representatives through some form of Student Council or Academic Council throughout the year. Such Councils were regular meetings where information about current items of interest was given, and discussion took place between student representatives on further items of interests. Students' unions instituted such meetings both to ensure student representatives were informed and prepared for debate, and to remain informed on student opinion at programme or departmental level.

78.   Similar to the findings of the surveys, participants in the interviews reported that training was commonly provided to student representatives either by the students' unions or institutions, or jointly in collaboration between institutions and their students' unions: '*Our [students' union] […] took on responsibility for the training and support of all student representatives from the university and that initiative has worked well. We work very closely with them to provide that training and support.*' In almost all cases, some level of communication existed regarding the content of such training and few participants expressed their reservations regarding the interference of their institutions in the independence of their students' unions. Of course, if the same interviews were held with students' union representatives, that impression might have changed.

79.   In interviews respondents also noted that the overburdening of student representatives, particularly at institutional and faculty/school/college level was becoming a matter of concern. By increasing involvement of students in a wide range of governance activities, institutions had noted that student representatives were becoming overwhelmed to the detriment of the quality of their contributions, or their endurance in key representational roles. One interviewee stated: '*they seize a student who's good and is interested and wants to get stuck in and I think as a university we need to think very carefully about how much we're burdening students.*' There was no clear pattern of how institutions and students' unions addressed this, beyond reconsideration and separating of currently combined responsibilities across more representatives, and sometimes, employing representatives preferably within a structure of support that helped to ease the pressures of the role.

Supporting staff on supporting student engagement

80.   Evidence gathered showed that addressing student engagement in staff development activity was not yet well embedded. Some institutions noted that they related to this aspect in their institution's staff development arrangements for probationary lecturers, experienced academic staff and administrative staff, but this was limited in nature. Although some examples of training and guidance materials were given, considerable reliance was placed on 'learning by doing' and exposure to debates and discussions on student engagement. As mentioned previously, particularly for chairs of committees some informal steering also took place, but this was not a common approach.

81.   The limited level of the training and support for both students and staff, suggested that this was an area that had not yet been a major focus for attention. It was also notable that neither in interviews, nor in the survey, any indicators were given of joint development activities or guidance materials for staff and students. Worthy of note is that student engagement, or rather staff engagement with the student voice was currently not included in the UK Professional Standards Framework for staff teaching and supporting learning in higher education (HEA, 2012). It may be possible that as student engagement with quality management, governance and the organisation of the wider students experience becomes more embedded, staff development activities in support of engagement with the student voice becomes more common place. Taking note of the earlier discussion of with Student Charters in this report, it will also be of interest to observe whether in time, charters will fulfil their awareness raising function not only effectively with students, but also with staff.

Students and staff engage in evidence-based discussions based on the mutual sharing of information (Indicator 5).

The informed student voice: sharing of data between students and institutions

82.   Data and information that is perceived by institutions and students' unions to be most shared by institutions, is the NSS data and reports of actions taken to enhance the student educational experience. The least shared information and data sets were annual institutional financial and performance data. Comparing the most shared information and data sets with the least shared sets, there appeared to exist more institutional interest in engaging students in maintaining quality and developing the strategic direction of learning and teaching than there was in their involvement in retrospective evaluation of institutional effectiveness in financial terms or against performance indicators.

83.   Both institutions and students' unions reported that their Students' Union shared survey outcomes, minutes or summaries of academic representatives' meetings, proposals for action arising from the students' union Council reports from focus groups on specific issues as well as reports of research undertaken by the students' union itself.

84. In the interviews participants provided several examples of how the information shared between students' unions and institutions had influenced change in their institutions and even initiated policy development. In some institutions, this was capitalised on by inviting an annual report from their students' unions on issues that had arisen over the last academic year in students' union councils, committees and sometimes SSLCs. These respondents felt that such input offered their institutions a good base for developing proposals for future enhancement activities.

85. Institutions reported that students were not just involved in sharing data, they were also involved in making sense of it. Institutions reported to use student representatives, students employed as researchers and specifically selected students (usually because of a relevant characteristic) to help interrogate, analyse and interpret data from surveys and similar: *'Whilst we are in the meeting, because they are anonymous surveys, we have the opportunity because student reps are in the meeting so we can say to them 'well this looks like it is saying something about this, do you guys have a view on that? And we can actually get a bit more detail from the students from something that has been pointed out anonymously in a survey.'* This approach appeared to be equally attractive for working with distance learners: *'I've asked for students to be involved in the analysis of the results, so we will join a consultant to provide some assistance with the analysis. But we would run some online competent sort of focus groups or something, to see how the reactions are with some students in terms of, you know, we this means that or do you think that's a fair interpretation of our findings?'* Similar feedback was also received by other interviewees.

