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February 2009

# **Report to HEFCE on student engagement**

**Centre for Higher Education Research and  
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Most of all we are grateful to our contacts in higher education institutions, further education colleges and student unions who helped organise interviews with relevant staff, student representatives and student unions; to those who took part in interviews; and to those who responded to the online survey.

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# Executive summary

## Context

- 1 One of the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) strategic plan objectives is to 'work with students and other stakeholders to ensure a high-quality learning experience that meets the needs of students'.<sup>1</sup> HEFCE is working with various other national stakeholders within a cross sector group to enable a number of agencies (for example, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), the Higher Education Academy, the National Union of Students, Universities UK and GuildHE) to work together to develop student engagement policies and inform institutional practice. More generally as part of its commitment to a new style of politics and citizen engagement, the government is seeking to 'amplify the student voice' with the launch (in December 2007) of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills' student listening programme.
- 2 A number of studies undertaken within the UK in the early-to-mid 2000s relating to student representation and student feedback had highlighted a number of common concerns, including: a recognition that student representation systems seem to work well at institutional level, but below institutional level there is much variability (between and within institutions); the extent to which student representatives adequately represent the wider student body; the failure to 'close the feedback loop' and provide students with information about what consideration has been given to their views and what actions (if any) taken as a result.
- 3 The Open University's Centre for Higher Education Research and Information was commissioned by HEFCE to undertake a study on student engagement. The study was concerned with institutional and student union processes and practices – such as those relating to student representation and student feedback – which seek to inform and enhance the collective student learning experience, as distinct from specific teaching, learning and assessment activities that are designed to enhance individual students' engagement with their own learning.
- 4 The study aimed to:
  - determine the current extent and nature of student engagement in higher education (HE) in England;
  - explore current models of formal and informal student engagement;
  - explore institutions' rationales for student engagement policies and practices, their measures of effectiveness, and perceptions of barriers (if any) to effectiveness;
  - explore what institutions and sector bodies might learn from student engagement models operating in other countries.
- 5 The main part of the study was undertaken during June-October 2008. It comprised interviews with key stakeholders; an online survey of all higher education institutions (HEIs) in England and their student unions, and those further education colleges (FECs) with a significant higher education provision; fieldwork with a selected group of higher education providers, student unions and student representatives.

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<sup>1</sup> Higher Education Funding Council for England (2007) *Strategic plan 2006-11*, HEFCE 2007/09, Bristol: HEFCE

## Conclusions

- 6 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. For student unions, the emphasis tends to be on the latter aspect. Notions of students as 'partners in a learning community' seem to be stronger in certain subject areas (for example, Art and Design and Performing Arts) than others.
- 7 The majority of HEIs and FECs rate their student engagement processes, comprising a basic model of student feedback questionnaires and student representation systems, as reasonably or very effective; student unions are less likely to do so. Detailed discussions with staff and students within a diverse range of HE providers showed that actual practices vary between and within institutions, and that their effectiveness could be improved.
- 8 There are a number of elements to the student representation process, viz: awareness raising and recognition of the role; nominations and elections; training for the role; undertaking the role; monitoring and reviewing effectiveness. Institutions and student unions face a number of challenges in ensuring that each element and the whole process are as effective as possible (paragraphs 5.7-5.41 of full report refer). Further, the process seems to work better at the institutional and operational (school/department/programme) level than at the intermediate (faculty) level.
- 9 HEI and FEC processes for collecting individual student views to feed in to quality assurance and enhancement (via student feedback questionnaires) are broadly similar and are undertaken at a number of levels: module, programme and institution. A number of HEIs are using institution-wide questionnaires for first and/or second year undergraduates and taught postgraduate students as a way of supplementing the information gathered through the National Student Survey (NSS). Some institutions are looking to become 'smarter' in analysing aggregated data from student questionnaires, and others acknowledged that the NSS has sharpened institutional practices for action planning.
- 10 Though institutions are taking steps to 'close the feedback loop' and inform students of actions taken, it is not clear the extent to which student representatives and/or the wider student body use the opportunity to seek out information about planned actions for improvements. There is some (rather limited) evidence that greater engagement is engendered when students themselves take the lead in investigating specific issues affecting the collective student learning experience and develop discussion papers for debate at relevant committees. In some institutions, there seems to be an absence of any systematic review and identification of where responsibility lies for institutional monitoring of processes and practices.
- 11 While the above findings suggest that not much has changed since previous studies and reports, we must acknowledge that many institutions and student unions are putting efforts into improving their student engagement processes, but the question remains 'to what effect'? Though the majority of HEIs have recently introduced (or are planning to introduce) additional student engagement mechanisms, it is questionable whether institutions and student unions yet have a clear idea of what criteria they would use to gauge the extent of the effectiveness of their current (and new) practices.
- 12 We *suggest* that one way of improving the effectiveness of student engagement processes would be for institutions and student unions to review, in a systematic manner, all the interlocking aspects of their current student engagement processes. Figure 1 (below) shows a basic outline of the whole review process; figure 2 (also below) identifies some detailed questions that could usefully be addressed of the various interlocking aspects of student engagement processes.

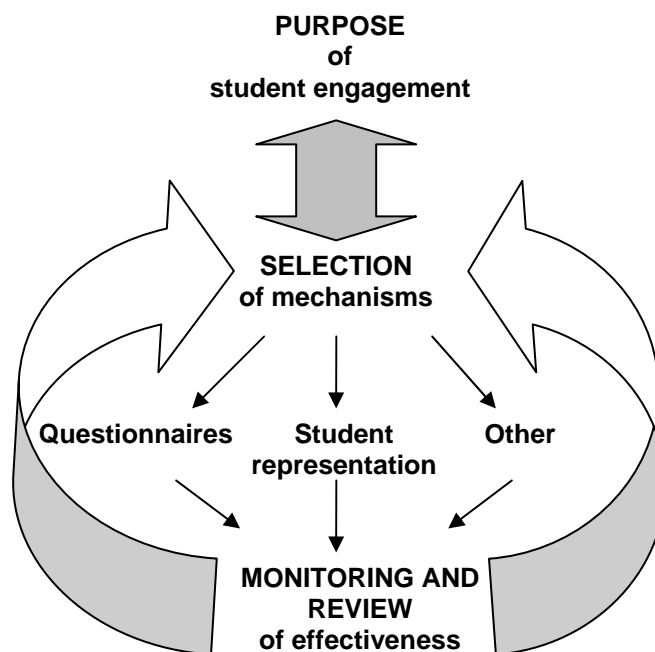
13 Detailed discussion about:

- purpose of student engagement processes;
- choice of mechanisms – including alternatives to student feedback questionnaires and student representation – to adequately reflect underlying purposes (and practices supporting each mechanism);
- monitoring and review of effectiveness.

would help all parties to gain a better understanding (and where necessary reach agreement) on roles and responsibilities linked to the different stages of student engagement mechanisms and the relationships between the processes and the people involved.

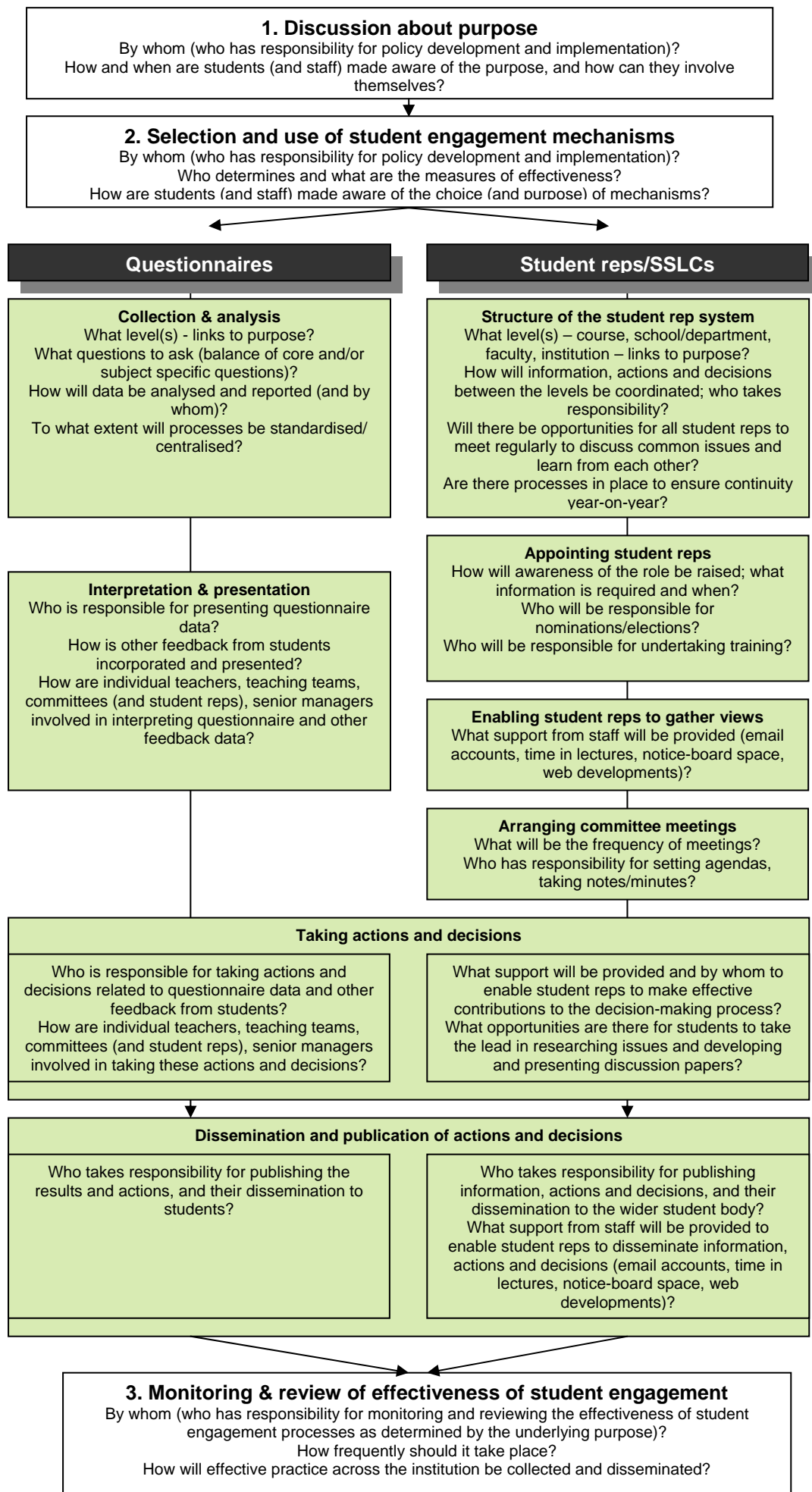
14 In many HEIs and FECs the constituency of the student body continues to diversify, and such increasing diversity brings with it a range of issues relating to engaging students, not least in terms of understanding different students' attitudes and motivations towards HE study. Since very many HE students may now be considered to be part-time (in the sense of HE studies being one part of students' busy lives, which may well embrace a range of commitments such as paid employment and family responsibilities), we *suggest* that the sector as a whole could benefit from working together on developing student representation practices that 'work' for part-time students and sharing those practices widely. It should also be recognised that students' interests in such practices could well be mediated by more fundamental attitudes and motivations towards HE study. In this respect, a more explicit exploration of the underlying rationale for student engagement processes (as suggested in paragraph 12 above) and clear communication of that rationale with the wider student body should help foster an enhanced understanding across the range of discrete learner constituencies.

**Figure 1: Outline of student engagement review cycle**





**Figure 2: Student Engagement Cycle**



## Recommendations

15 In the light of the above findings we recommend:

- that further discussions are initiated across the sector about the purposes of student engagement processes;
- that institutions and student unions consider undertaking their own systematic review of the student engagement cycle, and in so doing establish their own measures of effectiveness – for monitoring and review purposes (Section 7 of full report refers);
- an exploration of the extent to which learning and teaching strategies may be used to clarify rationales for student engagement (Section 3 of full report refers) and assist in the process of reviewing the student engagement cycle. Any subsequent analysis undertaken of such institutional learning and teaching strategies might helpfully further inform discussion about the emergence (if any) of distinctive models of student engagement across the sector;
- the development of networking opportunities for institutions/student unions to learn about effective practices in a range of institutions and relevant to a range of learner constituencies, in particular part-time students (paragraphs 5.28-5.41 of full report refer);
- that QAA discusses with relevant stakeholders whether, in undertaking the Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review process with FECs, it is possible to identify and disseminate examples of effective practice in relation to student engagement (possibly as a result of learner involvement strategies), and stimulates discussion about the extent to which such practices may have wider applicability across the sector;
- that discussions about staff and student development needs in respect of student engagement (paragraphs 5.21-5.41 of full report 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;
- that broader discussions are 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.

# 1 Introduction

- 1.1 The role of students in the process of shaping the student learning experience (through formal institutional processes for assuring and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching, and more informal mechanisms) has long been recognised in UK higher education (HE) and elsewhere. Further, the increasing marketisation of higher education and continuing drives to greater public accountability (the so-called 'new public management') have arguably prompted renewed institutional efforts to ensure that student voices, as consumers and stakeholders, are listened to and their messages acted upon as appropriate.
- 1.2 A 2003 report on student feedback, produced for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2003) by the Open University's Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI), NOP Research Group and SQW as part of the early development of the National Student Survey (NSS) noted that as quality assurance (QA) arrangements have become more formalised, so have arrangements for collecting, analysing and using quantitative and qualitative feedback data from current students. The same report noted a number of contextual features that were reducing the opportunities for informal interactions and communications between students and staff and hence increasing the need for a greater formalisation of opportunities for such interactions. Such features included: the steady decline of staff-student ratios in general; the increasing use of modular forms of course organisation; a more diverse student body among whom traditional and homogeneous expectations and attitudes could not be assumed; and pressures on academic staff themselves – to which we would add the pressures on students themselves, who increasingly have 'busy lives' and need to 'fit' higher education study in with other commitments, including work and family.
- 1.3 The study on student feedback found that while all institutions operated systems of student representation on institutional and local committees, the effectiveness of the systems varied between and within institutions. In this context, it should also be noted that the 2008 Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) report on institutional frameworks for managing quality and academic standards (QAA, 2008a) concluded that though overall frameworks were sound, features commonly identified for concern in QAA audit reports included: 'undue complexity and lack of transparency in the committee structure, with ill-defined responsibilities, making for inefficient and ineffective processes' (ibid., paragraph 26). Further, specific attention was drawn to the variability in committee arrangements below institutional level, and the need for institutional oversight of quality and standards, with particular reference to devolved arrangements and the assurance of consistency.
- 1.4 The HEFCE 2003 study on student feedback also found that while higher education institutions (HEIs) may be improving their practices of collecting and analysing feedback data from students, they were failing to provide time and opportunities for feedback to students on how, and in what ways, the institution had acted upon such feedback data. Further, the 2005 QAA report on student representation and feedback arrangements found significant limitations in institutional processes in relation to this 'feedback loop' (QAA, 2005).
- 1.5 Notwithstanding such limitations, recent research for HEFCE, commissioned from CHERI and Hobsons Research (HEFCE, 2008a), found that higher education institutions are responding vigorously to one particular form of final year student feedback, viz the National Student Survey. Increasing importance is being attached to the results of the survey, and there is widespread evidence of institutional actions and initiatives arising from NSS results.
- 1.6 Around one tenth of undergraduate higher education in England is provided in further education colleges (FECs). During the course of undertaking academic reviews of higher education in further education colleges during 2005-2007, QAA found that most colleges had well established and effective quality assurance processes in place, though they needed to be further developed to accommodate the needs of higher education provision. QAA also identified, in most cases, the responsiveness of colleges to student views as a significant strength (QAA, 2008b).

- 1.7 In terms of further education (FE) more generally, the 2006 FE White Paper (Department for Education and Skills, 2006) had set out the expectation that all colleges would publish and monitor strategies for involving learners. Learner involvement was not a new idea for the sector, and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) noted in 2007 that across the FE system there were many examples of providers 'working hard to engineer greater learner involvement in order to meet learners' needs well and deliver excellent provision' (LSC, 2007, paragraph 19). Following on from this, 2007/08 was the first year when further education providers were required to publish learner involvement strategies.
- 1.8 Student representation was the focus of two mapping studies undertaken in Scotland in 2003 – one in higher education and one in further education (student participation in quality Scotland (sparqs), 2005). The studies identified a hierarchy of student involvement in institutional procedures for assuring and enhancing the quality of the student learning experience, viz: opportunity to attend meetings; attendance at such meetings – opportunities taken up; engagement at such meetings – where students were able to make an effective contribution. Issues arising from these mapping studies included how to secure: effective engagement at faculty level; effective engagement of postgraduate (PG) students (in particular, postgraduate research students); communications between student representatives; a focus on learning and teaching issues.
- 1.9 In Wales a study commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) found that, although systems for student representation in most institutions were well developed at institutional level, some weaknesses were evident at faculty, school or departmental level (York Consulting, 2006). The study found significant variations across institutions in terms of coordinating systems. Further, faculty, school or departmental buy-in was key to determining the effectiveness of student representation, but gaining sufficient numbers of representatives was an issue for all institutions, as was ensuring diversity in student representation.
- 1.10 More generally as part of its commitment to a new style of politics and citizen engagement, the government is seeking to 'amplify the student voice', with the launch of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) student listening programme in October 2007. The programme comprises four elements: a Minister for Students; ministerial campus visits; student juries; a National Student Forum (NSF). The student juries (which met between November 2007 and January 2008) aimed to capture the views of higher education students and feed them into the policy-making process. Summaries of the juries' main findings were used by the NSF to inform its discussions throughout its first year of operation, and the NSF produced its first annual report for ministerial review and comment in autumn 2008 (NSF, 2008).
- 1.11 One of HEFCE's strategic plan objectives is to 'work with students and other stakeholders to ensure a high-quality learning experience that meets the needs of students' (HEFCE, 2007). In addressing this strategic plan objective, HEFCE is working with various other national stakeholders within a cross sector group to enable a number of agencies – for example QAA, the Higher Education Academy, the National Union of Students (NUS), Universities UK and GuildHE – to work together to develop student engagement policies. The group will consider the findings from the current study to consider what support might be offered to institutions in developing their own policies and practices in relation to student engagement.

## 2 Scope of study and method

- 2.1 For the purposes of the study, student engagement was taken to be 'the process whereby institutions and sector bodies make deliberate attempts to involve and empower students in the process of shaping the learning experience' (HEFCE, 2008b). This meaning was subsequently refined (and agreed with the cross sector group). Thus, the study was concerned with **institutional and student union (SU) processes and practices, such as those relating to student representation and student feedback, that seek to inform and enhance the collective student learning experience**, as distinct from specific teaching, learning and assessment activities that are designed to enhance individual students' engagement with their own learning.<sup>2</sup> The study was to focus on taught students, regardless of subject, level or mode of study. Given the resources available and the intended timescale, it was agreed that the study would have the particular remit, as above. However, it was acknowledged that the term 'student engagement' and its impact on the student learning experience could span a much broader area of enquiry, including students' engagement with their own learning, and their more general engagement with a higher education provider's activities and communities.
- 2.2 The study aimed to:
- determine the current extent and nature of student engagement in higher education in England;
  - explore current models of formal and informal student engagement;
  - explore institutions' rationales for student engagement policies and practices, their measures of effectiveness, and perceptions of barriers (if any) to effectiveness;
  - explore what institutions and sector bodies might learn from student engagement models operating in other countries;
  - make recommendations to HEFCE and other sector bodies about how they might best support and promote effective student engagement in higher education.
- 2.3 The study was undertaken using: desk research; interviews with key stakeholders; an online survey of all HEIs in England and their student unions, and those FECs in England with significant higher education provision; fieldwork with a selected group of higher education providers and student unions. The main part of the study was undertaken during June-October 2008.
- 2.4 Interviews with stakeholders were undertaken in June (Appendix A lists the interviews undertaken). Findings from these interviews were used to inform the development of the online survey and fieldwork interview schedule, and some of the recommendations.

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<sup>2</sup> The study was not concerned directly with the role of students on institutions' internal quality review teams – the subject of a separate QAA report (*Student membership of audit and review teams – learning from periodic review*, QAA, 2008c). Nor was it directly concerned with the effectiveness of institutional frameworks and processes for assuring the quality of student learning experiences – the subject of a separate QAA report (*Outcomes from institutional audit – institutions' frameworks for managing quality and academic standards, second series*, QAA, 2008a).

## Online survey

- 2.5 The online survey, conducted in June-July, sought the separate views of English HEIs, FECs and student unions on higher education student engagement policies and practices. In all, 130 HEIs and 75 FECs with 300 or more higher education students were contacted by email, as were 130 student unions in HEIs. Providers were asked to provide a single institutional response, as were student unions. Within the broad category of respondent (HEI; FEC; SU) responses to the survey were anonymous.
- 2.6 The survey comprised mainly a series of closed questions relating to institutional models of student engagement; student feedback relating to teaching and learning; the effectiveness of student representation and student engagement processes, together with some open questions. Given that a separate study of the NSS has also been commissioned by HEFCE, the online survey explicitly excluded questions relating to the NSS. The closed questions relating to institutional models were based partly on the findings of the earlier national study on student feedback (HEFCE, 2003) and the QAA report on student representation and feedback arrangements (2005). The draft survey instrument was piloted prior to its being made available online, and some minor modifications were made. Overall findings from the online survey, including analysis of responses to the open questions, are contained in Appendix B. The questionnaire forms Appendix C.
- 2.7 In all, 80 HEIs completed the survey (62% response rate) from across the range of institutional types and mission group; 25 FECs (33% response rate) completed the survey, of which the majority were members of the mixed economy group of colleges. As such, the FEC responses to the online survey can be seen as being representative of those FECs offering a significant proportion of higher education provision. In addition, 39 student unions responded (30% response rate). It must be acknowledged that the timing of the online survey was not ideal, especially for student unions, for which changeover of executive officers – together with student vacation time – tends to occur during late June/early July. Such a changeover period may well have affected the student unions' response rate and their ability to respond to certain detailed questions within the survey.

