

## **Supporting students' unions and institutions to engage students in shaping their learning experience**

### **Summary**

The National Union of Students (NUS) and the Higher Education Academy (Academy) are proposing a joint project to support institutions that deliver higher education qualifications (whether universities, university colleges or further education colleges) and students' unions to better engage students in shaping their learning experiences. The project will combine a sector-wide approach as well as more tailored advice for specific institutions or groups of institutions.

The project proposes to:

- Develop a series of materials, such as guides, toolkits and benchmarking tools, for students' unions and institutions to improve how they engage students in shaping their learning experience. These materials, both hard copies and online versions, will address representation structures, feedback mechanisms and how institutions engage students in shaping their curriculum as well as supporting their evaluation of how they are currently engaging students.
- Facilitate students, student representatives and academics in subject areas to discuss teaching and learning issues and approaches to pedagogy to enhance the student learning experience.
- Bring students, academics and senior managers within institutions together to discuss student engagement at two national conferences. The conferences will look at what student engagement is, why it is important and share effective practice. The conferences will reach beyond the "usual suspects" and showcase the resources developed as well as acting as a forum for discussion.
- Produce two publications on student engagement looking at what student engagement is, why it is important, examples of effective practice and offering different perspectives from across the diversity of the sector. The first publication, one of the NUS series of quarterly *HE Focus* journals, will be targeted primarily at students' unions, institutional managers and policy makers. The second publication, an HEA publication, will be targeted primarily at academics within institutions.

The project aims to disseminate the materials through the conference, the websites of the Academy and the NUS, and links with the members of the Cross-Sector Group (membership of which is set out below) to disseminate the materials to their members, where appropriate, to deliver the maximum impact of the project.

The project will update the Cross-Sector Student Engagement Group at each of their meetings and invite comment and advice to benefit from the experience within the group from different parts of the HE community. In particular the April Seminar of the Cross-Sector Group will provide a useful opportunity for the project to further explore some of the issues with the members of the Group.

The project aims to build a platform to support a real step-change in the participation and effectiveness of student engagement providing institutions and students' unions with the materials and space to discuss and improve how they engage students.

In developing this project NUS and the Academy have identified work that we believe can be successfully achieved in one year and detail this in the proposal that follows. At the same time we recognise that to sustain and build on the momentum and change that we hope this project will deliver, would require continued activity and funding. We have, therefore, sketched out some of the work that we feel would extend the benefits and impact of the project beyond the detailed proposal to indicate the directions that we could move in.

### **Introduction**

Early in Summer 2008 HEFCE commissioned the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information at the Open University (CHERI) to undertake research into the different ways in which students are engaged in shaping their learning experience. CHERI presented the report to HEFCE in December 2008 and the report, *Report to HEFCE on student engagement*, was published in February 2009 followed by a sector-wide conference on 18 February 2009, organised by UUK, GuildHE and NUS.

The CHERI report maps the ways in which students are currently engaged in institutions across England looking at the many benefits of this for both students and institutions. The report considers the processes for engagement, such as the representative structures, and feedback mechanisms as well as how these work.

One of the most striking statistics from the *NUS Student Experience Report 2008* in relation to student engagement was that only 23% of students said that they felt involved in shaping the content, curriculum or design of the course, compared to the 57% of students that said they wanted to be involved in this.

Alongside this activity various sector bodies have been meeting since late 2007 to examine student engagement and what it means for their organisations. The Cross Sector Student Engagement Group, chaired by NUS and with a joint Universities UK, GuildHE and NUS secretariat, also includes representatives from AOC, DELNI, DBIS, the Academy, HEFCE, ARC, NUS-USI, OIA and QAA. The Group has developed some principles of student engagement, articulating what student engagement is and why it is important.

In addition, the Government established the National Student Forum in early 2008 "to ensure that policies are the better for being informed by the student voice" (NSF Annual Report 2008). The Report also says that "listening to the voices of students is an essential component of any programme of improvement in higher education." The Forum is part of the Student Listening Programme together with Student Juries, Ministerial Campus Visits and a Minister for Students. The Government's response to

the first NSF Report says that “an active partnership and dialogue with students can, we believe, contribute significantly to a quality learning experience for all current and future students.” This project seeks to take forward these principles of engaging students at both national and institutional level policy making as well as in actively shaping their own learning experience.

### **Current activities of the NUS and the Academy**

Both the NUS and the Academy have been active in the area of student engagement and this project aims to support and develop the activities of the two organisations ensuring maximum impact and dissemination for the sector.