86. There were also examples of students using information and gathering data in an effort to make a strong case on an issue, especially if they found themselves in a position opposite to that of the institution. One senior manager gave the following example: *'I was very keen on doing anonymous marking throughout the institution and of course the NUS is terribly keen on that. I took it to the working group on academic structures and the students said no, we don't want it – as clear as anything. They went away and did research, they read papers on it and so an. They came back with all the arguments against it'.*

87. Equally, interviewees gave examples of how data and information instigated proposals or action from students' unions specifically. A good example was given by this respondent: *'I think the NSS drives an awful lot and I think feedback from Staff Student Liaison Committee drives an awful lot as well. Quite often what will happen is the Students' Union will use that data as evidence for pushing things forward but I don't think they'd particularly come up with anything we haven't already identified. So I think it's primarily data driven and then the Students' Union using that data.'* It was worth noting that this interviewee, like many others, said that the sharing of data with students had only very rarely led to being challenged on that data. Instead, by sharing data and information, institutions found they more often worked from the same starting point as their students' union. Although in the past it was not uncommon to hear concerns from institutional managers regarding the sharing of data and

information with their students' unions, such concerns now seemed to have been overcome.

Staff and students disseminate and jointly recognise the enhancement made to the student educational experience and the efforts of students in achieving these successes (Indicator 6).

Mechanisms used by institutions to inform students of enhancements to the student experience

88.   Both institutions and students' unions used a range of mechanisms to inform their students of enhancements to the student experience. Their choice of communications medium (email, publications, websites etc.) were not dissimilar although it is worth noting students' unions referred more strongly to social media (facebook, twitter and similar), whilst institutions referred more strongly to the use of media they can fully control such as in-house publications e.g. handbooks, student magazines and newsletters.

89.   Some institutions actively acknowledged the contributions of their students to the enhancement of learning and teaching. A few institutions only acknowledged student contributions explicitly '*if appropriate*', whilst most institutions had no deliberate, explicit or even tacit approach to this. That finding was supported by the responses of the students' unions. It was an interesting notion that whilst institutions were clearly embedding the notion of student engagement in their practices, encouraging the student voice to engage even at various levels and often view such engagement as influential, it was not (yet) common to acknowledge the contribution of students.

90.   Though the interviews concentrated more strongly on other aspects of the research, there were some interviewees who commented on general ways of recognising students' contributions, ranging from annual celebrations for student representatives and awards, to approaches which benefited students in a more individual manner, including in the Higher Education Achievement Records (HEAR) or local award schemes that recognises extra-curricular learning, usually run by the Students' Union. Although such recognition did not relate to enhancement activity specifically, especially the more public forms of recognition may inspire other students to engage.

The effectiveness of student engagement is monitored and reviewed at least annually, using predefined key performance indicators, and policies and processes and enhanced where required (Indicator 7).

91.   The research showed that the majority of institutions did not (yet) have established performance indicators specifically for student engagement, although several institutions were able refer to specific data and information derived from surveys, students' union feedback and targeted reviews and evaluations. Three types of approaches to measuring performance in student engagement emerged from further exploration in the interviews.

92. The first type of performance indicators comprised some form of direct evaluation of the effectiveness of student engagement activity. Examples of this approach were specific questions on student engagement in internal surveys and students' unions' surveys, the use of the relevant additional question set in the NSS used to determine whether students perceive that their institution engages with their views and feedback (B6), focus groups to evaluate aspects of engagement in quality management and formal reviews of the structure of student engagement in institutions. All of these related to the perceived quality of student engagement.

93. Institutions also used quantitative indicators of student engagement related behaviours such as targets for the return numbers of (module) feedback questionnaires, committee attendance by student representatives, or numbers of student representatives relative to the total number of students. One interviewee commented: '*the [SU] measure turn out in elections, the number of students putting themselves forward to be representatives and the number of students nominating in and so on, which are useful metrics but they demonstrate participation rather than impact.*' Interestingly, several participants reported that their institutions adhered to a target of 1:20 as a representation target, but they were not able to explain how they had arrived at such a target.

94. The second type was the use of student satisfaction scores by some institutions as an indication of how effective student engagement might have been in quality management, such as improvements in NSS results which were then attributed to a changed approach to engagement of students. One example was '*so I suppose if you're looking for a serious crunch performance indicator, the student engagement feeds into the NSS.*' However, it was important to note that interviewees, who reported using this second type of performance indicators, questioned the validity of the underlying assumption of this approach that increased satisfaction is due to increased student engagement effectiveness.

