

## **Improving Student engagement in England – an NUS view**

### **Introduction**

Universities have engaged students on institutional, faculty and departmental committees for many years, often highly valuing the contribution of these representatives. However, as has been noted (Palfreyman and Warner, 1998), as students have started to contribute more financially to their education it has given rise to discussions about them being seen as consumers, and indeed their own increasing consumer attitude.

NUS believe that the consumer model does not accurately reflect the experience of education. Education is not something that you can walk into a university and buy, but rather it is a process in which the student must actively participate if they are truly to learn. Baroness Deech gave perhaps the best analogy of higher education, describing it as a gym where you have to pay to join but only get benefit by working out. This has given rise alternative descriptions of students, for example, McCulloch (2009) argues that students are “co-producers” of their education.

This debate has given greater prominence to the role of students in higher education. If they are truly to be partners in their education then it is important that they are engaged and the challenge of how this can be achieved with an increasingly diverse student population. Student engagement has risen up the political agenda and the Government recently launched its student listening programme with a series of student juries to investigate what students think and the creation of the National Student Forum to feed in directly to Ministers.

Many sector bodies have also been increasing student engagement in their own organisations with UCAS and the QAA recently appointing student members to their Boards. The QAA is also engaging students in the quality management processes at the national level involving students as members of Institutional Audit panels in England from Spring 2010. The HEA also plays a key role in supporting the student learning experience.

It goes without saying that student engagement is central to the work of NUS. One of the key forms of student engagement is student representation but we would stress the importance of recognising that representation is not an end in itself – improving the student learning experience is the aim, student engagement is just the process. NUS has been providing increasing support for students’ unions and course representatives in this area. The last year has seen NUS’ first National Course Reps Conference and several regional events bringing reps from different institutions together to discuss issues such as a feedback and assessment and contact hours. NUS has also provided online forums for networking of reps and a resource for students’ unions on sharing effective practice of supporting representative structures.

### **What is student engagement?**

When discussing student engagement it is important to have a clear idea of what we are talking about. The Cross-Sector Group on Student Engagement have come up with the following definition:

*“Student engagement” means involving students as active participants in the development, delivery, management and improvement of their educational experience.*

## **Why is student engagement important?**

The Cross-Sector Group has also defined why they consider student engagement to be important: *Universities are communities of learning achieved through a partnership between staff and students. A committed partnership between students, as active participants, and the staff at an institution will open up possibilities for authentic and constructive dialogue, offering the opportunity for more holistic and reflective feedback and enhancement of learning.*

### **Cross-sector group**

The Cross-Sector Group on Student Engagement brings together various sector bodies and agencies to look at student engagement and what it means for their organisations and the sector more broadly. The group chaired by NUS and with a joint Universities UK, Guild HE and NUS secretariat also includes representatives from Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education (Amosshe), Association of Colleges (AOC), Department of Employment and Learning Northern Ireland (DELNI), DIUS, HEA, HEFCE, National Postgraduate Committee (NPC), National Union of Students–Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI), Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) and QAA.

### **Student engagement**

The CHERI Report identified two key forms of student engagement:

- Student feedback questionnaires
- Student representation on committees including staff-student liaison committees and students and liaison officers

It should however be noted that student engagement is much broader than just feedback and representation. With such a large and diverse student body it should be recognised that student engagement will mean different things to different students. For some students engagement will be as simple as attending lectures and completing their course, for others it will be enough to fill in a feedback survey at the end of a course, others will want to get more involved in discussing improving their course and experience with staff and students whether online or in staff/student forums or even becoming student representatives, and others still will want to be more involved in actually shaping their course and curriculum. The Cross-Sector Group have been looking at student engagement in the widest sense including some of the informal process of student engagement.