NUS has long supported students’ union representative structures including developing training materials for students’ unions. In particular it has developed its support for student representatives during 2008/09. During the last year the NUS ran a National Course Reps Conference, three regional course reps events as well as handover events for students’ unions for their course rep structures. In addition, NUS has developed a network of reps on Facebook and the NUS website. More than 800 reps have already signed up to share experiences. NUS has also developed an online hub for students’ unions

(<http://www.officeronline.co.uk/education/articles/275571.aspx>) to share their materials on to how they currently engage and reward their reps and information about their structures. The materials from the hub project will not only enable the sharing of practice from different unions but also start to develop national materials and collect the experiences of what has worked, what has not worked and why. In addition NUS has provided support to students’ unions on the National Student Survey to enable them to interpret their data as well as promoting the Survey. This has been important for the development of this key method of student feedback. This project aims to develop links with existing work and extend it beyond the NSS to the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) (both administered by the Academy), and course-level surveys.

The Higher Education Academy aims to help “students enjoy the highest quality learning experience in the world”. To support this goal it is vital that the Academy engages with students and the concept of student engagement at relevant levels. Within its governance the Academy provides for student representation both at a whole-organisation level, e.g. on the Board and Academic Council, and in subject centres through the advisory boards. The Academy engages students in different project areas such as assessment work and in *Change Academy*. More closely related to the curriculum and its delivery, the Subject Centres offer some excellent and often innovative practice. Subject Centre plans for 2009-2010 identify the ways that subject centres are intending to work with students. Some examples of this work are to develop student discipline networks (Bioscience, ADM); student-led learning and teaching projects (C-SAP); discipline-based student rep training (CME); Student focused competitions (CEBE), work on the discipline specific data from NSS (Physical Sciences). The Academy also facilitated the development of the Student CETL network

which brought together students involved in CETLs to discuss and shape their learning experiences such as in assessment for learning and innovative uses of space. This has now broadened beyond the CETLs. Through its work with the nations, the Academy works closely with Student Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs) and initiated and piloted with sparqs and subject centres some discipline-based student networks. Whilst there are many good examples of work, knowledge about the work and its outputs is not wide. There is a need to share the experience and knowledge across the sector and for this existing knowledge to be coherently situated within the broad landscape of student engagement to help deliver the greatest benefit possible for stakeholders in HE.

### **Project objectives**

The project aims to support students' unions and institutions at different levels to engage students actively in the development, delivery, management and improvement of their educational experience.

The project will take forward the observations and recommendations of the HEFCE-commissioned CHERI report on Student Engagement. It will look at the three strands of student engagement as highlighted by the CHERI report, the Cross-Sector Group and the HEFCE Teaching, Quality and Student Experience Committee: student feedback; representation; and engaging students in shaping their curriculum.

The project aims to:

- i) develop some practical tools for institutions and students' unions to evaluate their current student engagement practices and develop materials that support their improvement,
- ii) stimulate the debate in the sector on the importance and value of engaging students  
and
- iii) enhance the student learning experience at the subject level through facilitating greater discussion on teaching and learning between students and academics.

### **Proposed activities**

The CHERI Report to HEFCE on Student Engagement includes the recommendation that "institutions and students' unions consider undertaking their own systematic review of the student engagement cycle and, in doing so establish their own measurements of effectiveness – for monitoring and review purposes".

The Report goes on to make another recommendation "that discussions about staff and student development needs in respect of student engagement (paras 5.21-5.41 refer) are initiated, and that relevant materials to guide institutions' developing practices (including those which seek to build on e-based technologies to engender more effective practice) are drawn together and publicised."

In order to meet these two recommendations we propose the development of a series of guides and toolkits for students' unions and

institutions. These resources would also include benchmarking tools to enable the development and monitoring of student engagement.

In order to develop resources that effectively meet the needs of both students' unions and institutions, it will be important to bring together students and institutional staff representing the diversity of the sector in focus groups. The focus groups will help inform the development of the resources by reviewing the practical information and guidance that students' unions and institutions would need.

The project activities will be based around the two strands of student engagement identified in the CHERI report; a third strand, on the advice of the HEFCE Teaching, Quality and Student Experience Committee (TQSE), will focus on engaging students in shaping their curriculum. The three strands of the student engagement project will thus be:

Strand 1: Student representation

Strand 2: Feedback

Strand 3: Students shaping their curriculum

### **Strand 1: Student representation**

The CHERI report identified five stages of the lifecycle of representation:

1. awareness raising and recognition of the role
2. nominations and elections
3. training for the role
4. undertaking the role
5. monitoring and reviewing effectiveness

The first year of the project will focus on developing resources including materials for both students' unions and institutions and will be shaped round the five stages. The resources will include case studies of what has worked well in different institutions; and some key questions and thoughts to allow institutions to reflect on their processes and adapt appropriate responses to the circumstances in their institution. It will be important for the resources to be fully representative of the diversity of the higher education sector.