95. The third type of performance indictor for student engagement was the interpretation of retention and progression data, class attendance, library usage and similar. However, such data was not related to student engagement in learning and teaching quality management, but rather to student engagement with learning and teaching itself.

96. A striking finding from the interviews was that students' unions were reported to take a lead in developing performance indicators for student engagement. Several participants indicated that their students' unions already used indicators relating to student representation specifically. Data used ranged from the numbers of students standing for election to the numbers of students taking up the role of student representatives of those "hard to reach" groups of students. Some institutions reported that students' unions also included questions regarding the effectiveness of their students' unions as the voice of students and their influence within their institutions.

97. Although the use of performance indicators was relatively limited, there was substantial evidence of institutions and students' unions, often together, reviewing student engagement practices. Some interviewees referred to using the new Quality Code chapter on student engagement for this (QAA, 2012c) as a benchmark for review, whilst others reviewed practices against those of peer institutions. Evaluations already undertaken by students' unions played a further role in such processes, as did the use of external advisors.

Conclusions

98. Perhaps the most striking finding in the research **was the changing relationship between students and institutions**. Exploring this in some detail, it was found that institutions were most likely to describe the role of students within their institutions as 'stakeholders' despite the public debate *within* constituencies in the sector suggesting institutions view students as partners (QAA, 2012a and 2012c. NUS, 2012). From further investigation in interviews it became clear that many institutions had come to 'accept' that students have a consumerist role due to the higher fee introductions. However, in an effort to keep consumerism at least out of the classroom, institutions appeared to have embraced the partnership ethos as an ideal to strive for at discipline and programme level. This finding was in line with the notion of institutions engaging with both the transactional and transformational interests of students, whilst wishing to concentrate strongly on shared transformational interests in the classroom (van der Velden, 2012a).

99. In practice, the term 'stakeholder' was confidently used to describe an approach whereby students' interests were understood and respected, whilst a collaborative manner of working could be used to progress the success of the student learning experience. Alongside this was the growing involvement of students as co-creators, be it by engaging students in the co-creation of knowledge (students as researchers), the co-creation of new resources, programmes and units (students as co-producers) or the co-creation and instigation of educational change (students as change agents). What appeared to be developing was engagement of students in quality *assurance* in the role of stakeholder, whilst in relation to learning and teaching *enhancement* students were engaged in the role of co-creator.

100. These findings are in contrast with current policy (QAA, 2012c); past reviews of institutional practices (QAA, 2008a, 2009 and 2012a) and findings in earlier research (Little, 2009. Cockburn, 2005), all of which emphasised the role of students as partners. The most significant contextual change that may explain this change of perception of the role or status of students was the introduction of higher student fees in England. Yet, the perception of students as stakeholders was not only held by English respondents. In the coming years, policy makers and those who steer student engagement developments in relation to quality management may wish to take this shift in perception into account.

101. A further remarkable finding was that **the role of the NSS in relation to student engagement** appeared not as straightforward as might have been expected. In the interviews that covered student engagement in both quality management and governance, fewer than half of respondents referred to the NSS in the interviews. Those who did discuss the NSS recognised the annual publication of NSS results as one of the drivers behind a growing interest in engaging students in quality management as a principle. Yet, only a very limited number of institutions involved students in the evaluation of NS S data or NSS action planning itself. The latter finding was particularly interesting against the remarks of some of the interviewees who were from institutions high in NSS rankings, who responded that they *did* engage students in annual discipline or institutional action planning in response to the NSS.

102. The influence of the NSS on quality management and governance arrangements for as far as student engagement was concerned, extended well beyond the walls of individual institutions. With NSS as a driver for the promotion of student engagement in mind, **new entrants into the sector** introduced new challenges to the commonly accepted approaches to engaging students in quality management. As the NSS was not applicable to all HE providers, and most notably not to private institutions, alternative forms of engagement with the student voice were developed in these institutions which are very different from those in traditional institutions. Without the specific influence of the NSS and influenced by other considerations, rather than using elected or even selected representational forms supported by a students' union or similar, the admittedly limited number of private institutions included in our survey, veered towards the appointment and employment of recent graduates to take on representative roles within the organisation. Further research may be desirable to investigate what this means in relation to learning and teaching quality management and perhaps also, the parity of constraints and opportunities that apply to organisations potentially competing within a single higher education sector. More importantly, where such different approaches to engagement with the student voice existed, student populations across the sector were likely to encounter very different levels of student influence depending on their choice of institution. If such diversity was considered agreeable to the sector, institutions and policy makers may wish to consider whether clear public information for prospective students should be provided on this.