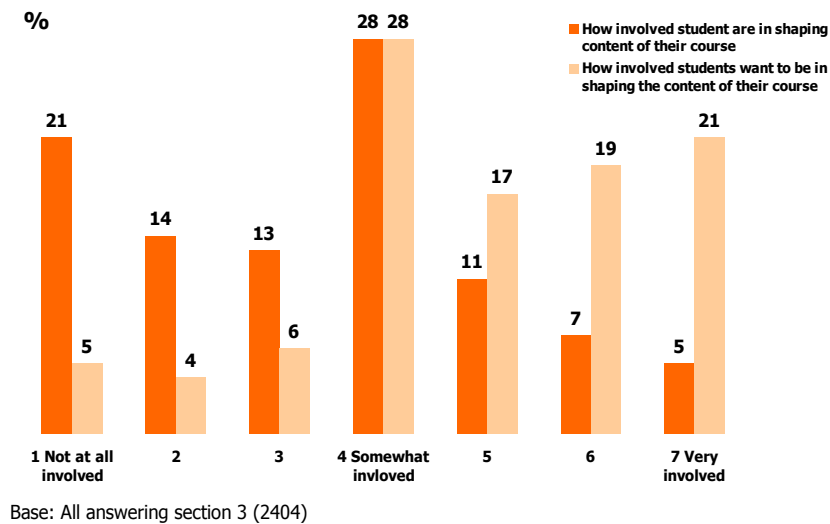
One of the most striking statistics from the NUS Student Experience Report looked at the extent to which students want to be engaged in shaping the course. The chart below shows that 57% of students wanted to be involved in shaping the content, curriculum or design of their course compared to only 23% of students that currently feel involved. This was also echoed by the recent HEA/JISC report *HE in a web 2.0 world* which highlighted the way in which students viewed their place in the institution and their expectation of participation and influence. These changing expectations are based on their experiences of web 2.0, such as social networking websites and blogs, which give much greater control to the individual.

NUS believes that if students are to get the most out of their education experience they should be encouraged to actively engage and truly become partners in the process. It will be important to consider how students are enabled to become more engaged in their educational experience.

## Chart 16: Divergence between how involved students are, and how involved they want to be, in shaping course content

Q25. How involved do you believe you are in shaping the content, curriculum or design of your course?

Q26. How involved do you want to be in shaping the content, curriculum or design of your course?



- **Student feedback questionnaires**

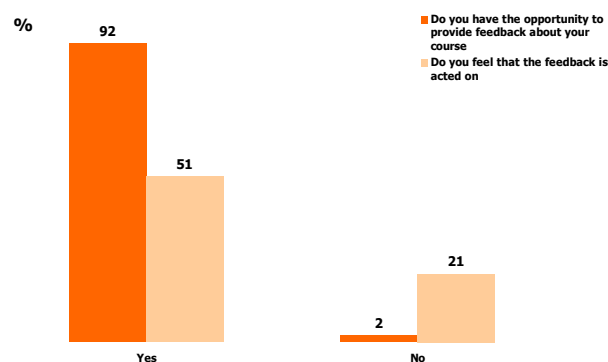
Students provide feedback of their experiences in a variety of ways. The most common examples are surveys, whether the National Student Survey, institutional surveys or the end of course feedback questionnaires. The CHERI report noted that student feedback questionnaires are widely used at an institution-wide 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. 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.

Survey fatigue and closing the feedback loop were identified by both the CHERI report and also the NUS Student Experience Survey, 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" with posters or notice-boards highlighting what students said in surveys and what the institution had done as a result, the report also mentioned including information in the school newsletter, although this was seen as quite reactive and expecting student to engage and the report questioned how much that happened in practice.

### Chart 17: Difference between the proportion of students that provide feedback on their course and those that feel it is acted on

Q28. Do you have an opportunity to provide feedback to your university/ faculty/ department about your course?

Q29. Do you believe that the feedback you provide is acted upon?



Base: Q28 all answering section 3 (2404), Q29 who have provided feedback (2223)

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

The report also highlighted some other ways in which institutions gather student feedback including making wider use of e-based platforms such as using VLEs, blogs and podcasts. It will be important to look at these alternative methods of gathering feedback to assess whether they are more effective than surveys or whether they provide useful additional qualitative data, particularly from some harder to reach students.

### Activities to increase the effectiveness of student engagement

NUS believes that the student feedback questionnaire is an area where support could be provided to institutions to ensure that these surveys are effective at engaging student views, drive improvements in the student learning experience and that these changes are fed back to students.

We believe that institutions should be provided with support, materials and case studies on how they can improve the student feedback questionnaire. For example materials could be produced for institutional self-reflection around the following questions:

1. Are course reps given the opportunity to comment on the design, format and proposed time/method of completion of the student feedback questionnaire?
2. Does your institution use both online and paper-based responses?
3. Does your institution give students notice before circulating the questionnaire to give students the chance to consider their views in detail beforehand?
4. Are course reps involved in promoting the questionnaire in class?
5. Has your institution considered using tutorial time to allow students to fill in their forms together, with the tutor explaining more about the questions and the information being sought?
6. Does your institution 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. Does your institution involve course reps in the analysis of the data and the construction of the subsequent report?