## Fieldwork with selected higher education providers and student unions

- 2.8 In addition to the online survey of higher education providers and student unions, fieldwork was undertaken with selected providers and student unions to explore more fully the nature, extent and effectiveness of student engagement. Given the planned timing of the overall study, initial invitations to take part in the fieldwork were sent to a number of selected institutions and student unions in June, with the intention of undertaking visits to institutions and student unions during July to September. The selection of institutions and student unions was informed by discussions with members of the cross sector group, and the desirability of including a range of HE providers (taking into account size, location, mission group membership, subject spread, range of learner constituency). The plan was to include ten HEIs (including two specialist institutions), five FECs with significant HE provision, and ten student unions (including five that were different from the selected HEIs). In the event, nine HEIs agreed to take part in the study, as did four FECs. Given the overall timescales for the study, it was not feasible to seek successive institutional replacements. All ten student unions contacted agreed to take part in the study. The list of institutions and student unions involved in the fieldwork forms Appendix D.
- 2.9 Within higher education providers, interviews were undertaken with senior academic and administrative staff with responsibility for student affairs/quality issues, and a selection of deans/heads of department in four different subject areas (Art and Design and Performing Arts, Business Studies, Engineering, Mathematics). If the specific subject was not taught, similar substitutes were used. Student views were sought through discussions with student representatives in the four subjects; views from the wider student body were not sought. The student union interviewees included the relevant sabbatical officer (with responsibility for education/quality issues) and in many cases the outgoing/incoming SU president and/or the SU member of staff with responsibility for coordinating the student/course representative system within the institution.

- 2.10 Not surprisingly, some difficulties arose in planning visits to the institutions and student unions during the summer period. In most cases, at least two visits to each institution were needed to complete the full range of interviews with relevant staff and students. Many of the (follow-up) visits were undertaken in October, particularly to include meetings with students who had undertaken the student representative role in the previous year. In the event, the vast majority of students interviewed were representatives of full-time undergraduate courses; a very few were faculty representatives (some undertaking the course and faculty representative role concurrently, others having previously been course representatives). Most interviews with staff and student union officers were undertaken face-to-face individually (but some in groups), and a few were conducted by telephone. Most interviews with student representatives were via group discussions, with a few undertaken by telephone conference call. In two FECs it did not prove possible to conduct student representative interviews, despite concerted efforts to set up such meetings. In all, 172 semi-structured interviews were undertaken (Appendix E provides the main interview schedule; Appendix F details the range and number of interviewees).

## **The report**

- 2.11 In the following sections, we present the findings from both the online survey and fieldwork in terms of:
- the rationale for student engagement (Section 3);
  - models of student engagement (Section 4);
  - student engagement processes in practice (Section 5);
  - student engagement and subject specific issues (Section 6);
  - the effectiveness of student engagement processes in informing and enhancing the collective student learning experience (Section 7);
  - previous studies and what might be learnt from practices elsewhere (Section 8);
  - conclusions and recommendations for actions to be taken by key stakeholders and institutions (Section 9).

There are rather different contexts in which higher education is provided by FECs, including: institutional responsibilities for assuring the quality of HE provision; the requirement for all FE providers to have in place a learner involvement strategy; and student unions having a less prominent role within FECs in respect of HE students. Given these differences, we present the findings from FECs separately from HEIs and student unions.

### 3 Rationale for student engagement

- 3.1 As noted above (paragraph 1.1), the role of students in the process of shaping the student learning experience (through formal institutional processes for assuring and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching, and more informal mechanisms) has long been recognised in UK higher education and elsewhere. It is clear from the interviews with senior institutional staff in higher education institutions that student engagement is central to enhancing the student experience. Many referred to student engagement as chiming with overarching strategic objectives for learning and teaching – for example, providing an ‘exceptional student experience’ – and hence it was crucial for the institution to hear and listen to the student voice such that students’ perspectives were taken into account in ways that might lead to enhancing that experience. For some institutions, a focus on learners is a deliberate attempt to engender parity of esteem between learning/teaching and research. In others, it is a more explicit recognition of students (and their families) as customers, wherein learner choice and learner opportunity underpin the institution’s drive to focus on learners and ensure good retention. As one interviewee noted, ‘students are now consumers and they can choose accordingly. All the opportunities we give them should make students feel that they have a voice’. In this respect an emphasis on student engagement is about future recruitment as well as current students. Thus it seems that the rationale for student engagement may be about a balancing of emphasis *within* some HEIs, and for others it is celebrating and reinforcing a long-term, mission-based commitment to learners.
- 3.2 A ‘listening and being responsive’ rationale pervaded most of the interviews in higher education institutions. In very many instances, discussions of processes were fore-grounded by reference to ‘nipping problems and issues in the bud’. Such sentiments are likely to reflect the institution’s desire to tackle issues early, before too many students are (adversely) affected. However, they could also be seen as having undertones of damage limitation and a reactive mode of operation (and possibly a sense of students being passive recipients of teaching and learning). Rather less reference was made to student engagement being of central concern to creating a cohesive learning community of teachers and learners, with a sense of staff and students being partners in learning. Such views were more likely to be expressed by senior staff in the specialist institutions, succinctly put by one interviewee as: ‘all the students and the staff are here to learn and to learn from each other and the only distinction is age and experience’. However, such views were also expressed by other types of institutions. For example, one interviewee (heading up a university’s central quality enhancement unit) suggested that though the institution was ‘signed up to listening and being responsive, there has been no fundamental debate about why student engagement is important. The language of student as customer is very strong but the language of student as a junior member of a learning community is less often heard’. For this respondent, notions of ‘partnership in learning endeavours need to be debated at programme level such that students’ inputs are viewed as more than ‘just’ expert witnesses’. In another university, a senior member of staff (in Engineering) noted that: ‘things work very well when students feel they are partners in the process of learning. We want to instil a love of lifelong learning in them’.
- 3.3 A few higher education institutions referred to developments that sought to highlight certain aspects of a partnership approach (for example, through a learning and teaching partnership agreement) in which the mutual roles and responsibilities of students, academic departments and central services were set out. One HEI noted that the introduction of the NSS had proved a useful tool in promoting [explicit] discussions within the institution both about what ‘the student experience should look and feel like’ and about promoting moves towards ‘establishing greater expectations from students that they are involved in a partnership approach to learning at HE level’. However, in one case at least, an internal survey had found a low level of awareness among students of the recently introduced partnership agreement. And in another, the term ‘student contract’ had been used, which seemed to infer notions of legal obligations (which were not seen by student union interviewees as particularly appropriate).



- 3.4 A number of student unions commented that the essence of student representation was in trying to engage students as partners in learning and teaching, and giving them a voice in meaningful decision-making processes. For a minority, more emphasis seemed to be placed on students as customers, and hence 'they need to know what is going on and the institution needs to tell them'. Another student union commented that although students are not consumers, there is a consumer relationship with the university in the sense of students 'buying access to membership of a [learning] community'.
- 3.5 Within further education colleges, a more general learner involvement strategy (LIS) has recently become a requirement (though in some cases this may have been formalising what was already happening informally). Senior staff in colleges acknowledged that a number of external 'drivers' have helpfully legitimised an emphasis on learner involvement for improvement and enhancement purposes, rather than 'just' a customer service focus. However, a number also noted that colleges need to be competitive – the implication being that customer needs have to be met. As one interviewee noted, 'if we don't listen to them then another college might'. Some senior staff also noted that students as consumers are very aware of the (education) product they are getting, and are aware of their rights, but expectations may have gone too far in relation to expecting 'instant' actions and responses.
- 3.6 Nevertheless, at least in one college, all staff commented on the strong college culture of continuous improvement which underpinned its student engagement processes. As a senior member of staff (in Art and Design) noted: 'the whole point of student engagement is trying to remove a 'them and us' sense of learning and teaching, and engender a better sense of it as a shared endeavour'. However, it was also acknowledged that student engagement processes that sought to engender a sense of openness and trust and good working relationships between staff and students could be undermined if there was a high turnover of staff (which might be the case if there was an over-reliance on part-time staff). In another college, it was suggested that a concept of partnership and user engagement was more readily accepted by staff delivering those higher education programmes which embraced a specific ethos of empowering users in the community (for example social work; youth and community work), where notions of empowering the client are central to some public service areas of employment.

## 4 Models of student engagement

- 4.1 In this section, we describe the basic models of student engagement currently used by higher education providers in England. In Section 5, we discuss these processes in practice.
- 4.2 By design, the online survey listed four main types of student engagement processes: student feedback questionnaires; student representation on committees; staff-student liaison committees (SSLCs) (or similar); students as liaison officers. From the survey, it seems that for the vast majority of higher education providers two of these types of student engagement processes dominate: student feedback questionnaires and student representation on committees. However, from the fieldwork it is clear that staff-student liaison committees are seen as equally important.

### Student feedback questionnaires

- 4.3 Student feedback questionnaires provide opportunities for the views of individual students to be collected, aggregated and reviewed. The survey data show that student feedback questionnaires are widely used in HEIs, at institution-wide level (92%) and module/unit level (87%). Such feedback is in addition to the National Student Survey (of final year students). From the interviews it was evident that a number of HEIs are continuing to use (or have recently reinstated and/or redesigned) institution-wide questionnaires for first and/or second year students as a way of supplementing the information gathered through the NSS. In this way, the institution can not only gather data more useful at institutional and departmental level, but can also receive 'early notice' of potential issues and possibly effect changes to enhance student learning experiences sooner than might otherwise be the case. A small number of interviewees also referred to the use of I Barometer (originally produced for international and European students, on arrival and on exit). The use of feedback questionnaires at module/unit level was also widespread, and most (76%) used such devices at the end of each module presentation. From the interviews it is evident that generally such questionnaires include some common 'core' questions together with questions specific to the module. A few institutions were planning to introduce some core questions into such questionnaires (to provide a basis for comparison within the institution), but this development was not necessarily welcomed by staff in schools, who considered that such inclusion could dilute the specificity of questions posed and hence the data gathered might be less useful to their local needs. Two thirds of HEIs also use programme-level questionnaires, and most of these (60%) use them on an annual basis. A few of the fieldwork institutions also mentioned the use of ad-hoc surveys of (samples of) students to address specific issues relating to learning and teaching.
- 4.4 Within FECs, student feedback questionnaires are widely used at institution-wide level (96%), and at module/unit level (72%) at the end of the module. Around half of respondents indicated that they also use them at whole programme level, on an annual basis. For the first time in 2007/08, FECs have been involved in the NSS. From the interviews it is clear that some FECs have taken the opportunity to adapt/augment their existing institution-wide questionnaires to better match the items in the NSS. The use of standard surveys of HE students at three phases – on entry, during the HE programme, and on exit – was mentioned in a number of FECs.

## **Student representation on committees**

- 4.5 In theory, student representation is the means whereby students' views are represented at various levels of an institution's academic organisation. Such representation is either by one of their peers (i.e. a student representative) who is concurrently studying, or by a representative of the student union who is concurrently undertaking other student union duties. It provides the opportunity for direct student input into decision-making, and discussions about programme and institutional development. From the survey data it seems that within HEIs student representation on institution-level committees is near universal. At this level such representation is likely to be through student union officers. Student representation at faculty/school-level and programme-level committees is also commonplace (with three quarters of HEIs indicating they had the former, and two thirds the latter). At these levels, representation is likely to be through students themselves (rather than the student union). From the fieldwork it seems that in many HEIs there is much variation in the operation of committees at the local level such that centrally directed processes and procedures are subject to interpretation at departmental level to better fit local circumstances (for example, the size and nature of the student cohorts). Such variation is reflected in student representation practices. Further, in one HEI the committee structure had recently undergone a thorough review to improve its effectiveness, and the resultant changes to student representation on these committees had yet to be put into practice. One of the specialist institutions was reviewing its committee structures in the light of having been granted taught degree awarding powers.
- 4.6 The survey data from FECs show that student representation on institution-wide committees is also near universal. Such representation is also highly likely at programme committee level, but less so at faculty/school level (just under half of FECs indicating this to be the case). Many of the fieldwork FECs had recently revised their academic board and committee structures to provide a clearer focus for deliberations on HE policies and practices. Such changes are likely to have a knock-on effect of 'how' and 'by whom' HE student views are represented at institutional and local committee level. (In this respect we note that the student union role with respect to HE students in FECs is currently underdeveloped.)

## **Staff-student liaison committees**

- 4.7 Staff-student liaison committees are another part of institutions' formal student engagement processes (though interestingly in at least one HEI the term 'committee' has been dropped in favour of the term 'forum' to indicate the intended more informal nature of the activity). The survey data show that just over half of HEIs operate such liaison committees at institution-wide and departmental level. However, findings from the fieldwork indicate that in fact most SSLCs operate at departmental/school level, although in one of the specialist institutions there are also forums between student representatives and governors. Staff-student liaison committees tend to meet on a termly/semester basis (59%) and in a minority of cases (10%) more than once per term. The survey data indicate that around a quarter of HEIs and student unions acknowledged that within their institution the frequency varies between faculties/schools. In the majority of cases (58%), the agenda for such meetings is set jointly by staff and students, and in a minority of cases (12%) by staff. But once again, a fifth of HEIs reported that such practice varies between faculties/schools, and student unions were even more likely to indicate that practice varies (35%). From the survey data, there seems to be no clear pattern of 'who' feeds back to the student body the outcomes of discussions at SSLC meetings; staff and students jointly seems to be the most common route (38%), while students are the route in around a quarter of HEIs, and staff less so (12%). A quarter of HEIs reported that practice varies between faculties/schools; again, student unions were more likely to indicate that such practice varies between faculties/schools (42%).
- 4.8 Within FECs, learner forums have become part and parcel of the more general learner involvement strategies. In the survey, three quarters of FECs indicated that they had staff-student liaison committees at institution-wide level, and just over half (56%) at programme level. Such liaison committees are most likely to meet on a termly/semester basis (68%) and in a minority of cases (16%) more than once per term. However, findings from the fieldwork indicate that most learner forums (which also involve a range of staff) operate at departmental/school level. The agenda for such meetings is likely to be set jointly by staff and students (40% of cases), or by staff only (28%). As with HEIs, there is no clear pattern of 'who' feeds back the outcomes of

discussions to the student body; staff and students seems to be the most common route (40%), while staff are the route in around a third of FECs, and students rather less so (16%). Additionally, colleges have student-governor liaison forums.

## Student liaison officer

- 4.9 Alongside staff-student liaison committees, a further type of student engagement activity is that undertaken by a student liaison officer. From the survey, it seems that over half of HEIs and FECs operate such a role. However, from our interviews with HEI staff it seems that the distinct role of student liaison officer is not very prevalent. That said, in one of the fieldwork HEIs a specific student liaison officer post has been established in each faculty. The role has been developed from earlier institution-wide activities on strategies for student retention, and it is now seen as an effective neutral conduit between faculties and 'the centre'. However, the more common practice is for the role (when undertaken) to be performed by the student faculty representatives (elected/selected from the pool of student representatives within the faculty), who liaise with the student union. Through this route issues raised by student representatives at school (and departmental) level are aggregated at faculty level and fed through to the student union, for onward transmission to the higher level institution-wide committees by the student union representatives. In at least one institution the student faculty representatives are currently paid annual honoraria in recognition of the fact that they are expected to devote a certain number of hours per week to carry out their faculty-wide responsibilities and liaise with the student union. In another institution, there are plans to try to enhance the liaison aspect of the faculty representative's role.
- 4.10 From interviews with staff in FECs it seems that in some colleges the student liaison officer is a recently created, centrally funded post with a responsibility for working closely with central student services and the student union on student representation (and other) issues, and liaising with schools/departments accordingly. In one of the fieldwork FECs, though there is no student liaison officer as such, an additional post *within* student services has recently been created to be a focus for 'higher education student' matters, including student representation.
- 4.11 In the survey, the majority of HEIs and FECs indicated that overall these formal student engagement processes varied a little between faculties/schools, but more than half the student unions considered that there was a lot of variation.

## Other formal processes

- 4.12 While the above can be seen as the four main types of processes, one further formal process was mentioned by all HEIs involved in the fieldwork, namely regular meetings between the student union president/other student union officers and the institutional head and/or senior management team. Reference was also made (in the survey and fieldwork) to tutorials as a further route through which students could raise issues, and to student involvement in institutional quality assurance processes. A number of HEIs also referred to student representation on institution-wide working groups addressing specific strategic themes. Finally, one of the specialist institutions and one university referred to a further, though possibly more tangential aspect of student engagement, namely the inclusion of the SU president and/or SU sabbatical officers on senior staff appointment panels. In the other specialist institution, panels of students (drawn from the wider student body) are established for all academic staff appointments and feed in to the appointment panel's deliberations.
- 4.13 Similar processes in respect of regular meetings between senior management and the student union, and tutorials were mentioned by FECs. Additionally, reference was also made to existing student-governor liaison groups, and to existing (or planned) student councils. In one of the fieldwork FECs, the student council (open to all student representatives) meets five times per year, and minutes are produced and relayed to the college's quality unit. In this same college, the head of the institution has instigated monthly meetings to which all students are invited to air their views on a current 'hot topic' (highlighted through the feedback system).

## **Informal processes**

- 4.14 In addition to the formal processes, the most common informal process (cited in HEI, FEC and SU responses to the online survey) was tutors'/lecturers' open door policies, whereby students could, in theory, gain easy access to relevant staff outside timetabled sessions. In the survey, HEIs also mentioned the use of email and online discussion forums. In one of the fieldwork institutions, reference was made to the use of a number of 'video booths' which are located around the institution's various campuses; students are encouraged to record their views on video. By their very nature, informal processes may not necessarily be seen as 'deliberate attempts' to involve and empower students in the process of shaping the collective learning experience, but they can provide other opportunities and routes by which students, if they choose to do so, can make their views known.

## 5 Student engagement processes in practice

- 5.1 In the previous section we described the basic types of student engagement processes currently in place within HEIs and FECs in England, as indicated in responses to the online survey and within the fieldwork interviews. In this section, we turn to the question of the effectiveness of these processes. We draw on responses to the survey and findings from the fieldwork to consider how these processes seem to be working in practice, in terms of informing and shaping the collective student learning experience.
- 5.2 From the online survey, it is clear that institutions rate some of their formal student engagement processes more highly than others; student unions also rate some of the formal processes more highly than others (see Appendix B for detail). In table 1 we present HEI and student union ratings for a number of student engagement processes.

**Table 1: HEI and student union ratings of effectiveness of student engagement processes in terms of informing and shaping the student learning experience (%)**

		Very effective	Reasonably effective	Not very effective	Not applicable	Do not know
Student feedback questionnaires	HEIs	25	70	5	0	0
	SUs	11	58	26	0	5
Student representation on institution-wide committees	HEIs	37	52	10	0	0
	SUs	37	53	8	0	3
Student representation on faculty/departmental committees	HEIs	16	71	9	4	0
	SUs	13	39	37	0	11
Staff-student liaison committees (or similar)	HEIs	33	58	5	3	1
	SUs	10	62	10	3	15
Students, as liaison officers	HEIs	26	52	5	12	4
	SUs	8	44	14	14	19

Source: online survey – HEIs, n= 80; student unions, n=39

- 5.3 A third of HEIs rated student representation on institution-wide committees, and staff-student liaison committees as very effective. Three quarters rated each of the four processes listed as reasonably or very effective; however, student unions were less likely than HEIs to rate the range of processes as reasonably/very effective. While a third of student unions rated student representation on institution-wide committees as very effective, a third considered that student representation on faculty/departmental committees is not very effective. Further, a quarter of student unions considered that student feedback questionnaires are not very effective. The survey data also show that while most HEIs (79%) considered that the effectiveness of these processes varies a little between faculties/schools, most student unions (72%) considered that the effectiveness varies a lot. We also note that a minority of student unions indicated that they did not know if certain student engagement processes are effective or not. FECs also rated a number of the formal processes as reasonably/very effective. Table 2 shows the detail. Around a third of FECs considered student feedback questionnaires and staff-student liaison committees to be very effective. In line with HEI responses, most FECs (76%) considered that the effectiveness of the processes varies a little between faculties/schools.

**Table 2: FEC ratings of effectiveness of student engagement processes in terms of informing and shaping the student learning experience (%)**

	Very effective	Reasonably effective	Not very effective	Not applicable	Do not know
Student feedback questionnaires	32	60	8	0	0
Student representation on institution-wide committees	28	56	16	0	0
Student representation on faculty/departmental committees	21	58	0	17	4
Staff-student liaison committees (or similar)	37	50	0	8	4
Students, as liaison officers	8	54	8	21	8

Source: online survey – FECs, n= 25

- 5.4 The above provides some overall ratings of effectiveness. The more detailed interviews and discussions held with a range of staff and students enabled a fuller exploration of student engagement processes, the effectiveness of these processes, and perceived challenges to improving effectiveness. In the following we draw on both the online survey responses and findings from the fieldwork to explore more fully understandings of effectiveness and perceptions of the effectiveness of student engagement processes in practice. A summary of the findings is presented in paragraphs 5.75 - 5.88.

## Student representation

### *Meanings of effectiveness*

- 5.5 As noted above (paragraph 1.8), an earlier mapping exercise of student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement processes in Scotland (sparqs, 2005) identified a hierarchy of student involvement, viz: opportunity to attend meetings; attendance at such meetings – opportunities taken up; engagement at such meetings – where students were able to make an effective contribution. Within this hierarchy can be added: considerations of representativeness, in terms of the existence of representatives; the process by which a student becomes a representative; and how ‘representative’ a student is of the wider student cohort (i.e. the extent to which the representatives, in presenting students’ views, are drawing on other students’ opinions and concerns as well as their own). Considerations of actions taken (if any) as a result of discussion at relevant meetings and how information on discussions and actions taken is fed back to the wider student cohort also need to be taken into account in discussing effectiveness.
- 5.6 In some senses, the lifecycle of the student representation process can be seen 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.

Though the semi-structured interview schedule used in the fieldwork did not delineate these separate stages, many of the themes arose during the interviews with institutional staff, student union officers and students themselves. In the following, we present our findings in relation to each of the above stages.