103. The research suggested that **the role of students' unions in institutions is changing**. The findings illustrated how for instance in the context of seeking to engage harder to reach student groups, institutions are increasingly viewing it as part of their students' union's responsibility to find ways of representing such groups effectively. Furthermore, institutions recognised that students' unions collected data independently to inform and sometimes steer developments within the institution. Similarly, though the use of performance indicators was limited (see below), institutions recognised that students' unions collected data and evaluated their own representational practices in ways that provided indicators of how successful student engagement is within the institution. All these developments appear to indicate that in the current climate, students' unions are increasingly seen as credible and reliable

collaborators in the processes of assuring, enhancing and benchmarking learning and teaching quality. When comparing this, for instance Cockburn's report (2005), who reported that institutions recognised a need to raise awareness of the usefulness and desirability of course representatives with their staff communities, the research showed that the validity of representational influence is by now increasingly embedded.

104. Whilst institutions embrace student representation and engagement with the student voice, there were still parts of the sector reporting **difficulties in filling student representative roles**, particularly if there was a limited tradition of student representation within the institution in question, or if no active students' union exists. A further group of institutions who reported difficulty with this were small specialist institutions of a strongly vocational nature, where students were reported to have little interest in joining representational or quality management roles for students. For these types of institutions there was not yet a clear pattern emerging of alternative arrangements to engage the student voice. For institutions with considerable distance learning or campuses abroad, new practices were more clearly emerging to engage the student voice, either through the use of online means allowing direct communication with students, thereby avoiding the need for representational means. Another approach for these institutions is to seek to capture student views and opinions through a semi- independent structure to which student engagement or student affairs officers are appointed.

105. In relation to engagement with 'hard to reach' groups, any alternative arrangements made by institutions to engage with the student voice fell broadly into two categories. Either institutions engaged with as many of the students they can reach directly, rather than engaging with representational structures they deemed ineffectual, or efforts were made to understand student behaviour and opinions through analysis of data including surveys, traditional student data and data collected from students' engaging with various facilities, services and learning environments. In light of the current policy emphasis on the *collective* representative student voice, these findings suggested that wider acceptance of engagement with the student voice other than through collective representation, may need to become more clearly recognised in institutional and national policy.

106. The research supported the commonly made assumption made that **a strong student voice informs in learning and teaching practices and policies**. Institutions provided a wealth of examples of learning and teaching practices that had been revised or newly developed, due to student engagement with quality management of the institution. Though a very wide variety of changes were listed, the single theme of assessment and feedback was mentioned by almost every institution and students' union.

107. When listing changes due to student engagement in quality management and governance, transactional changes were mentioned considerably more often than transformational changes. Noting the interest from interviewees in actual educational change as an outcome of student engagement, this appeared to suggest that further

focus on involving students in transformational considerations may be required (Van der Velden, 2012b).

108. Where student feedback and student representation in past research (Cockburn, 2005, Little et al, 2009, HEFCE, 2003 and York Consultancy, 2006) was strongly focused on matters of learning, teaching and quality, the research provided evidence **that the influence of the student voice is broadening**. This included engaging with professional services, expressing student interests beyond the student learning experience and in a few cases, overall institutional strategic planning. Specifically of interest in this context was the emergence of institutional level working groups or committees that reviewed student feedback (from internal and external sources) and where academic as well as professional service leaders engaged with student representatives with a view to enhancing the student experience ,beyond the learning experience specifically.

109. **The use of performance indicators for student engagement with quality management is currently limited**. Although institutions reported the use of many indicators of both a qualitative and quantitative nature, many of these were related to the assumed outcomes of student engagement such as student satisfaction or attainment. The few indicators of student engagement that were used, often related to measuring student engagement behaviour (standing for elections, attending meetings, number of questionnaire returns) or similar statistics (number of representatives in each discipline). Some institutions sought to review the quality of student engagement and used measures such as joint reviews of arrangements with their students' union, annual evaluation of NSS additional bank of questions set B6 (which questions level of staff engagement with student feedback) or inclusion of relevant questions in internal surveys.

110. **Student charters or similar agreements are widely implemented but have yet to find their relevance to student engagement**. Whilst the introduction of student charters in most institutions were reported to have been relatively straightforward, the research suggested that institutions and students' unions remain unconvinced of their role, status and effectiveness in the context of student engagement. Both institutions and students' unions also expressed concerns about the relevance of a charter in students' and staff's day to day practice and whether charters covered all student groups equally and effectively. An evaluation of the status, effectiveness and relevance of charters may be attractive in the future.

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