- **Student representation on committees**

The CHERI report showed that student representation on institution-wide committees was considered very or reasonably effective by both HEIs (89%) and students' unions (90%). However there was less agreement about departmental and faculty level representation.

The NUS Student Experience survey asked questions about course representatives. This is additional information from the survey that was not in the final report but is quite interesting in the context of the CHERI report.

**Does your course have a student representative?**

Yes	85%
No	4%
Don't know	11%

Base 2430

It is positive to see such as high response rate, although it was interesting that these responses varied between different departments. 91% of medical and life sciences students replied that they had a course representative compared to only 75% of mass communications and documentation students. Whilst the high response is positive it would be interesting to investigate why some subject areas have a low response rate. Are they less likely to have representatives or do they have course rep that are not able to communicate effectively to their peers.

The response dropped slightly, although still high overall, when asked whether they were able to select their representative.

**Were you able to select your representative?**

Yes	73%
No	18%
Don't know	9%

Base 2075

With 81% of medical and life sciences and 58% of architecture, building and planning responding that they were able to select their representative. NUS believes that it is important that students have the opportunity to select their representative in order to ensure greater legitimacy of their views, publicity of their role and engagement with students.

When asked whether the views of the representatives were listened to there was a spread of responses, although quite a small proportion that replied they didn't think that their representatives were not listened to.

**To what extent are their views listened to?**

Scale 1-5

1- Not at all, 3 Somewhat, 5 A lot

1	4%
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2	8%
3	34%
4	19%
5	10%

Don't know 26%

Base: 2075

This would imply that whilst students consider the views of their reps to be listened to to a large extent there is still development to be made in terms of how effective the representatives are in their role and how they are supported in this.

However, reinforcing the message above from the NUS Student Experience Survey the CHERI report showed that for student representation on faculty/departmental committees there was a divergence between how effective this was rated by HEIs (86%) compared to students' unions (52%). There was also a difference in the HEI views on institution-wide and faculty/departmental representation on whether it was "very" effective - 37% saying that institution-wide representation as "very" effective compared to 16% saying that faculty/departmental representation was "very" effective. It was also interesting to note that 84% of institutions believed that their reps need to be more effective.

The CHERI report identified the lifecycle of the student representation as (ideally) progressing through a number of stages:

- awareness raising and recognition of the role
- nominations and elections
- training for the role
- undertaking the role
- monitoring and reviewing effectiveness.

The CHERI report addresses each of these five areas identifying areas of good practice but also areas where there could be improvement. This included: the waning of interest of some representatives during the year; some vacancies or difficulty in filling rep positions; provision of and attendance at training; communication with reps from both the institution and the students' union; representing the diversity of the student population; and using ICT to facilitate engagement.

The CHERI report went on to comment (para 8.8) that the effectiveness of student representation at department and faculty level "varies within and between institutions". The report found that there was a lack of motivation of students to participate and that certain staff did not value and even ignored the student representation system. The report suggested that in order to overcome these problems there needs to be:

- clarity about the role and responsibilities of student representatives (including visibility and accessibility, ability to consult with, collect views from and feed back decisions to the student body)
- communication of these and their benefits to both staff and students
- greater motivation of senior staff to promote the value to staff
- greater motivation by providing the means through which they can operate effectively.

This highlights particularly the issue of understanding the benefits of student engagement and communicating these. This also emphasises the key issue of being able to measure the impact of student engagement in terms of improving the student learning experience.

### **Activities on student representation**

NUS believes that in order to increase the effectiveness of student representation it would be helpful to look systematically at each of the five stages of the representation cycle and see how each area could be improved. NUS believes that producing toolkits and other materials, such as job descriptions for reps and advice for reps on being representative of their fellow students, as well as case studies for institutions and students' unions would be a useful starting point to address some of the issues identified.

It would also be useful to develop self-reflective materials that would enable institutions and students' unions to look again at their representation structures in a more critical way to enable real change. Annex A is an example of a possible document for benchmarking procedures.