### *Awareness raising and recognition of the role of student representative*

- 5.7 From interviews with HEI staff, student unions and student representatives it is evident that most institutions arrange some preliminary briefing from the student union about the role of student representation during induction/freshers' week. Other methods mentioned include information by email (for example, from the course/programme leader), publicity on the SU website, and general poster information around the institution. Most colleges involved in the fieldwork indicated that the student representative system is more likely to be promoted through departments.
- 5.8 Student representatives interviewed during the fieldwork indicated a number of reasons for putting themselves forward: a desire to get involved in departmental discussions and decision-making processes through committee work; an interest in getting to know other students' views on certain issues and representing these in different forums; recognising the opportunities to develop/enhance certain generic skills through such activities (and being able to evidence these on CVs); being invited to various departmental events involving senior institutional staff and external people (which provided good opportunities for networking); a 'default' action as no other students seemed to be interested. However, some student representatives and staff in both HEIs and FECs recognised that some representatives' interests in the role wane as the academic year progresses, and that some carry out the role in a rather tokenistic manner and fail to engage fully in the range of activities involved (to the extent of not even making other students aware of 'who' they are and 'how' they can be contacted).
- 5.9 The survey data indicate that a third of higher education institutions offer student representatives the opportunity to gain specific recognition for their role; student unions considered that the proportion of HEIs offering this opportunity is rather higher – at just over half. There was also some disparity between HEI and student union responses to questions concerning the proportion of student representatives taking up the opportunity for recognition.
- 5.10 At least two of the fieldwork institutions offer a special certificate (based on students' attendance at training, and relevant meetings, together with a reflective piece on skills and knowledge derived from their student representation activities) which is kite-marked/linked to an externally accredited award, and another is currently considering a similar process. But another institution has moved away from offering a general certificate for student representation activities. Rather, it is now encouraging students to adopt a more holistic approach to reflecting on learning and development from formal courses and a range of co-curricular activities. But the same institution annually seeks nominations for a range of 'democracy awards' (non-credit bearing), with the awards presented at a special ceremony (as part of students' week).
- 5.11 Such specific recognition is one way of raising the profile of student representatives. Another (arguably) is through the title given to such responsibilities. One HEI has changed the title from course representative to StAR (Student Academic Representative); the student union considers that this better reflects the roles and responsibilities, and embraces notions of 'making a difference' rather than 'just' attending certain meetings. (Unfortunately it did not prove possible to interview a selection of student representatives at this institution to gain their views of the title change.) In another institution, the faculty representatives carry the title 'union academic representatives' to convey a clear sense that the role entails liaison between the (faculty) academic representatives and the student union.
- 5.12 The majority of FECs do not offer student representatives the opportunity to gain recognition for their specific role. However, in at least one of the fieldwork colleges, as part of the college's learner involvement strategy, students do have the opportunity to gain a certificate recognising a range of 'involvement' activities, including student representation or voluntary work in the community (or similar).
- 5.13 Within the fieldwork colleges, the student-governor liaison group is seen as a further way of raising the profile and importance of the student representative role. In at least one college, student presentations to governors have proved a very effective way of engaging governors in specific issues and seem to be more effective (in the sense of resulting in positive action) than issues being raised via student services 'on behalf of' students.



### *Nominations and elections – the democratic process*

- 5.14 The survey data indicate that student representation on HEIs' institution-level committees seems to be good, with more than two thirds of HEIs (71%) indicating no difficulties at all in filling posts (as these are filled by student union officers). But representation at lower levels (faculty/departmental and programme) is more difficult, with a third of HEIs reporting some vacant posts at this level. In the interviews, some senior staff acknowledged the variability of student representation between the various faculties/schools and considered that such variability matters, in the sense that it is important for all students across the university to have equitable access to opportunities for involvement in the formal representation processes.
- 5.15 From the fieldwork it is also clear that in the majority of cases, student representatives are much more likely to be 'nominated' or volunteered or elected 'by a show of hands in class' than by any more formal election process, although it was recognised that the latter might create a better sense of the representatives having a mandate from the student body to represent their views. In at least one case, the student representatives had been hand-picked (by staff). As one head of school commented, 'elections are very rare' and in some cases no representative had been identified. As one senior manager in another institution noted: 'there is an uneven eagerness among departments for taking on the shift towards a more systematic and election- driven system'. Further, many of the student representatives who took part in the fieldwork had continued 'in post' from the previous year. Such continuation might be helpful in terms of 'knowing the ropes' and having a broader awareness of current 'live issues' and hence improve continuity of discussions, year-on-year. But such practices can result in the range of students being involved in such representation activities becoming fairly limited. Some of the student representatives interviewed also suggested that the fact that many had continued from the previous year implied a lack of interest from the wider student body (and hence they had continued 'by default').
- 5.16 Although many of the institutional staff interviewees would have welcomed a situation in which elections were needed, there was also a sense that having a student representative (however 'found') was better than not having one at all. In at least one institution, staff noted that the time, effort and resourcing issues relating to holding elections annually, for each year of a course, could hamper enthusiasm for the process. Further, the timescales for identifying student representatives such that they could attend the first round of committee meetings in the academic year caused some difficulties, particularly in respect of first year students (who in the first few weeks are likely to be preoccupied with making a successful transition into university life) and taught postgraduate students (who may be attending the institution for only one year). Student representatives interviewed also noted that many of their colleagues relinquished the representative role in their final year, to concentrate on their studies.
- 5.17 A number of reasons were put forward for the evident difficulties of encouraging students to put themselves forward as possible student representatives at course/programme and departmental/school level. The two most common reasons suggested by student unions (in responding to the survey, and in interviews) were student apathy and students having other priorities and interests/commitments outside of studying and university life. This is particularly the case for part-time students, who may well be in full-time employment, but may be equally applicable to full-time students. And while employment (and other commitments) may well reduce students' desire to become involved in such processes, some interviewees (staff and student unions) noted other possible underlying causes. As one student union officer noted, 'an effective representation system is about a student community engaged with their subject area, but there's a reductive approach from students, they come to higher education, to get a certificate, to get a job'. Another student union officer echoed this concern, noting that students are very employment focussed and 'want to be taught methods and skills rather than content'. However, in one FEC which was having difficulty engaging its diverse range of HE students in broader aspects of the learning experience, a youth worker had run focus groups with students on a range of issues (including cultural awareness, social diversity and respecting difference) which had led to students gaining a more informed understanding of the school's desire to have effective processes for continuous improvement which involved the students themselves.

- 5.18 In many of the fieldwork universities, a particular afternoon each week is deemed 'free' (of timetabled sessions) to allow students to engage in extra-curricular activities (primarily sport) and, in theory, this time is used for committee meetings where student representation is required. But some staff recognised that this arrangement effectively means that students interested in sport will not put themselves forward for 'representation' activities (and in one instance at least, the 'free' sessions rule has been breached, to ease timetabling problems).
- 5.19 Both student unions and senior central staff noted in interviews that for many students something has to be 'going very wrong' for students to mobilise themselves, the implication being that they will (only) use or become aware of the representation systems as a route for complaints/identifying problems. A further reason for non-engagement, mentioned by a small number of interviewees, is students' lack of willingness to speak up and criticise learning and teaching processes – possibly because they perceive a hierarchical pupil/schoolteacher relationship (a few interviewees mentioned this in relation to some international students in particular). Others referred to students' perceptions that being seen to raise issues could negatively affect their academic performance.
- 5.20 Staff and students in further education colleges also noted that student representatives are more likely to be nominated/volunteered than elected. Further, while students may express enthusiasm to become representatives during freshers' week, such enthusiasm tends to wane when their course timetable 'kicks in'. In one college where the HE student population comprises primarily part-time students, senior staff acknowledged that such students have complex lives and 'they will choose to become involved in formal student engagement processes according to a level of intensity and frequency that matches their own needs at any one particular time. As with any democratic process there will be varying levels of involvement'. More generally it was noted that the increasing diversity of learners and the flexibility of attendance patterns to meet learners' needs does create challenges for student representation models predicated on a 'full-time' mode of study requiring regular attendance on campus.

### *Training for the role*

- 5.21 The survey data indicate that training for student representatives is near universal. Table 3 shows the detail. Just over half the HEIs indicated that the student union is responsible for training, and in around a third of HEIs such training is a joint institution/union responsibility. Interestingly, student unions considered that training is much more likely to be the sole responsibility of the student union (87% indicated this to be case). For FECs, responsibility is much more likely to be an institutional one.

**Table 3: Responsibility for providing training for student representatives, by category of respondee (%)**

	HEIs	Student unions	FECs
Institution (e.g. student services)	9	3	52
Student union	54	87	16
Joint institution/student union	35	10	16
Not applicable/no training provided	2	0	16

Source: Online survey. HEIs n=80; student unions n=39; FECs n=25

- 5.22 But while such training might be offered, it is clear from the interviews with student representatives that many had not attended such training, either because they had been unaware of it, or had received notification at short notice and had been unable to attend. In one of the fieldwork HEIs, the central enhancement unit was currently reviewing the nature of training for student representatives. It was hoped that better training might help representatives to make more reflective inputs to more general discussions about the future direction of the institution. The same institution recognised that faculty representatives (who are likely to be involved in strategic-level discussions) may need a rather different skill set than that required by student representatives at programme level.

- 5.23 Many student unions in HEIs have identified the coordination of student representatives as a specific area of activity for an executive member of the union, and institutional staff recognised that such developments have helped to enhance the visibility of the student representation system across the institution. However, it seems from the fieldwork that communications between departments/schools and the student union are not as effective as they might be. Student union/student representative coordinators are not necessarily informed by departments about 'who' the current batch of student representatives are, and so they are unable to contact the representatives easily. But without good lines of communication, much of the efforts put into briefing/training of representatives run by the student unions, running student representative forums and the like will be rather less effective than might otherwise be the case. In one of the fieldwork institutions, no training for student representatives had been offered in the previous session because the student union had no information about 'who' the representatives were. In fact, we found a rather wide spectrum of knowledge about 'who' are the student representatives, ranging from those where the student union is (still) trying to establish and maintain a comprehensive database of student representatives (and for whom efforts may be hampered by lack of communication with relevant departments and/or the non-existence of student representatives) to those that already have a comprehensive database, regularly update representatives on issues and have been able to establish good working relationships between the student union and a named contact (for student representatives) in each department.
- 5.24 In one of the fieldwork institutions, the student union had recently instigated an online election system both to 'save departments the time and trouble' and to provide the union with a good overview of the process across the institution (including a more comprehensive knowledge base). However, student representatives reported that initial teething problems with the system had resulted in rather fewer students voting than might otherwise have been the case. But not all student unions seem to be proactive in trying to improve current election processes and seeking out information about 'who' are the student representatives. In some cases it is an institution's central service unit that is working with the student union to develop an appropriate database. We should also acknowledge that resource constraints may be hampering some student unions' ability to be more proactive.
- 5.25 Alongside offering specific training, it is clear that institutions and student unions are putting some effort into producing (joint) student representative handbooks and codes of practice on student representation. At least one student union has gone further and produced a staff handbook on student representation. We also note that the NUS has developed a particular section of its website containing 'representation resources', including general information for course representative coordinators in institutions, case study examples and electronic links to particular institutions' processes and practices (covering certain aspects of the lifecycle of student representation). The NUS has also instigated an annual event for institutional student representative coordinators.
- 5.26 In addition to providing training for student representatives, in at least one higher education institution a central services unit provides mentoring support to student union sabbatical officers. The aim is to provide the incoming officers with sufficient information, support and advice to take issues forward (they can then provide information, support and advice to student representatives and the wider student body). The unit organises a 'hand-over' lunch for the incoming and outgoing sabbatical officers; provides a briefing session on institutional committee structures, lines of reporting, 'who's who', general protocols, current and likely issues for the new session; and gives ongoing support. In this way, the institution considers that it is enhancing the continuity and hence effectiveness of student representation processes which might otherwise be adversely affected by the annual changeover of student union officers and student representatives. In another institution, staff within the registry brief faculty convenors (of student representatives) about the operation of (faculty) committee meetings. And another institution is currently discussing the possibility of faculty liaison officers taking on a mentoring role for student representatives within the faculty.
- 5.27 As noted above, training for student representatives in further education colleges is more likely to be run by a central student services unit than by the student union. In at least one college, training for higher education course representatives is run as part of a weekend 'away-day' and this has now been supplemented by training in-college for those representatives who have difficulty

attending at the weekend. Though the multi-site nature of this college tends to exacerbate difficulties of student representative attendance at formal meetings, it does also provide opportunities for central support staff to brief student representatives as they travel together to the relevant site for such meetings. In another college, the student union (with support from the student liaison officer) has produced briefing packs for both course representatives and course leaders, and the student liaison officer is working with the student union to create a more structured and inclusive approach to student representation.

### *Undertaking the student representative role*

- 5.28 In addition to whether or not student representative positions are filled, there is a further question of the extent to which the representatives are reflecting the views of their wider student group. Responses to the survey indicate that most HEIs and FECs consider that the range of formal student engagement processes are reasonably or very representative of students' views (Appendix B, Section One refers), but the picture gleaned from other survey responses and from the fieldwork is rather different. For example, from the online survey the vast majority of HEIs (84%) consider that their student engagement processes need to be more effective, and one of the main barriers, in addition to time (limiting students' opportunities to take part), is perceived to be the increasingly diverse student body and ensuring that their views are adequately represented.
- 5.29 From interviews with staff and student unions, it is clear that this is not necessarily a question of 'who' the student representatives are (although at least one student union is currently analysing the socio-economic backgrounds of its student representatives); rather it is more a question of whether the full range of student views is being adequately reflected and reported through the student representation system. The main 'groups' of students mentioned who might not be effectively represented were part-time, mature, international and postgraduate students. It seems that some institutions are currently putting effort into enhancing levels of general engagement with postgraduate students (for example, increased social events to create a better sense of community initially), which 'may' lead to better participation in representation activities in due course.
- 5.30 But while some modes of study (for example, part-time, at a distance, work-based) and levels of study might pose certain barriers in terms of current institutional models of representation, a few interviewees commented that 'one size does not fit all' [types of student] and the institution generally needs to better understand what student engagement means for its different learner constituencies (within programmes, and between programmes), which could well be linked to issues of student motivations (see above, paragraph 5.17). As one university noted, 'we are less good on the UK ethnicity front than on international students; we need to understand the different social characteristics of students'. Recognising that its student body was (now more) multicultural, another institution questioned whether students from certain cultural backgrounds were more reticent about criticising 'authority' and hence lacked confidence in making their voices heard other than through (anonymous) questionnaires.
- 5.31 In terms of gaining students' views on 'issues' prior to relevant meetings (for example, staff-student liaison committees) many of the student representatives interviewed commented that though they tried to gain other students' views, they did not receive much response to such requests. They suggested this could imply that students were not interested, or that they did not think any actions would be taken, even if they did put forward their views, or students in the wider group had no issues to raise. Further, when meetings had been arranged to discuss outcomes of committee discussions with the student body, few students had attended. One student representative coordinator advises student representatives to take some rather basic measures as a way of gathering views from the wider student group, including talking to 'the students on each side of you' at the end of lectures.
- 5.32 However, other groups of student representatives (including those from the small specialist institutions and those from 'smaller' subject areas) indicated that they do have effective relationships with the wider student body, receive good inputs and hence can feed these 'wider views' into relevant discussions (even if they do not necessarily agree with them), and are able to

relay back information to the wider group on the outcomes of discussions and actions (to be) taken, if any. Further, in one university department, second/third year students now volunteer to mentor first year students (the scheme having been introduced last year), and most issues now come through word of mouth (via the mentors).

- 5.33 One of the student unions interviewed is about to undertake a project which will seek to ascertain (among other things) the 'representativeness' of course representatives' views, by comparing/contrasting what course representatives 'say' on certain issues with what students taking part in focus groups 'say' on the same issues.
- 5.34 Student representatives (particularly those in Business Studies) reported using a range of information and communications technology (ICT) to facilitate certain aspects of student engagement, for example using email or Blackboard to gather students' views, and in one case setting up a Facebook group to give feedback on SSLC discussions – however, in the latter instance there had been some resentment from the wider group of students that staff were encroaching on their territory.
- 5.35 The role of liaising between departments/schools/faculties and 'the centre' seems to be undertaken in two ways. As noted above (paragraph 4.9 refers), in many HEIs faculty student representatives (selected from the pool of departmental/school representatives) provide a way of bringing forward students' views and taking part in discussions about issues affecting the quality of the student learning experience at faculty level. Such representatives also liaise directly with student union officers so that the latter are informed about issues and debates emerging across the institution and can draw on these in discussions at the main institutional-level committees. In addition to such (faculty) student representatives, in at least one of the fieldwork institutions a separate post of faculty student liaison officer has been created to undertake a number of functions, including being a neutral link between faculties and central services – neither academic nor senior management. A head of school at that institution commented that with worsening staff-student ratios, the student liaison officer also undertakes a 'valuable additional listening role'.
- 5.36 Many of the fieldwork institutions and student unions also referred to the organisation of regular meetings between student representatives and senior staff, usually on a termly basis (but in at least one case more frequently), to discuss current issues affecting the quality of students' learning experiences, and/or to discuss a specific theme. Such 'student rep forums' are run either by the student union or jointly with a central services unit. In one institution, the annual student representative conference is a rather recent initiative and senior staff ensure that they are available for (part of) the event, seeing this as a tangible way of raising the profile of student representatives and reinforcing the importance given to such roles by senior staff. At departmental/school level, in at least one institution the student union course representative coordinator tries to ensure that student representatives have a good profile with departmental staff by arranging one-to-one annual meetings with the named departmental contact to discuss current practices.
- 5.37 Within the further education college interviews, several references were made to the fact that class sizes for higher education courses tend to be small, and hence course representatives have the opportunity to 'collect' the wider student view informally. But the difficulty of representing the views of part-time students was generally acknowledged. One school in an FEC had piloted the use of Blackboard as an electronic discussion group for part-time students, and the process was about to be rolled out more widely.
- 5.38 Further, senior staff in one college noted that, in the past, student representation on formal committees had not always been positive and the concept of 'representation' had been misplaced (in the sense that either the representatives remained 'mute' throughout discussions or used the opportunity to raise personal issues). The college considered that the recent appointment of a member of staff within student services with specific responsibility for HE students (including organising student focus groups), together with the planned introduction of a student representative handbook, should improve this situation.

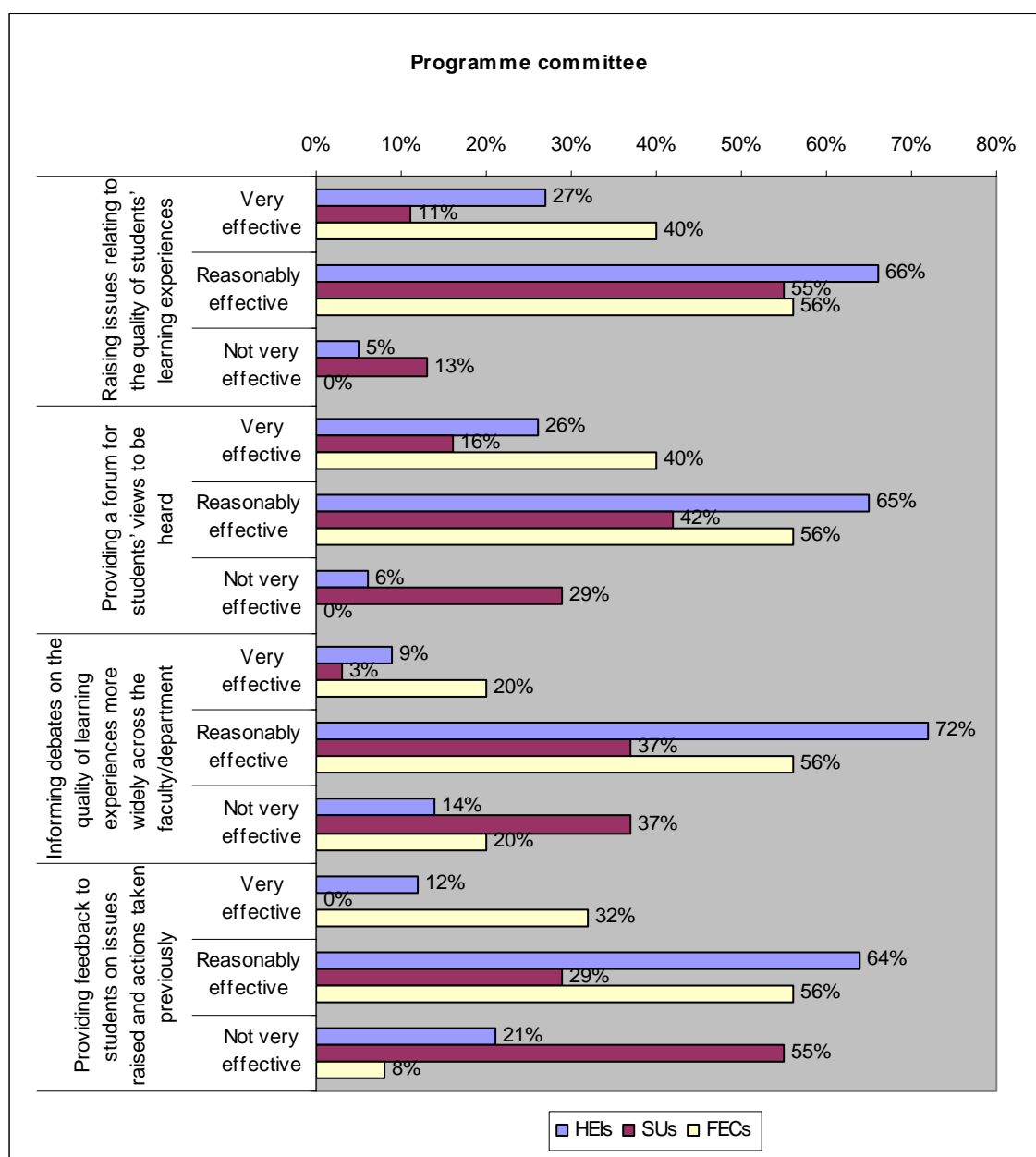
### *Undertaking the role at various levels within the institution*

- 5.39 The survey data indicate that the majority of HEIs (71%) consider that student representation on faculty/departmental committees is reasonably effective (and 16% thought it very effective). Faculty representatives are usually elected/selected from the pool of course representatives at school/departmental level, and (as noted above) are intended to be the 'link' between student representatives and student unions. Two institutions had recently instituted the role of faculty representative (three/four per faculty), with good reporting links to the student union. In one of these, the student union is proposing further changes, including the establishment of a 'school president' to act as a senior course representative for that school, and to be responsible for collating information from the other school course representatives; the faculty representatives would then be elected from the pool of school presidents. However, another institution (which had recently reorganised its academic structures into four large faculties) had abandoned the system of faculty representatives (one undergraduate and one postgraduate per faculty) since it had proved ineffectual.
- 5.40 With the exception of one institution, most institutional interviewees commented that the student representation system works better at programme and school level than at faculty level. Reasons for this seem to revolve around the 'closeness' of issues raised at course and school/departmental-level meetings to the interests and experiences of the student representatives (and possibly the more bureaucratic nature of faculty-level meetings). In one institution the constitution of the board of studies was such that meetings were not deemed quorate unless there was at least one student representative present. Another institution had recently reorganised its school programme-level committees to encompass a smaller group of programmes such that the student representatives would have a closer interest in, and knowledge of, the broader issues under discussion. The same institution recognises that it needs to do more student representative training, and also possibly training for chairs of relevant committees, to ensure that meetings are run in a manner that engenders an appropriate input from all committee members, including the student representatives. As an associate dean in another university noted of student representatives (Engineering, Physical Science), 'at formal board [of studies] meetings they can feel intimidated and can be very quiet'.
- 5.41 A further aspect of student representation mentioned in more than one fieldwork institution relates to student-led initiatives (see also paragraph 5.67). One aspect relates to students themselves being involved in the development of discussion papers on academic issues (for example, plagiarism) and the student union presenting the paper for discussion at institutional-level committees, with positive outcomes. Another aspect relates to students themselves undertaking small-scale internal studies on specific issues. In one case this had proved a fruitful exercise (in the sense of engendering well-informed discussion at the SSLC, and giving the wider student group a sense that their voices were being heard). But in another instance, though a specific study had been organised jointly by the student union and central services (and coordinated by student representatives), the final stage of the study (viz focus groups) failed to happen.