In practice this would mean the development of five resource packs, one for each of the stages of the representation lifecycle. One of the areas highlighted at the TQSE meeting was in the fourth stage of the representation cycle, undertaking the role. The materials developed should tackle how course reps can become truly representative of all the students on their course. The issue of representing an increasingly diverse student body is one that is regularly raised by institutional staff. Thus the resources should provide support and good practice on how to encourage reps to check they are speaking on behalf of *all* their students and using the research available to them, rather than just giving their own personal views. This would also explore the uses of technology in facilitating the engagement of a wide range of students.

It will also be important to consider the experiences of HE students studying in Further Education Colleges and the different methods of engagement and representation that have been used to support these students. The introduction of Learner Involvement Strategies for Further Education Colleges has encouraged focus on this issue; there will much to learn about engaging other hard to reach students and it will be important to capture this information as well as improving HE student engagement in FECs.

Annex B at the end of this paper is an example of a tool that could be developed as part of the resources. The annex indicates how students' unions and institutions could benchmark their systems; shows how they could improve these processes and also how improvement might be measured on a year on year basis and comparability between institutions.

The materials described above will be developed following the focus groups. The use of focus groups will help to make the materials as useful and readily applicable as possible. In order to organise these focus groups and write the materials for both strand 1 and 2, we will need the resources of a project officer for the year. This staff member will be located within the NUS Education and Quality team.

It will be particularly important when developing the institutional resources to liaise with Universities UK, GuildHE and the Association of Colleges as the sector representatives to actively engage institutions in the process and there should be an early meeting with these organisations to identify how institutions can be most appropriately engaged.

The five resource packs will be developed during the first year and are likely to be finalised after the first 11 months; dissemination will be concentrated over the following months. The resource packs will all be developed at the same time to ensure that they are all able to benefit from the experiences of the whole project and also to benefit from the cost efficiency in the printing and design costs. Dissemination will be achieved through the proposed conference, the NUS and the Academy websites as well as through distribution to all institutions. To ensure wide dissemination it members of the Cross-Sector Group will be invited to support this area of work through publication on their websites and sharing materials at events were appropriate. Possibilities for this will be explored at one of the Cross-Sector Group meetings..

### **Year 2 and 3**

In years 2 and 3 it would be possible to further embed the materials and resources within institutions and students' unions as well as developing more specific materials for the diversity of the sector – both institutional diversity and the diversity of student demographics. At the beginning of year 2 we could conduct some research amongst students' unions and institutions to determine key development needs/gaps in relation to student engagement.

## **Strand 2: Feedback**

Students provide feedback to their institutions in a variety of ways from the staff/student liaison forums, course evaluation surveys, institutional surveys, National Student Survey, the Higher Education Academy's Postgraduate Research Experience Survey and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey. Institutions are also developing other methods to enable students to provide feedback; for example video diaries and innovative uses of technology. The second strand of the project will explore ways in which students feed back to their institutions and ways in which feedback systems could be improved.

Student feedback questionnaires are widely used at an institution-wide level (92%) and module/unit level (87%). Feedback questionnaires are also used in FECs, 96% at an institution-wide level and 72% at a module/unit level. The CHERI report showed that only in a few cases are student representatives involved in disseminating or encouraging students to fill in the survey(s). Data from module surveys are most likely to be analysed by institutional staff but in 10% of HEIs they reported that student representatives analyse the data. Some HEIs also involve students in the deliberations on action plans.

The stage of closing the feedback loop was identified by both the CHERI report and also the NUS Student Experience Survey as an area for improvement, with 92% of students feeling that they are able to give feedback compared to 51% that think the feedback is acted upon. The CHERI report highlighted "You said, we did" and including information to close the loop in the school newsletter as examples of practice. However, these were considered rather reactive ways of expecting students to engage.

The CHERI report showed that 95% of HEIs considered student feedback questionnaires very or reasonably effective compared to 69% of students' unions.

Materials supporting student feedback will focus, initially, on course evaluation questionnaires in the first year. The materials could look at how student feedback questionnaires can be made more effective; this could include a series of self-reflective questions:

1. Ask course reps to give comments on the design, format and proposed time/method of completion of the questionnaire.
2. Investigate possibilities of using both online and paper-based responses.
3. Give up to two weeks' notice of the form being circulated.
4. Ask course reps to get involved in promoting the form in class.
5. Consider using tutorial time to allow students to fill in their forms together, with the tutor explaining more about the rationale for the questions and the information being sought.

6. Accompany the form with a handout or verbal presentation describing how previous feedback was used, and what has been enhanced as a result of comments.
7. Involve class reps in the analysis of the data and the construction of the subsequent report.