### **Informal and innovative approaches to engagement**

The report highlights some innovative approaches to student engagement, such as online communities, which can be a useful tool to increase engagement of part-time, distance and work-based learners. The CHERI report referred to business studies students that had developed an online community using their institutional VLE. Another institution mentioned video-booths, located round the institution's various campuses where students are encouraged to record their views.

Informal methods were also specifically mentioned by those smaller institutions and courses where the students all know the lecturers and vice versa. This allows more informal processes such as open-door policies and discussions in tutorials.

NUS believes that it would be useful to identify and share innovative approaches that look to tackle some of the challenges identified earlier.

### **Involvement in the curriculum**

It is important to recognise the way in which students are engaged in shaping the content and curriculum of their course. Several of the CETL's are engaging students effectively in their activities such as helping to design the criteria for formative assessment.

There should be more discussion in the sector of ways of involving students in shaping their curriculum.

### **National support**

This paper has looked primarily at the support provided for student engagement at an institutional level and we believe that there are a number of activities that can enhance these. There are however many potential benefits from support at the regional, mission group and national level. This support could include bringing together case studies and different approaches from different institutions. The CHERI report is a good example of this, bringing together an overview of the English sector and highlighting some innovative practice. We believe that this is an area where HEFCE could provide a little support and make a big impact.

NUS also believes that another area where support at the regional, mission group and national level could provide real benefits is bringing together reps from

different institutions. We have already begun to see, after trialling on a limited basis at regional reps events, the positive response from students when they are able to discuss with other reps studying the same subject in a different institution. Networking reps – physically and electronically - by subject area will enable real discussions about teaching and learning issues such as how a subject is taught in different institutions.



## Annex A: Benchmarking course rep systems

Enabling both students' unions, and those within institutions to be able to benchmark their course rep system will be key to driving up the quality of student engagement. NUS is starting to develop some self-reflective tools for course rep systems.

It would be interesting if you consider the structures within your own institution and how you would rate them.

	<b>1 (Poor)</b>	<b>3 (Satisfactory)</b>	<b>5 (Excellent)</b>
<b>Selection/ election</b>	Reps are chosen by who puts their hands up at the beginning of the first lecture of term	There are elections but it is usually just one candidate standing and few people voting	There are elections across the course so that all students can participate, with several candidates standing and many students voting
<b>How do you find out the contact details of course representatives?</b>	This is left to the students' union to do. We are aware that a few departments refuse to give them contact details for some reason.	This is collected by the institution with limited success and then passed on to the students' union so that they can communicate with them.	The information is collected systematically through a form that lecturers submit to the institution and/or the students' union. Each year individuals from the students' union speak to departmental staff to ensure the system will work
<b>Training for representatives</b>	Training is provided but few reps attend as it is after the first meeting that the rep is supposed to attend.	Training is provided but only about 30% of reps attend.	Training is provided jointly by the students' union and the institution which is attended by most reps. The training focuses on the role of representatives including how to ensure that they are representative, use available research, how to put papers on the agenda and includes a element of handover from the previous rep to ensure continuity.
<b>Attendance at meetings</b>	There are few places for students	The reps attend the relevant	The reps attend and contribute

	in departmental and faculty boards	meetings	usefully to meeting bringing the student views
<b>Contributions during meetings</b>	Reps only speak when they are called upon and are more likely to raise "complaints" i.e. lecturers not turning up on time	Reps speak on items on the agenda and will contribute to discussions on teaching and learning	Reps regularly raise items on the agenda and put items on the agenda
<b>Representativity</b>	The rep comes to the meeting but just speaks from their own experience	The rep has organised a focus group to get the views of students	The rep regularly uses evidence for their contributions including NSS results and focus groups which is representative of all the students on their course
<b>Feeding back</b>	The rep just put a copy of the minutes from the meeting up on the noticeboard for those students that are interested	The rep feeds back key issues to those students that attended the focus group and others that expressed an interest	The reps feed back to the students on their course through a variety of mechanisms such as facebook, email and newsletters. They also inform reps at the faculty and institutional level and the students' union on issues of importance
<b>Who has ownership over the course representative system?</b>	The students' union has ownership over the system <b>OR</b> The institution has ownership over the system	Ownership of the system is shared between the institution and the students' union although we are a little unclear about precise roles and responsibilities	The course representative system works because it is a partnership between the students' union & the institution where roles and responsibilities have been clearly defined