### *Effectiveness of programme committees*

- 5.42 The online survey included some specific questions about the effectiveness of programme committees in relation to certain aspects of their functions. Figure 1 shows the detail.

**Figure 1: Effectiveness ratings of aspects of programme committee functions, by category of respondent**



5.43 The survey data indicate that most HEIs considered programme committees to be reasonably effective in terms of: raising issues relating to the quality of students' learning experiences; providing a forum for students' views to be heard; informing debates on the quality of learning experiences more widely; and providing feedback to students on issues raised and action taken. In fact, a quarter of HEIs consider that such committees are very effective for raising issues and providing a forum. But at the same time, a fifth of HEIs considered that the committees are not very effective in providing feedback. Generally, student unions were less likely to rate the effectiveness of programme committees so well. Just less than a third of student unions indicated that such committees are not very effective in providing a forum for students' views to be heard; more than a third indicated that such committees are not very effective in informing debates on the quality of learning experiences more widely; and more than half considered that they are not very effective in providing feedback to students.

5.44 In terms of disseminating information 'back' to the wider student body, one or two schools referred in interviews to organising a session (a week or so after programme committee/course board) for

student representatives and staff to feed back to the cohort the outcomes of discussions and any plans for further action. However, at least one head of school commented that the time, effort and sheer logistics of setting up such face-to-face opportunities created some challenges, and it might well require student representatives themselves to have a certain level of 'boldness and maturity' to set up such meetings.

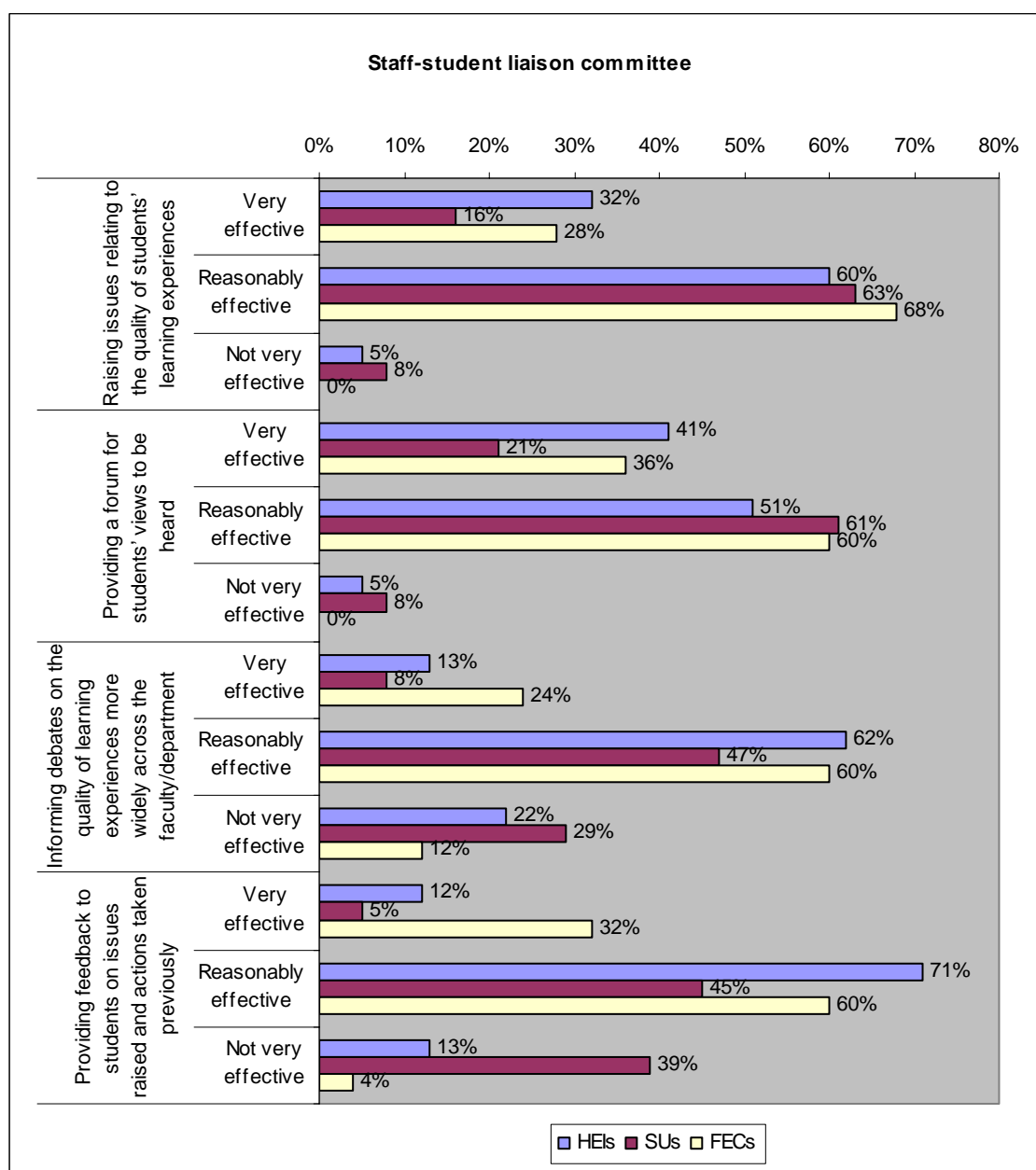
- 5.45 Some student representatives also commented that while they may want to take the initiative in relaying information directly to student cohorts, they do not necessarily have within their schools/departments sufficient 'authority' to draw upon the necessary resources – for example, accessing the schools' electronic mailbase to contact students directly (data protection issues); using photocopying facilities; and making room bookings.
  
- 5.46 The survey data indicate that most FECs also considered programme committees to be reasonably effective in terms of raising issues relating to the quality of students' learning experiences; providing a forum for students' views to be heard; informing debates on the quality of learning experiences more widely; and providing feedback to students on issues raised and action taken. In fact, two fifths of FECs considered that such committees are very effective for raising issues and providing a forum. From the fieldwork it is clear that colleges are now changing some of their formal arrangements for the academic governance of higher education within the college, and within that reviewing ways of 'securing' the collective HE student voice. The reasons for these changes include the growth in HE provision within the college, which now warrants separate arrangements, and the linked requirement to develop an HE strategy; (anticipated) requirements for QAA's newly introduced integrated quality and enhancement review (IQER) processes; and (for some) an anticipated application for foundation degree awarding powers. It is likely that these changes may well have a knock-on effect for student representation processes, including 'how' and 'where' they link in with the new committee structures.
  
- 5.47 From interviews with FEC staff, it seems that the gathering of HE student views via course representatives for onward transmission to higher level committees and to the HE coordinator is undertaken by various methods – for example, centrally (by student services); via quality managers in schools reporting through an HE quality manager; via the student liaison officer.
  
- 5.48 Within the FECs, most course representatives interviewed considered that they were able to feed back the outcomes of discussions to the wider group effectively (usually in class). A few commented that they saw their role as both a 'relay' role and a 'pestering role', ensuring that issues raised did not get forgotten.

#### *Staff-student liaison committees*

- 5.49 The online survey included some specific questions about the effectiveness of staff-student liaison committees in relation to certain aspects of their functions. Figure 2 shows the detail.



**Figure 2: Effectiveness ratings of aspects of staff-student liaison committee functions, by category of respondent**



- 5.50 In contrast to programme committees, HEIs were more likely to consider departmental/school staff-student liaison committees to be very effective in raising issues relating to the quality of students' learning experiences (32% did so), and providing a forum for students' voices to be heard (41%). Generally, student unions were less likely to rate the effectiveness of SSLCs so highly. In particular, around a third indicated that SSLCs are not very effective in informing debates on the quality of learning experiences more widely (across the department), nor very effective in providing feedback to students on issues raised and actions taken previously.
- 5.51 In some institutions students are in the majority at such forums, and in at least one of the fieldwork institutions the institutional code of practice for SSLCs stipulates that students should form the majority. But from the interviews it is also clear that in very many institutions attendance at SSLCs is patchy, with students more likely to attend if they have 'a problem'. Though intended to be rather less formal affairs than programme committees, at least one institution commented that 'SSLCs are rather stilted and defensive affairs; it's difficult for students to criticise staff who are in the meetings'.

- 5.52 From the interviews, it is also clear that the detailed constitutional and operational arrangements for SSLCs vary between departments and schools within the same institution – as noted previously, one size does not fit all. For example, in one institution there is an expectation that a student representative will chair the SSLC. However, after some poor experiences with student chairs, one school has reverted to the SSLC being chaired by a member of staff, and the students are happy with this arrangement. In another institution, some departments routinely make SSLC minutes available to students, but other departments do not.
- 5.53 As part of learner involvement strategies, FECs operate learner forums in each school/department which meet on a termly basis (or more frequently). In at least one of the fieldwork colleges, the learner forums comprise course representatives, teaching staff, youth workers, a student union representative and invited support staff. The survey data indicate that the majority of FECs consider these forums to be very/reasonably effective. But some senior staff also commented that issues raised at learner forums can be too specific to particular students and/or to particular courses, and that broader issues relating to learning and teaching are not addressed. In many of the fieldwork colleges, the growth in HE provision has led to the establishment of separate HE and FE learner forums to ensure that HE student voices and concerns are heard more effectively (though in those schools/departments with a relatively small proportion of HE provision there is still a single learner forum). But part-time HE students in one of the college's schools noted that they were unaware of such forums or the existence of course representatives. This same group also acknowledged that given they attend college only one day/week and have full-time jobs it is unlikely that any of their cohort would have the time or energy to take on such roles and/or attend such forums. In another college, each school's dedicated youth worker contacts all HE students prior to the meeting of the learner forum to ascertain issues to be raised (and ensure that the agenda is set by students). This has been successful in terms of establishing the remit of such forums: 'they are no longer seen as just a complaints forum anymore'. Further, in at least one of the schools these actions also seem to have engendered more positive student attitudes towards student engagement processes more widely (such that within the school response rates to college surveys have improved significantly).

### *Representation through the student union*

- 5.54 During the fieldwork interviews, all HEIs referred to the importance of good relationships between the senior management team and student unions, usually effected through regular (weekly or monthly) meetings and open door policies. Many HEIs referred to viewing the student union team as being 'critical friends'. For a senior staff member in one of the specialist institutions, the student union president's direct line to senior management far outweighs all the formal mechanisms of student representation.
- 5.55 All the student unions interviewed agreed that relationships with senior management are good, with each party trying to engage students as partners in learning and teaching processes. As such, relationships had maybe shifted away from a more aggressive position that might have been the case a few years ago. However, at least one student union noted that there could be some drawbacks to such good and open relationships with institutional senior management if student unions were then seen as being 'co-opted' into the institutional 'view' rather than acting as a critical friend. In another university, the involvement of student union officers in 'away-days' for governors is viewed as a further positive route for student voices to be heard by those responsible for the overall governance of the institution.
- 5.56 FECs noted that the student union role in relation to students' learning experiences is underdeveloped generally (and in particular in relation to higher education students, who in the main constitute a minority of the student population). In one college, HE students had joined the student union of the college's validating university. In most colleges, actions were currently being taken to enhance the student union role (for example, establishing a paid sabbatical post for president of the SU; creating a cross-college student liaison officer post; identifying a specific 'HE' post within central student services, whose remit included liaising with the student union).

### *Monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of student representative processes*

- 5.57 It is evident from the survey responses and fieldwork interviews that though overarching processes for student representation may be similar across the sector, there is much variation between institutions and within institutions. Senior institutional staff often referred to 'local variations' at school/departmental level, with decisions on detailed implementation being devolved to schools/departments, albeit within more general institutional policies.
- 5.58 Such 'local variation' might well assist departments and schools to develop processes which they consider better meet the needs of their (various) student constituencies, and also help create a sense of ownership (rather than compliance). But it can also create some difficulties for the institution in monitoring the overall effectiveness of those processes (and possibly increasing the institution's understanding about 'what works well' in different schools/departments), and can result in rather different interpretations of central policies at the local level. As noted earlier (paragraph 5.14 refers), while institutions recognise the desirability of such local variation, many senior staff are also concerned to ensure that all students (irrespective of school/department) have equitable opportunities for involvement in student representation activities.
- 5.59 From the fieldwork interviews it seems that HEIs were often clear about 'who' takes the lead in particular aspects of the student representation 'lifecycle' (for example, student unions taking the lead in informing students about the process during induction). But student unions in particular perceived less clarity about 'who' in the institution carries responsibility for the overall student representation process, and 'where' authority lies for making sure that certain things happen. In some institutions, the student union saw its role as one of supporting departments in delivering effective student representation practices, including trying to share knowledge of 'what works' between different departments, and the departments/schools acknowledged this role. But in other institutions, student unions referred to the difficulties of establishing good contacts with departments, and staff in departments/schools had little knowledge of student union activities in relation to student representatives other than training.
- 5.60 Further, in some HEIs, though it was acknowledged that certain departments/schools were rather less diligent than others in ensuring even a minimum level of student representation, there was less certainty about 'who' in the institution should and/or could be taking responsibility for ensuring that actions were taken to improve the situation. This lack of clarity could well be linked to fundamental questions about the 'ownership' of the student representation system within an institution.
- 5.61 However, in at least one of the fieldwork institutions, responsibility for all student representation matters has been clarified (since the previous QAA audit) and now lies with a student representation steering group, which reports to an academic practice sub-committee of the academic board. This steering group has tacit authority to 'try and make things happen, if needs be'. In another of the universities involved in the fieldwork, the student union has been given responsibility for setting the agenda of the student affairs committee (which reports directly to the board of governors), but the union noted that it has no authority to make the student representation system work (and work well). Further, though the senior management team may well take action with faculties and schools (for example, following the regular meetings between the union and the senior team), the student union felt that 'the message gets diluted and the imperative is lost'.
- 5.62 Within the further education colleges, processes for student engagement are much more likely to be centrally driven (though with local variations) and centrally monitored. However, it is evident from the fieldwork that there is a range of practices, and in some colleges senior staff readily acknowledged that there is much work still to be done in enhancing the 'higher education' dimension of student engagement processes generally. But in at least one college, the HE dimension is part and parcel of the college's learner involvement strategy, and the LIS (and its accompanying detailed action plan) is reviewed annually by the director of student services and the college's student liaison officer, with support from the student union executive. Another college has recently made its student representation system more formalised, in part to meet QAA's requirements for IQER.

## Student feedback

- 5.63 In the following paragraphs (5.64-5.71) we consider processes and practices that involve the views of individual students being captured, primarily through student feedback questionnaires, then aggregated and analysed at various levels.
- 5.64 As noted earlier (paragraph 4.3 refers), the survey data show that HEI and FEC processes for collecting individual student views to feed into quality assurance and enhancement are broadly similar and are undertaken at a number of levels: module, programme and institution. We also note that, perhaps not surprisingly, student unions are less likely to be aware of the detailed practices relating to student feedback questionnaires (Appendix B also refers). From the interviews it is evident that a number of HEIs are continuing to use (or have recently reinstated and/or redesigned) institution-wide questionnaires for first and/or second year undergraduates (and taught postgraduate students) as a way of supplementing the information gathered through the NSS. In this way, the institution can not only gather data more useful at institution and departmental level, but can also receive 'early notice' of potential issues and possibly effect changes to enhance student learning experiences sooner than might otherwise be the case.

### *Collecting and using data from student feedback questionnaires*

- 5.65 The online survey data show that a variety of methods exist for administering student feedback questionnaires to the wider student body and analysing the findings. In around half of HEIs, programme-level student feedback questionnaires are administered in class, by staff; and around half of HEIs administer them online, prompted by an email from staff. In only a few very cases are student representatives involved in administering programme-level questionnaires. Within HEIs, module-level questionnaires are slightly more likely to be administered in class by staff than online, and it seems that student representatives may be slightly more involved in the process at module level than programme level. Institutions are looking to make better use of e-based platforms for capturing views from the wider student body (for example, setting up programme/school websites to capture student views, creating 'blogs' for courses, and podcasting), which in themselves may better reflect what students do in their daily lives and hence may better align with the dynamics of students' relationships with the taught curriculum and university life more generally. Data from both programme and module-level feedback questionnaires are most likely to be analysed by institutional staff, but in the case of module level, just over 10% of HEIs reported that student representatives analyse the data. Several interviewees in higher education institutions commented on the burden of analysing such data and utilising the data in developing action plans. However, a number also referred to actions being taken to streamline reporting lines: for example, module convenors being expected to report on module feedback only if it is negative; target scores pre-set for student perception questionnaires, with course teams expected to provide an explanation (only) where student responses drop below the target score.
- 5.66 In around half of FECs, programme-level student feedback questionnaires are administered in class, by staff; and around half of FECs administer them online. Student representatives are not involved in these processes. Module-level student feedback questionnaires are much more likely to be administered in class by staff, rather than online. In a small minority of cases, student representatives are involved in the process. Data from both programme-level and module-level questionnaires are most likely to be analysed by institutional staff, but a quarter of FECs reported using an external agency to analyse programme-level data (and just over a tenth do so in respect of module-level data).
- 5.67 Findings from such questionnaires (and the NSS, as appropriate) are reported at programme-level and school/departmental-level committees and discussed at those meetings (and/or staff-student liaison committees). Student representatives are expected to be involved in these discussions, though few of those interviewed were aware of this process. In most HEIs, the outcomes from these discussions result in the development of learning and teaching action plans for the school/department and/or are reported to faculty-level management teams to inform faculty-level action plans. More general issues relating to academic quality and standards are identified (by

faculty managers and/or by a central quality enhancement unit) and reported 'up' to relevant institution-level committees for further discussion and action (as appropriate). A few HEIs acknowledged that when taking issues for discussion to high-level committees (academic board or senate), 'the message' can be more powerful when delivered by students themselves. In some instances, central student services have encouraged and supported students in developing their contributions to high-level committee debates (on topics like policies on plagiarism and anonymous marking).

- 5.68 Some institutional staff noted that they are looking to become 'smarter' in analysing aggregated feedback data, such that information gleaned from student feedback questionnaires is used in more strategic ways (and in some senses moving away from merely an operational focus). Others acknowledged that the advent of the NSS has sharpened up the institution's practices in relation to action planning (though it is as yet too soon to assess the effectiveness of this process). For some, the development, implementation and review of such action plans demonstrates a deliberate shift towards quality enhancement, and this is seen as a proactive process. Student engagement in this activity (through student representatives being party to deliberations on action plans) is part of that proactive process, whereas a focus solely on quality assurance (and student engagement in that) is seen more as a reactive process. To emphasise this focus on enhancement, one of the fieldwork institutions calls such plans 'learning and teaching enhancement review action plans'.
- 5.69 In interviews, we learned of one student union that 'mirrors' the committee deliberation processes itself, to the extent of summarising issues being discussed and brought forward at school/departmental committee meetings, and producing short papers for faculty representatives to use at faculty committee meetings. However, even where a student union would want to undertake such processes and has the resources to do so, it would depend largely on the student union being able to obtain copies of relevant committee minutes. This is clearly not the case in many of the fieldwork institutions, and can often be hampered by the basic logistics of meeting schedules.

#### *Dissemination of action plans and results from student feedback questionnaires*

- 5.70 While particular student representatives on committees at various levels of the academic organisation should be aware of such discussions and action plans, the extent to which the wider student body is informed of these (and/or wants to know about them) is less certain and variable. The online survey data indicate that HEIs consider that both student representatives and staff will be relaying decisions affecting the quality of the learning experience back to students. From the fieldwork it is clear that some HEIs use a range of ways of disseminating the information, including items within school newsletters and 'posting' course/school board minutes and action plans on relevant departmental/school notice-boards and web pages. But it is not clear the extent to which either student representatives and/or the wider student body use the opportunity to seek out information about planned actions for improvements to programmes. In some HEIs, a central 'student experience' team produces short posters highlighting 'what you said – what we did' and ensures that these are posted on relevant faculty and/or departmental/school notice-boards. Though the use of such posters may be becoming more widespread, it does still require the wider student group to seek out/read such posters, and it is unclear from our study the extent to which this happens in practice. Further, from interviews with some of the student representatives (paragraphs 5.31 and 5.32 refer) it seems that feedback to wider student groups can present some challenges.
- 5.71 Practices within FECs for disseminating information gleaned from student surveys back to the students are similar to those within HEIs. One FEC is currently piloting the use of mobile phone technology to 'text' students with the results of student feedback questionnaires, highlighting main issues.