Delivering high quality materials will be key and we believe that focusing on developing materials for course evaluation surveys will facilitate this. The project will, however, also link in with the work already undertaken by the NUS and the Academy to support institutions and students' unions use their National Student Survey, PRES and PTES surveys to drive institutional change and develop linkages between the different activities.

### **Strand 2 in years 2 and 3**

Strand 2 could be developed in years 2 and 3 to include other broader forms of student feedback and provide a showcase of some of the innovative methods which institutions use when gathering student feedback.

### **Strand 3: Engaging students in shaping their learning experience**

The fourth recommendation from the CHERI report calls for "the development of networking opportunities for institutions/students' unions to learn about effective practices in a range of institutions and relevant to a range of learner constituencies". The final recommendation calls for "broader discussions to be initiated across the sector about the nature of HE learning communities, to include a more explicit focus on notions of learning partnerships and perceived barriers to, and effective practices in, creating cohesive learning communities."

Discussions in the Cross-Sector Group, and also at the TQSE, have included a focus on the benefits of networking academics and students by subject area to share different approaches to teaching and learning. Bringing together students and student reps from different institutions to discuss feedback and assessment, for example, has already proven popular with students.

The Academy's Subject Centres are already significantly active in student engagement. As noted earlier, their work needs to be better captured and shared across the network as well as with the sector more broadly. The key focus of the third strand will be to mine the work of the subject centres to identify the range and diversity of activities to promote student engagement which bring together students and academics at a subject level; to generate case studies and examples of effective practice, and to encourage wider adoption of the approaches identified across the sector. It is anticipated that raising awareness of existing good practice will help promote the buy-in of academics, institutional senior teams and student organisations to student engagement in the shaping of their curriculum.

As part of the project the Academy will deploy a project officer who will undertake the synthesis of the ways in which the Subject Centres and CETLs engage students in shaping their learning experience; and to

oversee the development of materials and case studies for institutions and students' unions to further support this engagement. The project officer will liaise closely with the NUS appointee to the project. This liaison will enable coherence and integration across the strands of the project and aim to ensure that resources and websites are accessible to students, staff and institutions. The Academy will explore with Subject Centres the development of Learner Involvement Strategies.

To support institutional understanding of the rationale for student engagement, the Academy will also undertake some research to develop an evidence-informed statement on the rationale, benefits and potential impact of student engagement in enhancing the student learning experience. This statement will be aimed at the senior management - Vice Chancellors and Pro-Vice Chancellors - of HEIs. The Academy can use its links with institutions as avenues for the dissemination of the 'statement' as well as project specific avenues and websites.

### **Strand 3 in years 2 and 3**

The processes and models used in the discipline networks will be reviewed at the end of year 1. Usage will be monitored to identify where further materials would be valuable and to respond to developing practice in the area. This will help in the provision of current material of value to institutions.

### **Dissemination and debate: National conference on student engagement**

The first recommendation of the CHERI report is that "further discussions are initiated across the sector about the purposes of student engagement processes." As previously highlighted the fourth recommendation calls for "the development of networking opportunities" and the final recommendation calls for "broader discussions to be initiated across the sector about the nature of HE learning communities."

To support these aims we propose to organise two conferences on student engagement which will also act as the culmination of the end of the first year's activities. The conferences would need to combine information sharing and best practice elements, while strengthening the opportunities for networking students, academics and senior institutional managers.

It would be beneficial to harness the experience and relationships enjoyed by the members of the Cross Sector Student Engagement Group in organising the conferences. This would help deliver a wide cross-sector diversity of attendees and promote more extensive dissemination.

The conferences will include a plenary session on the purposes of student engagement which will also launch a special *HE Focus* publication (<http://resource.nusonline.co.uk/media/resource/HEFocus.pdf>) on student engagement with a series of articles on student engagement from across the sector. *HE Focus*, NUS's quarterly journal, is disseminated widely in the sector to both students' unions and institutional managers. The two editions already produced, 'Feedback on Assessment' and 'Quality', have been well received. An Academy publication would be produced to mirror

the proposed special issue of *HE Focus*. The Academy publication will look at similar information on student engagement but would be aimed at the academic audience and members of Subject Centres. It would include the 'statement on the benefits and impact of student engagement' as the product of strand 3. The project will also approach the members of the Cross Sector Group to identify appropriate, additional ways of dissemination to their members through their websites, publications and events.

By running two conferences we aim to reach beyond the "usual suspects" that typically attend such events. The conferences will be geographically based, one in the North, and one in the South, and will enable institutions to build up links with other institutions in their vicinity. Each conference will be planned for 100-120 attendees from across the sector. Due to HEFCE funding they will be primarily England-focused but there is likely to be some cross-border interest.

There should be a number of free places for those students engaged in Strand 3 of the project to support their involvement, as well as subsidised places for students' unions and academics involved in the subject centres.