## Student engagement through tutorials

- 5.72 As noted earlier (paragraph 4.12), respondents to the online survey referred to tutorials as a further route through which individual students could raise general issues relating to learning and teaching, in addition to issues relating to their own personal engagement with the course.
- 5.73 In interviews, many staff in HEIs referred to tutorials as an *informal* route by which students' views can be heard. Thus, though not necessarily central to the formal student engagement processes, they can be an effective 'early warning' of possible issues affecting the collective student learning experience which can then be 'nipped in the bud'. However, in many institutions it was acknowledged that practices on tutorials varied within schools/departments. Thus it could be questioned to what extent tutorials should be considered as *deliberate* attempts to involve and empower students in the process of shaping the learning experience (as defined for this study). One HEI has recently introduced a new model for personal tutoring to try to ensure a comparable experience for all students. In the past, it had seemed that students 'used' their tutorials only if they had a problem, and the institution is now trying to raise staff and students' perceptions of the value of tutorial sessions. It was also recognised that while in some departments first year tutorials were used primarily to supplement and reinforce teaching delivered through lectures (and as such students saw value in attending), by the second year it was left very much to students to choose whether they used their allotted tutorial time or not. Another HEI acknowledged that though personal tutors are available 'from day one', it is up to students to avail themselves of the opportunity to use the tutorial system.
- 5.74 In the FECs, tutorials are seen much more as part and parcel of the timetabled curriculum, with student entitlements to personal and group tutorials being clearly set out (for example, five personal tutorials per term), and student take-up monitored/audited. In one FEC, tutorials are seen as a very effective way of encouraging feedback from students; the tutorials are minuted and the minutes reviewed by school quality managers who identify any common issues and relay the information 'back' to course teams. However, some staff acknowledged that there is a balance to be struck between supporting individual learner development through regular tutorials and the development of HE students as independent learners.

## Summary of student engagement processes in practice

- 5.75 The majority of higher education institutions rate their student engagement processes as reasonably or very effective; however, student unions are less likely to do so. Of these processes, a third of HEIs rate student representation on institutional-level committees and staff-student liaison committees (or similar) as very effective. Further education colleges also rate a number of the formal processes as reasonably/very effective. The rest of this section explores in more detail the effectiveness of student engagement processes in terms of i) student representation and ii) student feedback questionnaires.
- 5.76 The lifecycle of the **student representation process** can be viewed as comprising 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.

Each stage is discussed below in terms of the issues raised in the study.

- 5.77 *Awareness raising and recognition of the role.* Most institutions, through or with the student union, arrange some form of preliminary briefing for students during induction/freshers' week. Reasons why students put themselves forward to become student representatives vary widely. Around a third of HEIs offer student representatives the opportunity to gain specific recognition for their role, while student unions consider that the proportion offering this opportunity is higher, at just over

half. However, the majority of FECs do not offer student representatives the opportunity to gain recognition for their specific role.

- 5.78 *Nominations and elections – the democratic process.* Student representation on HEIs' institutional-level committees is good; 71% indicated no difficulties at all in filling posts. However, representation at other levels – faculty, departmental and programme – is more difficult. Findings reveal that, in both HEIs and FECs, student representatives are much more likely to be nominated or volunteered than formally elected, and many continue 'in post' from the previous year. Reasons given why students do not put themselves forward as student representatives varied, but included apathy, having other interests, and just wanting to study and get a qualification.
- 5.79 *Training for the role.* Training is near universal, although many of the student representatives interviewed had not attended because they had been unaware of it or were given short notice. In HEIs, training is run by the student union or jointly with the institution; in FECs, training is more likely to be run by a central unit. Many student unions in HEIs have an executive member of staff to coordinate the student representation process across the institution, which enhances its visibility. However, findings suggest that communications between schools/departments and student unions are not as effective as they might be. In addition to specific training, some institutions and student unions have produced handbooks and codes of practice on student representation.
- 5.80 *Undertaking the student representative role.* Most HEIs and FECs considered that formal student engagement processes are reasonably or very representative of students' views. However, 84% of HEIs also considered that their student engagement processes need to be more effective to address – among other things – the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. Interviewees noted that the main groups of students that might not be effectively represented are part-time, mature, international and postgraduate students. While many student representatives commented that they tried to gain other students' views, responses from the wider student body to such requests were few. However, other student representatives, from the small specialist institutions and smaller subject areas, indicated that they do have effective relationships with the wider student body. In some FECs, class sizes for higher education courses tend to be small and hence course representatives have opportunities to collect the wider student view informally. But the difficulty of representing part-time students' views was generally acknowledged.
- 5.81 The online survey data suggest that the majority of HEIs consider student representation on faculty and departmental committees to be reasonably/very effective. However, fieldwork findings suggest that the student representation process works better at programme and school/departmental level than at faculty level because of the closeness of the issues raised to the experiences of the student representatives at the former level. Most HEIs considered programme committees to be reasonably/very effective in terms of: raising issues relating to the quality of students' learning experiences; providing a forum for students' views to be heard; informing debates on the quality of learning experiences more widely; and providing feedback to students on issues raised and action taken. Most FECs also considered programme committees to be reasonably effective and two fifths considered them very effective for raising issues and providing a forum.
- 5.82 Compared to programme committees, HEIs were more likely to consider school/departmental *staff-student liaison committees* to be very effective in raising issues relating to the quality of students' learning experiences, and providing a forum for students' voices to be heard. But fieldwork findings suggest that in many institutions attendance by student representatives is patchy and the detailed constitutional and operational arrangements vary between departments and schools within the same institution. In FECs and as part of learner involvement strategies, learner forums operate in each school/department; the majority of FECs considered these forums to be very/reasonably effective.
- 5.83 *Monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of student representative processes.* While student representation processes may be similar across the sector, there is much variation between and within institutions. Such local variation can assist departments and schools to develop processes that better meet the needs of their (various) student constituencies. But it can also create some difficulties for monitoring the overall effectiveness of those processes across an institution, and

result in different interpretations of central policies at the local level. Findings suggest that there is some lack of clarity within HEIs about *who* carries institutional responsibility for the overall student representation process and *where* authority lies in making sure that certain things happen. This lack of clarity could well be linked to fundamental questions about the 'ownership' of the student representation system within the institution. Within FECs, processes for student engagement are much more likely to be centrally driven and monitored.

- 5.84 In terms of **student feedback questionnaires**, HEIs' and FECs' processes for collecting individual student views to feed into quality assurance and enhancement are broadly similar and are undertaken at a number of levels: module, programme and institution. Fieldwork findings indicate that a number of HEIs are using institution-wide questionnaires for first and/or second year undergraduate and taught postgraduate students as a way of supplementing the information gathered through the NSS.
- 5.85 In around half of HEIs, programme-level student feedback questionnaires are administered in class by staff and the rest administer them online. Module-level questionnaires are slightly more likely to be administered in class by staff than online. Data from both programme and module-level questionnaires are more likely to be analysed by institutional staff. In around half of FECs, programme-level questionnaires are administered in class by staff and the rest administer them online. Module-level questionnaires are much more likely to be administered in class by staff rather than online. Data from both programme-level and module-level questionnaires are more likely to be analysed by institutional staff, but some FECs reported using an external agency.
- 5.86 Findings from questionnaires are reported and discussed at programme and school/departmental-level committees. Student representatives are expected to be involved in these discussions, though few of those interviewed were aware of this process. Outcomes result in the development of learning and teaching action plans, which are reported to faculty-level management teams to inform faculty-level action plans. More general issues relating to academic quality and standards are identified and reported to the relevant institutional-level committees for further discussion and action where appropriate. Some institutional staff noted that their institutions are looking to become 'smarter' in analysing aggregated student feedback data and others acknowledged that the NSS had sharpened institutional practices for action planning.
- 5.87 While particular student representatives on committees at various levels of the academic organisation *should* be aware of such discussions and action plans, the extent to which the wider student body is informed of these (and/or wants to know about them) is less certain and variable. Findings show that some institutions make sure that these action plans are posted on relevant departmental/school notice-boards and web pages.
- 5.88 There is some (rather limited) evidence that greater student engagement is engendered when students themselves take the lead in investigating specific issues affecting the collective learning experience and develop discussion papers for debate at relevant committees.



## 6 Student engagement and subject specific issues

- 6.1 By design, the fieldwork aimed to focus on a small number of specific subject areas within higher education provision, as well as exploring institution-wide processes of student engagement. As noted earlier (paragraph 2.9 refers), the areas identified were: Art and Design and Performing Arts; Business Studies; Engineering; Mathematics. In practice, not every subject area was represented in each of the institutions, and in some cases similar substitutes were used. While admittedly very small scale in nature and based on rather diverse settings, the following analysis of the fieldwork findings by subject area attempts to highlight aspects of student engagement that seem to be common to a particular subject area.

### Art and Design and Performing Arts

- 6.2 By their very nature, the disciplines of Art and Design and the Performing Arts require staff and students to interact with each other on an ongoing basis, which emanates from the studio and practice-based nature of the learning and teaching process. This was a central message to come out of many of the interviews undertaken with staff and student representatives in these disciplines. In addition to the learning and teaching process, reference was made to the public nature of the learning experience – exhibitions, performances and so on. As a senior manager of one of the specialist institutions described it: ‘the nature of studio-based practice defines the way in which students interact with the institution; the output of learning is so public that it impacts on relationships between students and staff, and staff (including non-academic staff) share a sense of pride in the students, especially during the degree show’. The role of external examiners was also highlighted in the context of the nature of the discipline. External examiners act as an additional formalised route for gathering and reporting back to staff on feedback from students as a result of their meetings and discussions with students.
- 6.3 With the exception of one institution, all senior managers and some of the student representatives interviewed in the fieldwork case study institutions referred to the importance and effectiveness of informal processes for students to express their opinions, discuss issues and resolve difficulties. Often, issues raised in this way are resolved much quicker than through the more formalised channels. However, in all cases, these informal processes operate alongside the more formal ones and, as one senior manager reported, ‘the more formal processes can act as a safety net if issues are not resolved informally and quickly’. Reasons given for the value placed on informal processes were the nature of the discipline, the generally smaller size of the student body and the ongoing interactions between staff and students.
- 6.4 Alongside this informality is a greater sense of community and partnership between staff and students in the Art and Design and Performing Arts disciplines than we detected in the other disciplines that were part of our study. Again, reasons for this echo those mentioned above – the size of the student body, the nature of the discipline and the ongoing interactions between staff and students. In three of the institutions, senior managers referred to the sense of partnership between staff and students and the use of a shared space. In one of the specialist institutions, senior managers saw students as part of the academic community; they were not seen as consumers but ‘co-producers of knowledge’. In the two specialist institutions and a number of departments in the other institutions, reference was made to the sense of community and the relatively small size of the student body, which made it easier for staff to talk with students and to get to know and understand their views.
- 6.5 At the two specialist institutions, students are involved in staff appointments. At one, the student union president is a member of recruitment panels for both senior academic and administrative appointments. At the other, student panels are established as part of the recruitment process of all academic staff; in this way students are made to feel that they are part and parcel of the academic community and the life of the institution.

- 6.6 The student representatives interviewed in the two specialist institutions were much more confident about the positive ways in which their organisations listened to and took seriously their views. For example, student representatives in one of the specialist institutions reported that alongside the formalised mechanisms for gathering students' views and as part of the learning process there are weekly meetings between the tutors and students to discuss issues. Student representatives at both the specialist institutions also felt that they were kept well informed about decisions made and actions taken as a result of their feedback; as one student representative noted: 'even when things can't be changed, we do get information about why it's not possible to meet our requests'. This undoubtedly reflects the size of organisation and the sense of community that exists in these types of institution.

## **Business Studies**

- 6.7 From the fieldwork interviews it is difficult to get a strong sense of a distinctive Business Studies flavour to student engagement, except perhaps a more developed concept of student as customer, the more extensive use of technology in student engagement, and the potential for involving external sponsors and business expertise in the process. One head of school talked of students having (and expecting?) rights as a customer, and acknowledged that course and faculty representatives have this sense as well. The school cannot ignore this (other) agenda, but is also trying to foster a genuine listening, 'value free' community (not 'just' listening to appease customers). More generally, it seems that the NSS has made a massive difference to staff awareness of student engagement issues and has engendered a more active approach in several university business schools, with student engagement being given more attention and being taken more seriously than in the past. In some university business schools, there is recognition of the need for a customer-facing approach from everyone, not just the person in the classroom. In others, some staff still need to be encouraged to be student focussed. In one FEC, students are being encouraged to reflect on their engagement in feedback processes in their personal development plans.
- 6.8 The use of technology in student engagement processes – podcasts, blogs, wikis, virtual learning environments (VLEs), Blackboard, Facebook – was more often mentioned by Business Studies staff and students than those from other disciplines. One interviewee thought this was because the expectations of students about using ICT are much higher now. Student representatives were reported to use Blackboard to gather students' views, and one tried setting up a Facebook group to give feedback on SSLC discussions to the wider student body. However, other student representatives reported resentment from Business Studies students that staff were encroaching on their territory. One of the FECs had particularly used Blackboard for capturing the views of part-time students and running discussion groups with them. In at least one institution, it was noted that the more informal mechanisms (for example those supported by VLE) seem to work better; the more formal ones 'encourage minor whinges'.
- 6.9 While filling the student representative positions in business schools did not seem to create difficulties, several staff and students reported a drop off in attendance at SSLC meetings. There were some specific practical obstacles (including timetabling clashes when students came from modular and multi-disciplinary programmes and/or were part-time students; very late notification of meetings). However, in one of the universities, part-time students tend to be mature and are more likely to become representatives.
- 6.10 The introduction of an election process in one institution had made a big difference because student representatives now felt they had a mandate from the wider student body to 'represent' their views. The types of discussion at SSLC had improved – prompted by the business school student representatives themselves undertaking surveys of students on specific issues, providing feedback etc. The SSLC now seems to have more students than staff attending (it used to be other way around) and is run by students, with staff support.
- 6.11 In another institution, student representatives do bring forward positive ideas to SSLC meetings and not just problems. There is a sense, as well, that students take more notice and listen more if

the 'messenger' is also a student. However, in another HEI it was felt that the school relies too heavily on the student representatives for feeding back to the student body.

- 6.12 It was acknowledged that, generally, business schools may be in a better position than most to attract sponsorship from external businesses. In at least one of the fieldwork institutions, such sponsorship provides honoraria for student representatives. External business also comes in to the school to provide training in advocacy, leadership etc, which has the additional benefit of giving the representatives an opportunity to meet together as a Business Studies group.
- 6.13 In another institution, the students were operating in a more strategic manner and seeing the Business Studies Society as a good way of networking, building links with employers etc (the society also benefits from external sponsorship). From next year, the president of the student society will also be part of the SSLC.
- 6.14 In terms of recognition for student representatives, for many the 'best bit' was being invited to various events within the school to meet external business people, and this was seen as good for networking.

### **Engineering (including computing)**

- 6.15 A number of staff referred to the 'ethos' of engineering and computing departments being important to engendering student engagement. In a few cases, this was referred to in terms of the subject itself – for example, a head of school within an FEC noted that the school is conscious of the need for continuous improvement, and continuous improvement is at the heart of engineering. Within the same school a recent influx of young staff moving 'in' from industry had helpfully brought with them a culture of continuous (business) improvement. One university department head was hopeful that the younger departmental staff will help to break down barriers between staff and students and focus more attention on aspects of attitudes and cultures in creating positive student engagement processes and improving the student experience (and less on performance metrics). Another head of department specifically referred to students being an important source of information about new technologies and hence maintaining the currency of the curriculum (along with inputs from industry, and professional accreditation panels). However, a counter view was also expressed, with staff in one university suggesting that it is debatable how much input from students (at undergraduate level) is in fact desirable, and others noting that some staff see student representatives as challenging and threatening.
- 6.16 One aspect of student engagement mentioned by a number of interviewees related to a sense of 'community' facilitated (or hampered) by physical location. One university department noted that it has always had its own building with a large social area where staff and students mix, and this 'has created a sense of family over very many years'. However, in at least one FEC, intense timetabling (over a three-day period) means that students have little opportunity for 'socialising' with their own and other year groups or with the staff, and attend college for timetabled sessions only, then return home (or go to work). Another university noted its reputation for accessibility of staff and referred specifically to an 'open working space area for students' (which has some whiteboards where students 'jot' down ideas/work out solutions to problems) and through which staff regularly pass, which has proved very beneficial for informal interactions between staff and students. Open door policies whereby students could see staff outside formal timetabled sessions were also noted, though one head of department noted that 'not everyone has an open door'. In another institution, relocation to a new building and the prevalence of multi-occupancy staff offices has led one department to seek the reinstatement of some single occupancy offices (where students can have a one-to-one conversation with a staff member).
- 6.17 Student representatives seem to be mainly volunteers, though many staff noted 'we'd be delighted if we needed elections!'. Several interviewees noted that issues raised tend to focus on specific modules (both content, including level of difficulty, and delivery) rather than on broader issues. According to a number of staff, some representatives have a distorted view of their remit (and do not necessarily present a consensus view), and a few see the main benefit of taking on the role as enhancing their CV. But one department commented that students returning to university after a period of industrial training made better contributions to discussions, and in another university a

head of school noted that when part-time students do attend discussion groups, their input can be very good – drawing as it does on their broader workplace experiences and practices.

- 6.18 At least two other university departments noted particular difficulties in obtaining feedback from certain groups of international students, whom they perceived as not wishing (to be seen to) criticise staff and/or provide feedback. Moreover, part-time students attending an FEC on a one-day-per-week basis were unaware of any formal representation system and could not recall receiving any feedback from surveys they had completed.

## Mathematics

- 6.19 Little direct reference was made to the culture and ethos of mathematics teaching and learning itself, though some sense of this can be gleaned from the fact that in at least two interviews specific reference was made to deliberate attempts whereby the school/department had recently tried (but failed) to create a better sense of a 'mathematics community' through the establishment of a mathematics society. But in two other schools/departments, there is clearly a vibrant society. In one case, it is the society that elects the student representatives; in the other, the society is aligned to a very specific vocational (and expanding) area of mathematics, viz actuarial science, and links with the profession are seen as particularly important.
- 6.20 A further (indirect) sense of the ethos might be seen in the fact that in at least two departments specific attention was drawn to the need for intense tutoring for year one undergraduates. For one interviewee, while student engagement (as conceived in the study) was important, of even greater importance was the more fundamental and essential task of getting mathematics undergraduates to engage with the subject material in a manner appropriate to higher education.
- 6.21 Whereas in some departments student representatives are elected, in others they are volunteers. Issues raised by representatives are mainly module specific (content, including level of difficulty, and delivery). As one student representative noted, the main issue recently had concerned students' requests to be provided with model answers for previous years' examination questions. A department with a high proportion of international students noted the difficulties in obtaining feedback from such students, and the use of an online system for capturing (anonymously) student views had been abandoned because of lack of use. In another university, the student representative also mentioned the difficulties of getting views from certain groups of international students. Most staff agreed that though formal processes are in place and work, they are used in a fairly static way, based on students being reactive.
- 6.22 Informal methods are seen as complementing formal ones, and for some these are seen as more effective. But in at least one department, space limitations severely restrict opportunities for informal staff/student interactions, and in another, though staff do operate an 'open door policy', getting students physically 'in' to the department seems to be the main issue.

## **7 Effectiveness of student engagement processes in informing and enhancing the collective student learning experience**

- 7.1 As noted in Section 3, senior institutional staff consider that student engagement is central in terms of enhancing the student experience. Listening to the student voice such that students' perspectives are taken into account in ways that might enhance the collective student learning experience seems to underpin many institutions' rationales for student engagement. But institutions seem to place rather less emphasis on student engagement being of central concern to creating cohesive learning communities of teachers and learners.
- 7.2 Both student feedback questionnaires and student representation are dimensions of student engagement (as defined for this study). From the survey data and interviews with staff and students in a diverse range of higher education providers, it is clear that institutional processes and practices in respect of student engagement are widespread. There is an intention to engage with students, and institutions are taking actions to effect such engagement. It is also clear that practices vary both between institutions and within institutions. But there is less and variable evidence about the impact of these intentions and actions – that is, the effectiveness of student engagement processes. Although the survey data indicate that responsibility for monitoring the implementation of policies on student engagement is much more likely to be centralised than devolved to schools/departments/faculties, from the fieldwork it seems that there is a general absence of any widespread institutional monitoring of processes and practices. That said, one of the fieldwork HEIs had undertaken a review of student representation and student feedback during 2007 (which had highlighted issues relating to variability of practices and feedback); another HEI was about to carry out an internal audit on the theme of 'listening to students' in the current 2008/09 session.
- 7.3 The survey data show that three quarters of HEIs considered that their student engagement processes are reasonably or very effective. But just over half of HEIs also indicated that they would like to be doing more on student engagement processes, and most student unions (80%) would want to do so. Almost three quarters of HEIs have recently introduced (or are planning to introduce) other student engagement mechanisms. Two thirds of FECs would also like to be doing more in respect of student engagement.
- 7.4 The vast majority of HEIs and student unions and FECs considered that student engagement processes need to be more effective. However, when asked during the interviews to articulate what 'effectiveness' means in practice and what measures of effectiveness are in current use, institutional interviewees were less certain what constituted 'effectiveness'. A range of measures were suggested, including:
- a low level of student complaints relating to learning and teaching;
  - a high incidence of students using open response/comment 'boxes' in surveys;
  - issues identified through student representation processes being the same as those identified through the NSS and internal feedback questionnaires;
  - having the requisite number of student representative positions filled, and those representatives being able to comment on programme delivery and wider issues without this being seen as threatening (to staff);
  - being able to demonstrate that deliberate attempts (after due consideration) have been taken to improve the student learning experience;
  - having a student representation system that is not dominated by negative comments and specific issues, but can input to broader discussions and be forward looking in terms of programme and institutional developments;

- student representatives (and staff) having a sense of shared responsibilities for a student's own learning and the learning of others on the same programme;
  - all students have an equal opportunity to have their voices 'heard'.
- 7.5 Clearly, any consideration of measures of effectiveness should relate to the underlying purposes of the processes themselves. As noted above (7.1), while institutions' rationales for student engagement processes stem from a central concern to enhance the student experience, for many of the fieldwork institutions a 'listening and being responsive' rationale seemed to take precedence over a rationale that emphasised student engagement as being central to creating a cohesive learning community (and hence staff and students being viewed as partners in enhancing learning experiences). As can be seen from the above list of suggested measures of effectiveness, some seem to relate to more reactive and responsive aspects of student engagement processes (for example, a low level of complaints); some point to more proactive, forward looking aspects and hint at notions of students and staff working in partnership to improve the collective student learning experience; others hint at the need to improve both student and staff understandings of the purposes of certain student engagement processes. However, it is also clear from the fieldwork that such possible measures (and their underlying rationales) are not seen as mutually exclusive.

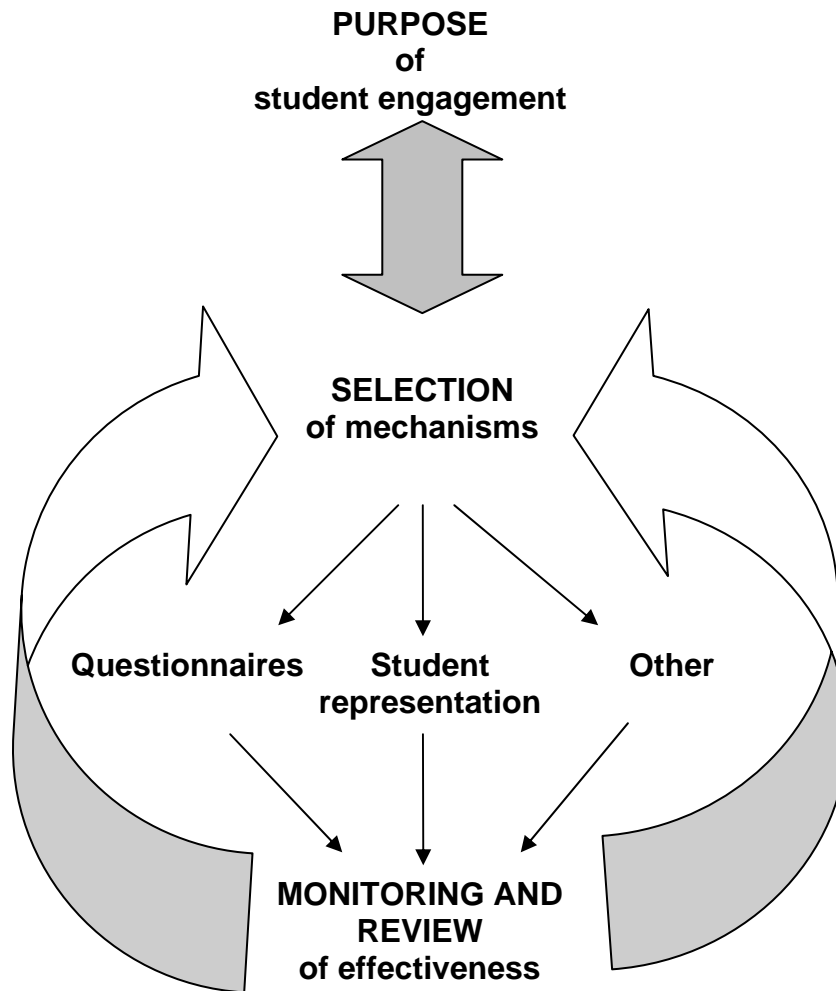
## **Roles, responsibilities and relationships**

- 7.6 Though it is evident that similar systems and processes are in place in HEIs, many elements of the processes are interlinked and hence arguably the overall effectiveness depends on each part of the process being effective. In interviews, most institutions acknowledged that a judicious mix of formal and informal mechanisms creates the optimum climate for effective student engagement processes, and it seems that the appropriate balance between formal and informal depends to some extent on the size and type of student body in any one institution/school/department, the subject of study and the curricular organisation. Moreover, though interlocking processes may be in place, ultimately the effectiveness of each aspect, and hence the overall effectiveness, depends to a large extent on the interest and energies of the individuals undertaking roles and responsibilities relating to student engagement processes. As one institution noted, '[the processes] are pretty widespread but we are now working on the next stage – the effectiveness of the people that are involved in the processes'.
- 7.7 But this may not only be an issue for those students taking on representative roles and for student union officers taking on a proactive rather than a reactive role, but also the wider student groups being sufficiently interested to use the opportunities afforded to them by the various elements in the processes in making their views known (either through student representatives or through student feedback questionnaires). It was acknowledged by institutional staff and students alike that students' active interest may well be diminished if they sense that their views are not listened to, and/or they gain little sense of active consideration being given to their inputs, and information about decisions/actions taken disappears into a 'black hole' – in this respect many references were made in the fieldwork to 'survey fatigue'. The interests of the wider student body can also be discerned in the extent to which such groups are aware of – and take notice of – the various outputs currently used by institutions and student unions for disseminating the outcomes of discussions and actions taken as a result of views expressed by students (through student representation processes and student feedback questionnaires and the like). From the fieldwork interviews it seems that this aspect of the feedback 'loop' has yet to be addressed to any great extent.
- 7.8 Alongside roles and responsibilities there is the further issue of relationships between people (student representatives; student union; wider student body; departmental and faculty staff; staff in central units; senior management). As noted earlier (paragraph 5.59 refers), good communications between departments and the student union (or in the case of FECs, central student services) are rather important in ensuring that student representation processes run well.
- 7.9 A further aspect of student engagement processes is the extent to which academic staff (and other staff) are generally aware of, and accept the roles and responsibilities of, student representatives. At least one HEI is looking specifically at the role of chairs of relevant committees in ensuring appropriate inputs from all members of committees (including student

representatives). And as noted above (paragraph 5.25 refers), some institutions and student unions have jointly produced handbooks on roles and responsibilities for student representatives for course/programme leaders. However, it seems from some of the interviews with student representatives that more might be done to ensure that they have reasonable access to facilities within their department/school to undertake their responsibilities in an effective manner.

- 7.10 There seems to be clarity within institutions about 'who' is responsible for ensuring that the student feedback questionnaires aspects of student engagement processes operate at various levels. But there seems to be less certainty about 'who' in the institution should and/or could be taking responsibility for ensuring that the student representation systems are operating. Such lack of clarity could be linked to questions of ownership of the student representation system within the institution.
- 7.11 Both the survey data and findings from the fieldwork clearly show the extent of similarities in the basic models of student engagement processes, but also point to some considerable variation between and within institutions in actual practices. While many interviewees justified such variations in terms of a need to ensure a better 'fit' with local needs (including specific learner constituencies and programmes), they also acknowledged that, irrespective of such variations, the underlying premise should be that all students have equal opportunity to have their voices 'heard'.
- 7.12 Given the findings explored in Sections 3-5 of this report, and the foregoing discussion of roles, responsibilities and relationships, we suggest that one way of improving the effectiveness of student engagement processes would be for institutions and the student unions to review the underlying rationale for such processes, and then consider in a systematic manner all the interlocking aspects of their current student engagement processes. Figure 3 shows a basic outline of the whole review cycle; figure 4 (adapted from 'Student feedback cycle' in Brennan and Williams, 2003, p.7) identifies a number of questions that could usefully be addressed of the various interlocking aspects of student engagement processes. We also suggest that in addition to monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of student engagement processes overall, monitoring and review of the interlocking aspects should be seen as an ongoing activity.

**Figure 3: Outline of student engagement review cycle**

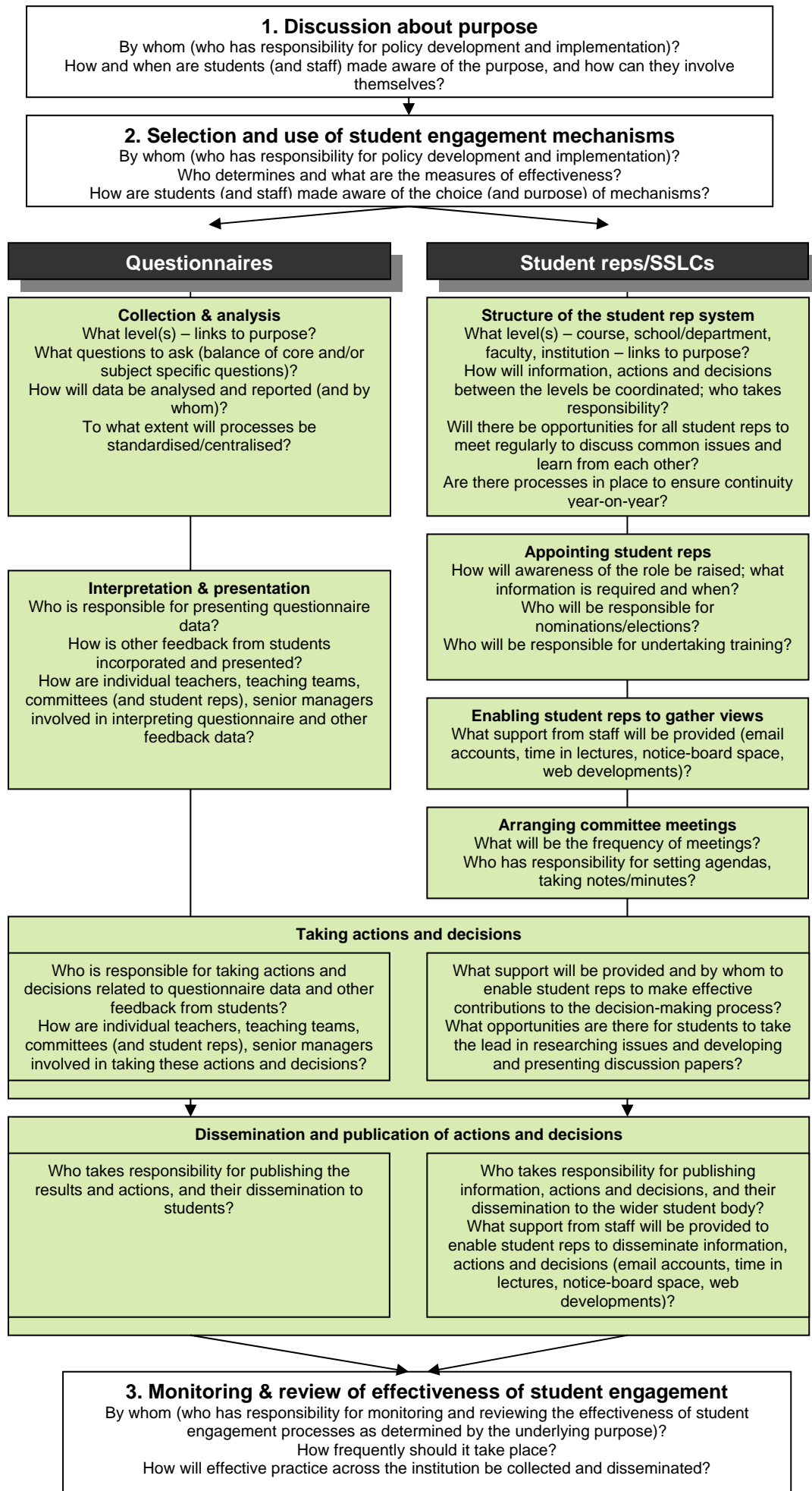


7.13 Such considerations would help staff and students (through the student union) to:

- identify current practices and gain a better understanding of what currently works well, and at what level within the institution (institution; intermediate – faculty; operational – school/department/programme); and where improvements could be made and at what level;
- ensure that the separate elements work and interlock effectively (including basic logistics of committee cycles, and communications between different levels within the institution and the different people involved);
- ensure that students and staff are aware of the different roles and responsibilities relevant to particular processes and the nature of relationships between the processes and between the people involved (and where appropriate the nature and level of resources required to undertake particular processes).



**Figure 4: Student engagement cycle**



- 7.14 It is likely that such detailed discussions would also assist an institution and the student union to gain a clear sense of ownership in relation to student engagement processes, and hence establish clarity about 'who' within the institution has authority and responsibility to make sure actions are taken to establish and maintain effective student engagement processes that are 'fit for purpose'.
- 7.15 However, we should acknowledge that the effectiveness of student engagement processes is only a part of a rather larger question of effectiveness of an institution's overall structures for academic governance. The 2008 QAA report on institutional frameworks for managing quality and academic standards concluded that though overall frameworks were sound, features commonly identified for concern in QAA audit reports included 'undue complexity and lack of transparency in the committee structure, with ill-defined responsibilities, making for inefficient and ineffective processes' (QAA, 2008a, paragraph 26). Further, specific attention was drawn to the variability in committee arrangements below institutional level, and the need for institutional oversight of quality and standards, with particular reference to devolved arrangements and the assurance of consistency.
- 7.16 We also note that practices in FECs tend to relate both to more general annual monitoring practices prevalent in FECs (including internal inspections) and to quality assurance processes aligned to the requirements of the FECs' validating partners. Staff in the fieldwork colleges commented that the inspection regime under which they operate in relation to FE provision may well have engendered tighter and clearer reporting lines than might prevail in HEIs (but may possibly have also encouraged a sense of a compliance culture). Nevertheless, as their HE provision grows and they gain more confidence in assuring the quality of HE students' learning experiences, they are reviewing internal processes to better fit HE purposes.

### **Wider aspects of student engagement**

- 7.17 The interest of the wider student body in these processes can be seen as part and parcel of aspects of student engagement in a learning community more generally. We have noted earlier (paragraphs 3.2 and 3.5 refer) that the language of 'student as consumer' pervaded the discussions about institutions' rationales for student engagement processes, and rather less emphasis was placed on students as 'partners in a learning community'. But clearly, this latter aspect is important to certain staff and certain academic communities. Art and Design and Performing Arts is rather distinctive in this respect, but reference was made to having (or trying to establish a better sense of) a cohesive learning community in other disciplinary areas as well. Certain contributing factors to establishing/maintaining such an ethos were hinted at, including staff attitudes and physical space configurations. In this respect it is worth noting that while HEIs may be concerned with creating/maintaining 'spaces' for staff/student interactions within disciplinary areas, many FECs are currently trying to create distinctive 'spaces' for their HE students, irrespective of subject of study. But we also note the more general comments about aspects of the student learning experience which might adversely affect institutional attempts to create/maintain such learning communities, including students' busy lives and their attitudes to, and motivations for, HE study.
- 7.18 Though not specifically addressed in the survey or fieldwork, a number of HEIs referred to aspects of institutional life germane to building/maintaining a sense of wider student engagement. These included: use of student ambassadors as mentors to year one students; development of institutional guides to effective practice in helping students make the transition from 'school to university' and become part of a learning community; inviting students to nominate tutors for the annual 'tutor of the year' award; identifying students within each faculty who are seen to epitomise the institution's ethos and mission to give a 'vote of thanks' at the graduation ceremony.
- 7.19 As noted above (paragraph 3.5 refers), FECs are required to publish learner involvement strategies: some of the fieldwork colleges are currently reviewing their LIS to extend to HE students. But one college has already done so and is about to undertake a systematic review of its LIS, which covers five aspects of learner involvement: a student's own learning; their course; their peers; the college; the community. The range of HE provision on offer in the college, including a number of vocational programmes, clearly lends itself to enabling students to become involved in the day-to-day life of the college – for example, in terms of general events management and

hospitality, and in particular graduation ceremonies, for which HE students in each school help develop a 'show reel' of student activities (which serve to celebrate the life of the college).

## 8 What we know from previous studies and what might be learnt from practices elsewhere

- 8.1 A literature review of empirical studies relating to the effectiveness of student engagement processes (as defined by the study) was undertaken both to inform the study and to help locate its findings within a broader knowledge base. Much of the international literature identified during the review focussed on students' involvement in quality assurance processes, which was not the main focus of this study and which has now been summarised in a recent QAA publication (QAA, 2008d). Rather less was found on student representation and using student feedback questionnaires; the main recent reports are summarised below.

### **Collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in HE (HEFCE, 2003)**

- 8.2 The purpose of the review was to 'Review current good practice by HEIs in collecting quantitative and qualitative feedback from students on the quality and standards of their higher education programmes, and using that feedback to secure improvement ... [and] ... Make recommendations on how individual HEIs can best design and implement their own internal mechanisms for collecting quantitative and qualitative feedback data from current students, and following up that feedback to secure improvement and address students' concerns'.

#### *General findings*

- 8.3 Student feedback has a multiplicity of purposes and it plays an important role (along with other sources of information) in institutional quality assurance and enhancement processes. However, the review found that some institutions may need to consider and clarify the purposes of collecting and using student feedback, and in relation to the level at which that information is collected and used.
- 8.4 The review also found that most institutions operated a mix of student feedback mechanisms at various levels of their institutions; the most common were: staff student liaison committees, student representation on committees, and questionnaires and surveys. Issues about the nature of the mix and the type of mechanisms used will often be dictated by the ways in which the curriculum is organised and student numbers.

#### *Questionnaires and surveys*

- 8.5 The review found that most institutions stressed the importance of collecting students' views at the module level, the level where the teaching and learning takes place and where immediate improvements can be made. The institutional and programme-level perspective is also important, but there is a generalisation of the student experience at this level. There was evidence that questionnaires/surveys at these levels had been discontinued by some institutions because of the low response rates generated. Purposes will vary at the different levels: at the module level, the purpose is to evaluate the immediate learner/teacher interface whereas at the programme/institutional level, data generated will be of use for management information purposes.
- 8.6 Lack of clarity of purpose with regard to the administration and use of questionnaires/surveys can lead to feelings of ritualism and survey fatigue among both staff and students. Students will feel detached from the process if there is no understanding of why the process occurs and no feedback regarding what happens to the information used and any actions taken as a result. Consideration should be sought about the frequency with which questionnaires are administered,

especially at module level; the purpose and use to which the data generated are put; and how best to present information about the whole process to students, including actions taken (even if students will not get to know the results/actions taken or even be affected by those actions taken).

- 8.7 The advantage of questionnaires and surveys is that they are inclusive, in that students are given equality of opportunity to take part in the process. However, the review found that users were not often surprised by the data generated from questionnaires; the main value was that the data generally confirmed what was already known.

### *Student representation*

- 8.8 Most institutions operate systems of student representation on institutional and local committees, and staff student liaison committees. However, while most institutions have good working relationships between their senior managers and student union, the effectiveness of (non student union) student representation at other levels varies within and between institutions. The review 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. 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 of staff to promote the benefits to students, and to support student representatives by providing the means through which they can operate effectively.

### *Reporting results and actions taken back to students*

- 8.9 The review found that most institutions use the annual monitoring process and committee cycle as the main means for reporting the results of questionnaires and surveys, deciding on action, checking if actions have been taken and monitoring its effect. Staff-student liaison committees and student representation on other institutional committees are important in this respect because it is one of the ways in which decisions and actions can be fed back to the student body by their representatives, if the system is working effectively. However, other means can be the posting of minutes and the like on notice boards and through electronic media, but these of course will only be effective if students know about them and consult them.

## **Student representation and feedback arrangements (QAA, 2005)**

- 8.10 This report describes features of good practice and summarises the recommendations about student representation and feedback arrangements from the 70 institutional audit reports published by QAA to the end of November 2004.

### *Student representation*

- 8.11 'Student representation is a key component of quality assurance in higher education'. Most institutions are aware of the need to keep student representation systems under review, especially to ensure that no particular student constituency is disadvantaged (e.g. part-time, mature, distance learning, postgraduate research and international students).
- 8.12 Arrangements at the operational level (i.e. department) may be the most meaningful, but it is at this level where there is a lack of consistency in arrangements within institutions. Consistency can be enhanced when there is institutional commitment, and coordination and integration between the different levels of representation. Challenges to achieving consistent and effective student

representation have been met through innovatory practices in a number of institutions: student liaison officers to facilitate representation, the appointment of full-time coordinators.

- 8.13 Failure to 'close the loop' and provide feedback to students not directly involved in the student representation system is a significant limitation of the system. Other problems are the difficulty of recruiting representatives and getting them to attend meetings regularly.

### *Questionnaires and surveys*

- 8.14 The module questionnaire is most widely used at operational level for collecting feedback from students on the quality of their learning experience. Programme evaluations are less common and where these are used a 'systematic approach to and central oversight of the collection and analysis of feedback is necessary in order to make the best use of the material to enhance the student experience'.
- 8.15 Some institutions were awaiting the NSS before revising their institutional-level feedback arrangements. Most institutions recognise the importance of collecting feedback from students at the operational and institutional levels; however, there is more variability in the analysis and use of evaluations.

### **Report of the higher education mapping exercise of student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement processes (sparqs, 2005)**

- 8.16 The approach taken by this mapping exercise across the Scottish higher education sector was that students should have the *opportunity* to attend meetings/events; should take up those opportunities through *attendance* at meetings/events; and by taking up these opportunities should be able to make an effective contribution through *engagement* with the process.
- 8.17 While student representation on institutional committees is universal, the extent of student representation at faculty level in many institutions varies between faculties within the same institution. Moreover, student engagement at faculty level is lower than at institutional and departmental levels. At departmental level, representation is generally through the staff-student liaison committee. However, departmental autonomy means that arrangements vary across the Scottish sector. The representation system works reasonably well for full-time on-campus undergraduate students, and in the main the system does not work so well for distance learning, part-time and postgraduate students.
- 8.18 The annual monitoring system in the majority of institutions is the main means of oversight of the effectiveness of the staff-student liaison committee system. The information gathered through these committees was seen as being for the individual department's use. However, through the annual monitoring system, concerns from these committees could be addressed at either faculty or institutional level; usually these would be major concerns as the more minor concerns would normally be addressed at the local level. Thus, it was not possible for many institutions to obtain an overview of the types of and similarities between issues being raised in these meetings across departments.
- 8.19 There is a link between the level of attendance and engagement in the student representation system by students and good informal links (i.e. any form of communication outside structured events) between staff and students. The relationship between sabbatical officers and middle managers was viewed by student representatives in a more negative light than the relationship with senior managers.
- 8.20 While student involvement was welcomed by institutions, there are concerns about whether the student representation system is working effectively, and one of the major concerns is how representative student representatives are of their peer group.
- 8.21 Often, information for students about the course representation system is presented during freshers' week – a time of information overload. A review of the materials provided by institutions

on the system and student associations showed that the system is explained in general in negative terms.

- 8.22 The annual change of sabbatical officers is perceived as a problem; new officers may have different views or priorities to those who have just completed their term of office. This annual change was perceived by institutional staff as destabilising and something they had little control or influence over.
- 8.23 Institutional respondents were universal in agreeing that there is a need for more incentives for student representatives. Student representatives felt that the greatest hindrance to getting involved in the system is time, but that the idea of making a difference and helping others encourages involvement.

### **Study of the extent and effectiveness of existing student representation structures within higher education institutions across Wales (York Consulting, 2006)**

- 8.24 Generally, institutional-level representation operates effectively and there is formal provision for representatives to communicate with senior managers, which representatives felt are fairly effective. Institutions acknowledged the value of the representatives' role at this level, which is a key contribution to decisions relating to the management of the institution.
- 8.25 All institutions have systems for representation at the faculty, school or departmental level, which is supported through the course representative system. Approaches to identifying students to become involved at faculty, school or departmental level vary across and within institutions; in some institutions this is coordinated centrally, in others it is devolved.
- 8.26 All institutions operate course representative systems and in most institutions representatives at this level are involved in staff-student liaison committees. Some institutions experience problems of student attendance at these meetings. The impact of the role at this level is dependent on student and staff personalities and departmental cultures. Most institutions offer training for student representatives. Engaging part-time students is a key barrier for all institutions.
- 8.27 The approach to the management and coordination of the student representation system at the institutional level is fairly consistent. At the operational level it is more variable, and a number of models emerged: managed at the operational level but minimal links with the student union; managed at the operational level but with support from the student union; managed by the institution. Approaches to monitoring and review vary considerably.
- 8.28 Factors influencing effectiveness include:
- a culture of commitment, which needs to be embedded with the lead coming from the top (but also to include the faculty, school or departmental level – although it was acknowledged that buy-in was variable – and the student union);
  - a dedicated resource for the management and coordination of the system across the institution (e.g. supporting the recruitment/appointment process, coordinating contact details, organising networks, coordinating feedback across the institution, training);
  - consideration of the needs of students to ensure engagement in the system (sparks: opportunity, attendance, engagement) – e.g. timing and advanced notification of meetings; however, effectiveness in terms of engagement will depend on the individual representative.

- 8.29 Most institutions face barriers to engaging sufficient numbers of students to take part in the system and ensuring that students turn up to meetings. A key barrier is the time required of student representatives. A key incentive to participation identified by the majority of institutions was the transferable skills acquired through involvement. There was a common concern that payment for involvement could incentivise involvement for the wrong reasons. Other weaknesses mentioned were:
- links between student representation at the various levels were not well coordinated;
  - barriers were faced in terms of establishing effective structures early in the academic year;
  - some student unions did not have sufficient resource/capacity to support the system;
  - structures to feed back the outcomes of student input into quality processes needed to be improved.

### **Learning from academic review of higher education in further education colleges in England 2005-07 (QAA, 2008b)**

- 8.30 This is the latest in a series of reports summarising the findings of the academic review of HE in further education colleges undertaken by QAA during 2005-07. The report is based on 51 reviews of 46 colleges in England, which represent the final round of academic subject reviews in colleges. Although the report does not specifically focus on student feedback and representation systems, it touches on them by reviewing all the processes and factors that impinge on the quality of learning and teaching in HE programmes in FECs.
- 8.31 Comments on the quality of learning were particularly positive. A feature of good practice is the way in which staff provide a highly supportive academic environment, particularly through academic tutorials. Staff were generally considered accessible and friendly. Informal access to staff via an open door policy, email or telephone contact sits alongside more structured opportunities provided by review tutorials (one-to-one opportunities to discuss developments and plans with one's tutor), group tutorials and specific tutorials arranged depending on students' needs. Indeed, the downside of such a high level of support was considered to be that 'in a few cases, the high level of support provided may make it difficult for those students to adjust to the independent learning required at higher level'.
- 8.32 In the best cases, quality assurance processes are strong and ensure that all quality loops are closed. Through annual monitoring reports a range of information is pulled together and analysed (student statistical data, results of feedback questionnaires, external examiners' reports, committee minutes), which results in clear action plans. In many colleges, quality assurance processes are geared towards HE provision. However, where this is not the case and colleges rely on models developed for FE, opportunities for staff to use the findings of quality assurance processes and bring about enhancements to the HE programmes are more limited. Instances of such weaknesses are, for example, student questionnaires lacking an HE focus and data collections that do not differentiate between HE and FE students.
- 8.33 The responsiveness of colleges to students' views is seen as a significant strength. Colleges use both formal mechanisms (student representatives on committees; student questionnaires; focus groups) and informal ones (informal contacts; email) to canvass student opinions. In some colleges, however, concern was expressed about the lack of feedback to students on actions taken as a result of their feedback. Occasionally, students also felt uninformed about the student representation processes in operation and how to avail themselves of them.

### **Student participation in higher education governance (S Bergan, Council of Europe, 2003)**

- 8.34 The Council of Europe undertook a survey of policies and practices for student participation in university governance. The survey involved students, representatives of higher education institutions and higher education ministries and was distributed via members of the European Student Union and the national delegations of the Council of Europe's Higher Education and



Research Committee. Student replies were received from 28 countries, academic replies from 24 countries and ministry replies from 21.

8.35 Common points identified were:

- Student participation and representation are strong at institutional and faculty level, where they are regulated by legal mechanisms. In the majority of countries, student representatives are full members of the institutional governing bodies and they have full or differentiated voting rights. At departmental level, student representation is less regulated and it is weaker than at institutional or faculty level.
- Student representation and participation at national level (for example, in relation to governments or other national bodies) are not as strong as at institutional level.
- Student representatives in higher education institutions are almost universally elected rather than appointed. It is generally possible to find enough candidates to occupy the elected positions, even if this seems more difficult at departmental than at higher levels. Voter turnout at student elections is variable, but generally low. The author of the report makes the point that 'while it seems possible to mobilise students for a 'great cause' it seems much more difficult to maintain a sustained interest in and commitment to institutional life and governance.'
- Respondents from all three groups showed a positive attitude towards increased student influence on university governance. Areas where student representation is more effective are social and environmental issues at the institution, as well as pedagogical and educational content issues.
- In some countries, however, there is still the feeling that senior faculty decide everything and student involvement does not lead to concrete results. There is also a perception that student representation is run by a 'small elite' without much contact with the student population.
- There is a need for more focus on the dissemination of information about the rights of the students and about the results of decisions and discussion relevant to them.

**Bologna with student eyes (ESIB, 2007)**

- 8.36 This report of a survey of 36 national student unions in Europe by ESIB – the National Unions of Students in Europe (now known as ESU – European Students' Union) is the third of its kind, which analyses the progress of the Bologna Process from the student perspective. It looks at how far student life has really changed through the Bologna reforms.
- 8.37 In terms of student participation in quality assurance, the survey found that students are not participating at all levels – national, institutional and faculty/departmental/programme – throughout the European Higher Education Area. However, findings from the survey show that there is no clear tendency about which level is the most problematic one. With regard to student questionnaires, the survey identified a number of reports that students often do not see their impact or value.
- 8.38 The survey also explored student participation in implementing the Bologna Process at the national and institutional levels. The report notes that there has been 'no real improvement of the overall situation ... [i]n general it seems as if the students are best represented at the highest level in the HEI, with less possibilities both at the national level and the programme, course or faculty level'. It further notes that most countries have some form of student representation system at the highest level of the HEI, but at the faculty/departmental/programme levels student representation is more problematic. Seven national unions, including the UK, were of the view that the Bologna Process had not been a driving force towards more or better student involvement in their country.

## Themes emerging from recent studies

- 8.39 A number of common themes seem to emerge from the above findings relating to the UK, as follows:
- Student representation systems seem to work well at institutional level (where representation is through the student union), but below this level there is much variability (both between and within HEIs) in terms of managing and coordinating student representation.
  - There is some evidence that student representation systems are more meaningful and work better at departmental rather than faculty level, but it is recognised that at these levels the impact of the role may depend on the personalities and cultures of students and staff within departments and the relationship between the student union and middle managers within departments.
  - Student unions may have insufficient resources available to adequately support a student representative system, there is a lack of motivation within the general student body to participate, and the annual changeover of student union personnel can be destabilising.
  - A common concern is the extent to which student representatives adequately represent the wider student body. In this respect certain learner constituencies are mentioned, namely part-time students; distance learning students; mature students; international students; postgraduate students.
- 8.40 In Europe, student representation is strong at institutional level and (in contrast with the UK) at faculty level: at both levels such representation is regulated by legal mechanisms. But it is weaker at departmental level, where it is less regulated. Student representatives tend to be elected (rather than appointed), but voter turnout is low; further, and in common with the UK, there are some concerns about how representative the elected students are of their wider student constituencies.
- 8.41 Student feedback surveys are seen as having some advantages over student representation systems for gathering student views, since they are inclusive (in the sense of giving students equality of opportunity to take part in the process). Their main value is that the data derived from surveys generally confirm what is already known, but lack of clarity of purpose can lead to feelings of ritualism and survey fatigue among both staff and students. There is some evidence of institutions discontinuing surveys at institutional and programme level because of low response rates, whereas module-level questionnaires are widely used. But it should be noted that these reports pre-date the advent of the NSS in the UK, and some institutions were awaiting the NSS before revising their institutional-level feedback arrangements.
- 8.42 A recurring theme from all the above reports is the failure to 'close the feedback loop' and provide students with information about what consideration has been given to their views provided via surveys and through student representatives, and what actions (if any) have been taken as a result.

## 9 Conclusions and recommendations

9.1 This study set out to:

- determine the current extent and nature of student engagement in higher education in England;
- explore current models of formal and informal student engagement;
- explore institutions' rationales for student engagement policies and practices, their measures of effectiveness, and perceptions of barriers (if any) to effectiveness.

9.2 As noted in Section 8, a number of common themes have emerged from previous recent studies (in the UK and elsewhere) relating to student engagement processes in HE. While student representation systems may work well at institutional level, there is much variability below this level, and they may work better at the operational level (i.e. school/departmental/programme) than at the intermediate level (i.e. faculty). Student unions may have insufficient resources to adequately support representative systems, and there is an apparent lack of motivation within the general student body to participate. Further, there are concerns about the extent to which student representatives adequately represent the wider student body. Previous studies also suggest that student feedback surveys are seen as having some advantages over student representation systems since they are (more) inclusive. Their main value seems to be that data derived from surveys generally confirm what is already known, but lack of clarity of purpose can lead to feelings of ritualism and survey fatigue among staff and students. An overarching and recurring theme from recent studies is the failure to 'close the feedback loop' and provide students with information about what consideration has been given to their views (provided via surveys and through student representatives), and what actions (if any) have been taken as a result.

9.3 From this current study we have found 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. For student unions, the emphasis tends to be on the latter aspect;
- notions of students as 'partners in a learning community' seem to be stronger in certain subject areas (for example, Art and Design and Performing Arts) than others;
- the majority of HEIs and FECs rate their student engagement processes, comprising a basic model of student feedback questionnaires and student representation systems, as reasonably or very effective; student unions are less likely to do. Detailed discussions with staff and students within a diverse range of HE providers showed that actual practices vary between and within institutions, and that their effectiveness could be improved;
- there are a number of elements to the student representation process, viz awareness raising and recognition of the role; nominations and elections; training for the role; undertaking the role; monitoring and reviewing effectiveness. Institutions and student unions face a number of challenges in ensuring that each stage and the whole process is as effective as possible (paragraphs 5.7-5.41 refer). Further, the process seems to work better at the institutional and operational (school/department/programme) level than at the intermediate (faculty) level;
- HEI and FEC processes for collecting individual student views to feed in to quality assurance and enhancement (via student feedback questionnaires) are broadly similar and are undertaken at a number of levels – module, programme and institution. A number of HEIs are using institution-wide questionnaires for first and/or second year undergraduates and taught postgraduate students as a way of supplementing the

information gathered through the NSS. Some institutions are looking to become 'smarter' in analysing aggregated data from student questionnaires, and others acknowledged that the NSS has sharpened institutional practices for action planning;

- though institutions are taking steps to 'close the feedback loop' and inform students of actions taken, it is not clear the extent to which student representatives and/or the wider student body use the opportunity to seek out information about planned actions for improvements;
- there is some (rather limited) evidence that greater engagement is engendered when students themselves take the lead in investigating specific issues affecting the collective student learning experience and develop discussion papers for debate at relevant committees;
- in some institutions, there seems to be an absence of any systematic review and identification of where responsibility lies for institutional monitoring of processes and practices.

- 9.4 Thus it seems from this current study on student engagement that little has changed since previous studies in relation to institutions' internal processes for student representation and capturing student views in ways that allow students to participate in informing and enhancing the collective student learning experience. While the basic model for student engagement – comprising student feedback questionnaires and student representation systems – is similar across the diverse range of HE providers, it is clear that actual practices vary both between institutions and within institutions. It is also noticeable that student unions are more likely than institutional staff to consider that there is variation of practice between faculties/schools. This may be because, in respect of student representation systems in particular, it is student unions who are at the 'sharp end' trying to ensure that the various phases work in practice (for example, trying to make sure that representatives are appointed, trained and involved in relevant committee meetings). And while relationships between student unions and staff may be working well at senior management level, it seems that further effort needs to be put into ensuring better understandings of roles and responsibilities, and creating an environment such that there are good working relationships at both the operational (i.e. school/departmental/programme) and intermediate (i.e. faculty) levels.
- 9.5 Institutions readily accept that a judicious 'mix' of formal and informal methods for listening to students' voices are more effective than placing too much emphasis on any one particular process, particularly in relation to resolving issues of a short-term nature. But institutions and student unions are still experiencing difficulties with ensuring that students take up the full range of representation activities. This seems to be the case in most institutions, even those which have received positive comments from QAA institutional audits. Further, though institutional responses to this study's survey questions about effectiveness of process may reflect what institutions think should be happening in their own institutions, the detailed discussions undertaken during fieldwork conveyed a more nuanced and sometimes negative perception of processes in practice. And while there is anecdotal evidence about attempts to 'close the feedback loop', there seems to be little systematic review of how effective internal mechanisms for 'closing the loop' are in practice. Institutions may be in 'listening' mode, and student representation processes are in place such that a relatively small cadre of student representatives might be seen to be involved and empowered 'in the process of shaping the learning experience'. But it is rather questionable to what extent the wider student body feels (the need for?) such involvement and empowerment.
- 9.6 The National Union of Students is active in trying to build knowledge and capacity in the HE sector relating to student representation. For example, it has developed a particular section of its website containing 'representation resources', including general information for course representative coordinators in institutions; case study examples; and electronic links to particular institutions' processes and practices (covering the lifecycle of student representation). The current NUS Student Evaluation Initiative is evaluating the representation structures in 50 student unions. Further, the NUS has instigated an annual event for institutions' student representative coordinators.

- 9.7 While the above findings suggest that not much has changed since previous studies and reports, we must acknowledge that many institutions and student unions are putting efforts into improving their student engagement processes, but the question remains 'to what effect'? Certainly HEIs have been reviewing their internal student feedback arrangements in the light of their experience of the NSS, and we have found that in many HEIs such a review has led to the redesign and/or the (re-) introduction of institution-wide surveys to capture student views 'earlier'. We have also found that some institutions, in reviewing and analysing student feedback (from a range of sources), are trying to shift the emphasis away from 'just' a quality assurance function – which could be seen as a reactive process – towards a more explicit focus on quality enhancement and an emphasis on action planning – seen as a proactive process (paragraphs 5.65-5.68 refer).
- 9.8 However, though the majority of HEIs have recently introduced (or are planning to introduce) additional student engagement mechanisms, it is questionable whether institutions and student unions yet have a clear idea of what criteria they would use to gauge the extent of the effectiveness of their current (and new) practices. And as noted earlier, in general HEIs are more likely than student unions to consider that current practices are reasonably/very effective. Any discussion of effectiveness needs to be based on clear and agreed understandings of the underlying rationale for student engagement processes. The external environment in which HEIs and FECs are having to operate continues to change, and it is evident from this study that institutions' rationales for seeking to place emphasis on institutional and student union processes and practices such as those relating to student representation and student feedback, which seek to inform and enhance the collective student learning experience, are as much (or more?) about viewing students as customers as they are about trying to involve students as partners in a learning community. We must acknowledge that the fieldwork did not generate sufficient data to analyse institutional rationales in sufficient depth to develop well-evidenced models (for example, a consumer model, or a learner community model) of student engagement. Nor did we find examples of institutional rationales which focused solely on a certain dimension (for example, student as consumer) to the exclusion of other dimensions. However, it could be argued that too strong a customer/consumer emphasis might bring with it a sense of a series of one-directional transactions between the institution and the learner. This might encourage students to behave as passive recipients of (higher) education and restrict their full(er) involvement in a learning community in ways that inform and enhance the collective student learning experience.
- 9.9 Many institutions acknowledged that there is variation of practice at the operational level, to better 'fit' with local needs (in terms of learner constituency, curricular organisation and the like). And the majority of institutions and student unions considered that student engagement processes need to be more effective. But there seems to be some lack of clarity within institutions 'where' responsibility lies for ensuring that student engagement processes are in place and being used effectively. We *suggest* that one way of improving the effectiveness of student engagement processes would be for institutions and student unions to review, in a systematic manner, all the interlocking aspects of their current student engagement processes. Figure 3 (in Section 7) shows a basic outline of the whole review process; figure 4 identifies a number of questions that could usefully be addressed of the various interlocking aspects of student engagement processes (paragraph 7.12 refers). Detailed discussion about:
- purpose of student engagement processes;
  - choice of mechanisms – including alternatives to student feedback questionnaires and student representation – to adequately reflect underlying purposes (and practices supporting each mechanism);
  - monitoring and review of effectiveness
- would help all parties to gain a better understanding (and where necessary reach agreement) on roles and responsibilities linked to the different stages of student engagement mechanisms and the relationships between the processes and the people involved.
- 9.10 It is no doubt the case that in many HEIs and FECs the constituency of the student body continues to diversify, and such increasing diversity brings with it a range of issues relating to engaging students, not least in terms of understanding different students' attitudes and motivations towards HE study. Arguably, such diversity cannot be neatly categorised as differences between discrete learner constituencies (for example, part-time students, mature

students, international students), though many institutions and student unions do use such labels as a 'shorthand'. In fact, since very many HE students may now be considered to be part-time (in the sense of HE studies being one part of students' busy lives, which may well embrace a range of commitments such as paid employment and family responsibilities) we *suggest* that the sector as a whole could benefit from working together on developing student representation practices that 'work' for part-time students and sharing those practices widely. It should also be recognised that students' interests in such practices could well be mediated by more fundamental attitudes and motivations towards HE study. In this respect, a more explicit exploration of the underlying rationale for student engagement processes (as suggested in paragraph 9.9) and clear communication of that rationale within the wider student body should help foster an enhanced understanding across the range of discrete learner constituencies.

9.11 In the light of the above findings we recommend:

- that further discussions are initiated across the sector about the purposes of student engagement processes;
- that institutions and student unions consider undertaking their own systematic review of the student engagement cycle, and in so doing establish their own measures of effectiveness – for monitoring and review purposes (Section 7 refers);
- an exploration of the extent to which learning and teaching strategies may be used to clarify rationales for student engagement (Section 3 refers) and assist in the process of reviewing the student engagement cycle. Any subsequent analysis undertaken of such institutional learning and teaching strategies might helpfully further inform discussion about the emergence (if any) of distinctive models of student engagement across the sector;
- the development of networking opportunities for institutions/student unions to learn about effective practices in a range of institutions and relevant to a range of learner constituencies, in particular part-time students (paragraphs 5.28-5.41 refer);
- that QAA discusses with relevant stakeholders whether, in undertaking the IQER process with FECs, it is possible to identify and disseminate examples of effective practice in relation to student engagement (possibly as a result of learner involvement strategies), and stimulates discussion about the extent to which such practices may have wider applicability across the sector;
- that discussions about staff and student development needs in respect of student engagement (paragraphs 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;
- that broader discussions are 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.

## **Appendix A: Stakeholder interviews**

Alex Bols, Jim Dickinson and Matt Hyde  
National Union of Students

Brenda Smith  
Higher Education Academy

Kat Fletcher  
Centre for Excellence in Leadership

Douglas Blackstock and Derfel Owen  
Quality Assurance Agency

Helen Bowles  
GuildHE

Liz Carpenter  
Universities UK

Louisa Baker, Anna Sherratt and Chris Taylor  
Higher Education Funding Council for England

Matt Gayle  
National Postgraduate Committee

Philip Lomas  
Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills

## Appendix B: Online survey method and detailed findings

Detailed findings from the online survey of higher education institutions, further education colleges with significant higher education provision, and student unions.

### Introduction

The survey sought institutional and student unions' views on student engagement policies and practices in higher education in England. For the purposes of the study, 'student engagement' was taken to mean processes and practices whereby institutions and student unions make deliberate attempts to involve and empower students in the process of shaping the learning experience. The survey was concerned with processes and practices, such as those relating to student representation and student feedback (excluding the National Student Survey) which seek to inform and enhance the collective student experience.

Respondents were asked to provide information on:

- the institution's student engagement processes overall;
- student feedback questionnaires relating to teaching and learning;
- the effectiveness of the student representation system;
- staff-student liaison committees set up to discuss issues relating to the quality of the learning experience;
- overall views on the effectiveness of institutional practices on student engagement and current challenges to improving that effectiveness.

The main body of the questionnaire (see Appendix C) was identical for all three groups of respondents (HEIs, FECs and SUs). A final section sought information on institution type (multi-faculty; specialist) and whether the institution was part of some grouping or affiliation (for HEIs – post-1992 universities, post-2004 universities, HE colleges, Russell Group, or other pre-1992 universities; for FECs – mixed-economy group of colleges, or other).

An email inviting participation in the survey was sent to the heads of all higher education institutions and 75 further education colleges with higher education provision (those with over 300 directly or indirectly funded full-time equivalent students) in England. Contact details of institutional heads were provided to CHERI by HEFCE for the purpose of this study. In addition, the NUS emailed the representatives of the student unions on behalf of CHERI inviting them to take part in the survey.

Respondents were encouraged to consult with colleagues and provide a single institutional response rather than a personal opinion. A PDF version of the online questionnaire was attached to the electronic invitation to facilitate the consultation process.

The survey opened on 3 July 2008 and was scheduled to remain open for three weeks, closing on 25 July. The deadline was extended to 4 August to accommodate requests for late submission from some institutions which had been unable to complete the survey within the time specified. Two electronic reminders were sent out (on 14 and 22 July).

### Sample and response rate

All 130 HEIs in England were invited to take part in the online survey; 80 valid responses were received (response rate 61.5%). Of the respondents, 30% were post-1992 universities, another 30% were pre-1992 universities, and 17.5% belonged to the Russell Group. The Russell Group and the post-1992 universities were therefore strongly represented, with over four fifths and two thirds of their English member institutions respectively responding to the survey.



In addition, 75 FECs in England were invited to take part in the survey; 25 valid responses were received (response rate 33%). The mixed-economy group of colleges was strongly represented (over two thirds of its members responded to the survey).

Also, 130 student unions in HEIs were invited to take part in the online survey; 39 valid responses were received (response rate 30%).

## Section One: Institutions' student engagement processes overall

Respondents were asked to indicate what types of student engagement processes are currently used in their institutions and at what level (q1a). Over 90% of HEIs and FECs use student feedback questionnaires at institution-wide level, and over four fifths of HEIs (86%) and almost three quarters of FECs (72%) use them at module/unit level. The use of student feedback questionnaire is less widespread at faculty/school and departmental levels in all types of responding institutions, but over half of all responding institutions use them at whole programme level.

Student representation on committees is used by over 90% of all responding institutions at institution-wide level; by two thirds of HEIs (67%) and over four fifths of FECs (88%) at whole programme level; by over three quarters of HEIs (77%) but only half of FECs (48%) at faculty/school level.

Staff-student liaison committees and the use of students as liaison officers appear to be much less common than the other two processes at all levels, although more than half of FECs and HEIs have these mechanisms at institution-wide level.

Institutions were also asked to list any other *formal mechanisms* for student engagement which are in operation; 55 open-ended comments were received from HEIs, 9 from FECs and 18 from SUs, many containing information on more than one mechanism. The table below summarises their responses.

*Most commonly mentioned other formal mechanisms:*

HEIs	FECs	SUs
Meetings ⇒ SU and institutional managers ⇒ students and tutors ⇒ students reps and faculty managers	Involvement of students on committees	Use of forums of different types ⇒ PG research forum ⇒ community forum ⇒ education forum ⇒ teaching and learning forum ⇒ students' forum
Involvement of SU officers or student reps on committees or boards		Involvement of student reps or SU officers on committees or boards
Engagement in QA process on committee or validation work		

With regard to the degree of variation of formal student engagement processes between faculties/schools (q1b), over three quarters of HEIs (77%) and FECs (84%) thought that they vary 'a little'. SU respondents were almost equally split between those who thought they vary 'a lot' (54%) and 'a little' (46%).

In addition to formal mechanisms, student engagement also occurs in an *informal way* in institutions (q1c). HEI respondents provided 68 open-ended comments on this topic, FECs 24 and SUs 33. The table below summarises their responses.

*Most commonly mentioned informal mechanisms:*

HEIs	FECs	SUs
Open door policy and/or office hours (e.g. tutors, lecturers, deans, heads of department, pro vice-chancellors)	Open door policy	Open door policy/office hours
Access to personal tutor	Access to personal tutor	Access to personal tutor
Informal meetings		

*Least commonly mentioned informal mechanisms:*

HEIs	FECs	SUs
Email, online facilities such as blogs, web-based discussions	Email access to staff	Informal meetings
Ad hoc focus groups		
Suggestion boxes		

In terms of the effectiveness of student engagement processes (q2a), the majority of respondents from all types of institutions thought that all the student engagement processes listed are 'reasonably effective', with the only exception being the SUs' rating of student representation on faculty/departmental committees, which was almost evenly split between 'reasonably effective' (39%) and 'not very effective' (37%). Also to be noted is the higher proportion of SU respondents who were unable to answer this question, a trend that recurs in other sections of the survey.

Three quarters of HEIs and FECs thought that the effectiveness of student engagement processes varies 'a little' between faculties/schools. Conversely, almost three quarters of SUs (72%) thought that it varies 'a lot' (q2b).

In terms of the extent to which student engagement processes are representative of students' views (q3a), the vast majority of respondents thought that they are either 'reasonably' or 'very' representative. For instance, 94% of HEIs, 88% of FECs and 74% of SUs thought that student feedback questionnaires are 'reasonably' or 'very' representative; 84% of HEIs and FECs and 80% of SUs thought that student representation on institution-wide committees is 'reasonably' or 'very' representative; 84% of HEIs, 75% of FECs and 62% of SUs thought that student representation on faculty/departmental committees is 'reasonably' or 'very' representative. Interestingly, over a quarter of SUs (28%) thought that student representation at faculty/departmental level is not representative, a higher proportion than any of the other groupings. Also to be noted is the higher proportion of SUs who were unable to answer this question.

Over three quarters of HEIs (82%) and FECs (76%) thought that the representativeness of these processes varies a little between faculties/schools; but only half of SUs (54%) did so and another 38% thought it varies 'a lot' (q3b).

The survey went on to ask whether responsibility for some aspects of student engagement processes is centralised or devolved (q4). In almost all HEIs and FECs who responded to this question, student engagement policies are formulated centrally; whereas according to 13% of SUs this function is devolved in their institution. The implementation of such policies is devolved in over two thirds of responding HEIs (68%) and SUs (66%), but takes place centrally in two thirds of responding FECs (64%). A higher proportion of FECs than HEIs or SUs also take a centralised approach to monitoring (88% compared with 71% for HEIs and 63% of SUs) and reviewing (96% compared with 86% of HEIs and 78% of SUs).

## **Section Two: Student feedback questionnaires relating to teaching and learning**

With regard to the frequency in the use of student feedback questionnaires (q5), at programme level student feedback questionnaires are used annually by 60% of the HEIs who responded to this question, 80% of FECs and 46% of SUs. At module/unit level they are used at the end of module in over three quarters of all types of responding institutions. The proportion of SUs who were unable to answer this question is considerably higher than those from HEIs and FECs.

The administration of student feedback questionnaires (q6) at programme level is done in class by staff or online, prompted by email from staff, in approximately half of all respondent institutions in all three groups. Student representatives do not play a role in this, and the proportion of institutions that have their feedback questionnaires administered by reps is very low. A similar picture emerges for student feedback questionnaires at module/unit level, although here the proportions administering them in class (rather than online) are higher: 67% of HEIs, 72% of FECs and 67% of SUs. Again, the proportion of SUs who were unable to answer this question is considerably higher than those from HEIs and FECs.

The analysis of student feedback questionnaires at programme level is undertaken by staff in approximately two thirds of respondents from all institutional groups. The proportions for all three groups are even higher at module/unit level (77% of HEIs, 80% of FECs and 69% of SUs). Again, student representatives play little part in this.

As noted previously, the proportion of SUs who were unable to answer these questions is considerably higher than those from HEIs and FECs.

In HEIs and FECs, staff in faculties/departments are chiefly responsible for feeding the results back to students at both programme and module/unit level. SUs considered that this responsibility is spread slightly more evenly between departmental and central staff, student representatives and 'others'. Also to be noted, however, is that over a third of respondents from SUs were unable to answer this question (q7).

Information on actions taken as a result of student feedback is fed back to students by staff in departments/faculties in over three quarters of HEIs and FECs. Central staff play a role in 30% of HEIs and 40% of FECs, and student reps are involved in 32% of HEIs and 28% of FECs. At module/unit level the proportions of departmental/unit staff involved are even higher (81% of HEIs; 92% of FECs). Almost half of respondents from SUs were unable to answer this question (q8).

## **Section Three: Effectiveness of student representation on institutional committees relating to teaching and learning**

The survey probed into any difficulties institutions might have in recruiting representatives to institutional committees (q9). Almost three quarters of the HEIs who responded to this question do not have any difficulties in recruiting student reps at institutional level, and only 7% of them had some vacant posts. At faculty/departmental and programme levels, one third had some vacant posts. In FECs, there were 'a few' vacant posts in 48% of responding institutions at institutional/academic board level and 44% at faculty/departmental level; but there are fewer difficulties at programme level.

Within HEIs, the SU is responsible for providing training for student reps in the majority of cases (54%), although another 35% stated that this is done jointly by the institution and the SU. In FECs, just over half of institutions (52%) provide training themselves, whereas over four fifths of SUs (87%) said that they are the ones who provide training in the HE sector (q10).

Only 37% of HEIs, 20% of FECs and 54% of SUs stated that student representatives have the opportunity to gain recognition for their role, for example through the award of an academic credit or institutional certificate (q11).

Within HEIs student representatives are primarily responsible for relaying back to students the decisions affecting the quality of the learning experience taken at committee meetings (81% of all HEI respondents), whereas in FECs this task is mainly attributed to staff (84%). A third of respondents from SUs were not sure (q12).

HEIs and FECs appear to have a higher level of satisfaction with the effectiveness of programme committees than SUs do. Over 90% of both HEIs and FECs who responded to this question (q13) thought that programme committees are 'very' or 'reasonably' effective at raising issues relating to the quality of the students' learning experiences (SUs 66%) or providing a forum for students' views to be heard (SUs 58%). A lower proportion of HEIs and FECs, however, thought that such committees are 'very' or 'reasonably' effective at informing debates on the quality of learning experiences (HEIs 81%; FECs 76%) and providing feedback to students (HEIs 61%; FECs 88%).

SUs have a more critical view on the effectiveness of such committees, and around one third thought that they are not effective as a forum for student voices (29%) or informing debates (37%), and over half (55%) thought that they are not effective at providing students with feedback.

SUs had a higher proportion of respondents who were unable to provide an answer.

#### **Section Four: Staff-student liaison committees (or similar) set up to discuss issues relating to the quality of the learning experience**

The survey asked about the frequency of staff-student liaison committee meetings (q14). In over half of institutions who responded to this question (59% of HEIs, 68% of FECs and 50% of SUs) staff-student liaison committees meet every semester/term, although approximately a quarter of respondents from all groups acknowledged that there is variation between faculties/schools.

Over half the HEIs (58%) and SUs (51%) reported that the agenda for the meetings is set by staff and students jointly, although this is the case in only 40% of FECs and in almost a third of them (28%) the agenda is set by staff (q15).

Around a third of HEIs and SUs reported that staff and students jointly feed the outcomes of discussions back to students, and this is the case in 40% of FECs. A quarter of HEIs (26%) and two fifths of SUs (42%) acknowledged that there is variation between faculties/schools in this too (q16).

Over three quarters of HEIs and FECs rated staff-student liaison committees as 'very' or 'reasonably' effective in raising issues relating to the quality of student experience, providing a forum for students' views to be heard, informing debates and providing feedback to students. Approximately one third of SUs, however, thought that such committees are not effective at informing debates (29%) and providing feedback to students (39%). SUs also had a higher proportion of respondents who were unable to provide an answer (q17).

#### **Section Five: Overall views on the effectiveness of their practices on student engagement**

The survey asked whether institutions had recently introduced (or were planning to introduce in the near future) any other student engagement mechanisms (q18). Almost three quarters of HEIs (72%) and over half of FECs and SUs (52% and 56% respectively) responded affirmatively; the remainder had no such plans.

Institutions were asked to list these 'new' mechanisms. The following table provides a summary of the most and least commonly mentioned mechanisms.

*Most commonly mentioned 'new' mechanisms:*

HEIs	FECs	SUs
Enhancing the student rep system, e.g. ⇒ greater consistency ⇒ better training ⇒ award or credit for reps ⇒ greater opportunities for reps' involvement	Creation or further development of new structures, e.g. ⇒ student parliament ⇒ student council ⇒ student ambassadors	Enhancing the student rep system, e.g. ⇒ SU to recruit student reps ⇒ better representation for PGs ⇒ more representation on teaching forums ⇒ more support for faculty reps
Surveys, e.g. ⇒ external ⇒ internal	More opportunities for consultation, e.g. ⇒ student forums ⇒ conferences of various types	Introduction of new structures or facilities, e.g. ⇒ teaching quality forums ⇒ 'Ask the Dean' ⇒ new committee structure ⇒ codes of practice
Meetings and committees, e.g. ⇒ student experience committee ⇒ student open forum ⇒ working groups		Introduction of new initiatives, e.g. ⇒ student voice ⇒ student engagement strategy

*Least commonly mentioned 'new' mechanisms:*

HEIs	FECs	SUs
Student feedback mechanisms	Student voice activities	Participation in QA activities
	Implementation of learner involvement strategy	Surveys
	Engagement in IQER	

The survey asked what actions are being taken by institutions to measure the impact and effectiveness of their student engagement processes (q19). The following themes can be identified.

*Most commonly mentioned actions to measure impact and effectiveness:*

HEIs	FECs	SUs
Surveys, e.g. ⇒ external ⇒ internal	Surveys, e.g. ⇒ external ⇒ internal	Monitoring systems
Meetings, e.g. ⇒ formal ⇒ informal	Annual monitoring and reviews	Surveys, e.g. ⇒ external ⇒ internal
Annual monitoring and reviews		

*Least commonly mentioned actions to measure impact and effectiveness:*

HEIs	FECs	SUs
Internal audit	Informal processes	Annual review processes
Student voice project	Learner voice	New posts being created to review feedback mechanisms
Feedback from students or student reps		

When asked whether their institutions would like to be doing more to measure impact and effectiveness (q20), just over half of the HEIs (55%) stated that they would like to do more, and the remainder were quite happy with the level of activities currently in existence. None said they would like to do less. Explaining the reasons for their answers in the open-ended comments, some HEIs expressed satisfaction with the current breadth and effectiveness of the mechanisms in place. Other respondents commented that although the mechanisms in place are appropriate, their effectiveness needs to be improved. The need to strike a balance in a system that is effective but at the same time not burdensome for students and staff was also mentioned. Another related theme is that of student 'fatigue' due to too many evaluations and surveys. Among the HEI respondents who said they would like to do more, some comments focussed on the need to develop a more robust student representation system that is more representative of the student population and more effective (improved attendance and recruitment). Other respondents commented more generally on the need to involve students more, to gain more information on the student experience and to improve the feedback process so that the communication loop with students can be closed.

Two thirds of respondents from FECs (67%) would like to do more in the area of student engagement, with the remaining one third (33%) about the same; none would like to do less. A few respondents from FECs stressed the commitment of their institution towards student engagement, which they saw as an enabler for widening participation, lifelong learning and enhancing the quality of the student experience. One stated that the balance of activities is about right and another concluded that you can always strive to do more. A need to increase the effectiveness and the representativeness of the processes was underlined by other respondents. The issues of survey fatigue and a general apathy (by students and staff) were also mentioned.

The majority of respondents from SUs (79%) would like to do more, and 21% about the same; none would like to do less. The comments made described a wide range of ideas that cannot easily be grouped in patterns. Some respondents mentioned that current processes are 'tokenistic', superficial or piecemeal; several stressed the need for processes to become more effective and strive for wider representativeness of the student population. Two comments mentioned the need to record more thoroughly data on student representatives' work. In general, however, most comments stressed the importance of doing more in the future.

Finally, the survey asked whether student engagement processes need to become more effective (q21). The vast majority of respondents to this question (84% of HEIs, 80% of FECs and 95% of SUs) thought that such processes need to be more effective.

The following table summarises the barriers to improving effectiveness identified.

*Most commonly mentioned barriers to improving effectiveness:*

HEIs	FECs	SUs
Diversity of the student body	Difficulties with student rep system	Staff resistance/ineffectiveness
Lack of time ⇒ staff ⇒ student	Student apathy	Communication/closing the feedback loop
Communication/closing the feedback loop		Lack of time and resources

*Least commonly mentioned barriers to improving effectiveness:*

HEIs	FECs	SUs
Difficulties with student rep system	Difficulties in engaging part-time students	Difficulties in engaging students and apathy
Student apathy	Diversity of the student population	Training of student reps
Lack of resources ⇒ staff ⇒ student		Survey fatigue

## Appendix C: Survey questionnaire

### HEFCE-commissioned study into student engagement in higher education

This online survey seeks your views on student engagement policies and practices in higher education in England. By student engagement we mean processes whereby institutions make deliberate attempts to involve and empower students in the process of shaping the learning experience. For the purpose of this study, student engagement is concerned with institutional and student union processes and practices, such as those relating to student representation and student feedback (**excluding** the National Student Survey) which seek to inform and enhance the collective student experience.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** This questionnaire seeks to elicit a **single institutional response** and can only be completed online. We suggest you prepare your institutional response using the PDF version of the questionnaire sent in the email attachment and then complete the survey online in one sitting. This should take approximately 10 minutes. Please do not close this questionnaire part of the way through completing it as all the information you have provided will be lost. We are sorry, but we are not able to process paper submissions.

For queries on this questionnaire please contact Anna Scesa email: [a.scesa@open.ac.uk](mailto:a.scesa@open.ac.uk); or telephone: 0207 447 2555.

#### Section One: Your institution's student engagement processes overall

**q1a** Please indicate the types of student engagement processes currently in operation within your institution, and at what level they operate (*please tick all that apply*)

	Institution-wide	Faculty/school	Departmental	Whole programme	Module/unit
Student feedback questionnaires	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Student representation on committees	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Staff-student liaison committees (or similar) (e.g. student forums)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Students, as liaison officers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Other formal mechanisms  
- *please list up to three such mechanisms*

**q1b** To what extent do you think these formal student engagement processes vary between faculties/schools?

- A lot ☐
- A little ☐
- Not at all ☐
- Do not know ☐



**q1c** Please list up to three informal mechanisms in operation in your institution (e.g. tutor open door policy)

**q2a** For each of the following processes, please rate their **effectiveness** in terms of informing and shaping the student learning experience

	Very effective	Reasonably effective	Not very effective	Not applicable	Do not know
Student feedback questionnaires	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Student representation on institution-wide committees	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Student representation on faculty/departmental committees	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Staff-student liaison committees (or similar)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Students, as liaison officers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**q2b** To what extent do you think the **effectiveness** of these processes varies between faculties/schools?

A lot	<input type="radio"/>
A little	<input type="radio"/>
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>
Do not know	<input type="radio"/>

**q3a** For each of the following processes, please indicate how **representative of students' views** you think they are

	Very representative	Reasonably representative	Not very representative	Not applicable	Do not know
Student feedback questionnaires	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Student representation on institution-wide committees	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Student representation on faculty/departmental committees	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Staff-student liaison committees (or similar)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Students, as liaison officers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**q3b** To what extent do you think the **representativeness** of these processes varies between faculties/schools?

- A lot ☐
- A little ☐
- Not at all ☐
- Do not know ☐

**q4** Please indicate whether responsibility for each of the following aspects of student engagement processes is centralised or devolved

	Centralised	Devolved
Formulating policy on student engagement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Implementing policy on student engagement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Monitoring the implementation of policy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reviewing the implementation of policy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Section Two: Student feedback questionnaires relating to teaching and learning

**q5** How frequently are the following types of student feedback questionnaires used?

At **programme** level

- Annually ☐
- Every two to three years ☐
- End of programme ☐
- Other ☐
- Do not know ☐

At **module**/unit level

- End of module ☐
- Annually ☐
- Every two or three years ☐
- Other ☐
- Do not know ☐

**q6** How are student feedback questionnaires administered and analysed? *(tick any that apply)*

**Administered**

	In-class, by staff	In-class, by student representatives	Online, prompted by email from staff	Online, prompted by email from student	Internal post	Other, internal	External agency	Do not know
Programme level	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Module/unit level	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Analysed**

	By staff	By student representatives	Other, internal	External agency	Do not know
Programme level	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Module/unit level	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**q7** Who feeds back the **results** of student feedback questionnaires to students?

	Staff in department/faculty	Staff, centrally	Student representatives	Other	Do not know
Programme level	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Module/unit level	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**q8** Who feeds back information on **actions taken** as a result of student feedback questionnaires to students?

	Staff in department/faculty	Staff, centrally	Student representatives	Other	Do not know
Programme level	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Module/unit level	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Section Three: Effectiveness of student representation on institutional committees relating to teaching and learning (e.g. programme/course committees)**

**q9** To what extent do you have difficulties recruiting student representatives to institutional committees at the following levels?

	None at all	Slight, a few vacant posts	Some vacant posts	Severe, more vacant posts than filled ones	Not applicable	Do not know
Institutional/academic board	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Faculty/departamental	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Programme level	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**q10** Who, within your institution, is primarily responsible for providing training for student representatives?

- Institution (e.g. student services) ☐
- Student union ☐
- Joint institution/student union ☐
- Not applicable/no training provided ☐

**q11** Do student representatives have the opportunity to gain recognition for their role (e.g. through the award of academic credit or institutional certificate)?

- Yes ☐
- No ☐

If yes, in any one year, what proportion of student representatives take up this opportunity?

- Most ☐
- Around half ☐
- A few ☐
- Do not know ☐

**q12** Who relays back to students the decisions affecting the quality of the learning experience taken at committee meetings? *(tick all that apply)*

- Student representatives ☐
- Staff ☐
- Do not know/not sure ☐

**q13** How do you rate the effectiveness of programme committees in your institution in terms of:

	Very effective	Reasonably effective	Not very effective	Do not know
Raising issues relating to the quality of students' learning experiences	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Providing a forum for students' views to be heard	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Informing debates on the quality of learning experiences more widely across the faculty/department	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Providing feedback to students on issues raised and actions taken previously	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Section Four: Staff-student liaison committees (or similar) set-up to discuss issues relating to the quality of the learning experience**

**q14** How often do your staff-student liaison committees meet?

- Annually ☐
- Every semester/term ☐
- More than once per semester/term ☐
- Other ☐
- It varies between faculties/schools ☐

**q15** Who sets the agenda for the staff-student liaison committee?

- Staff ☐
- Students ☐
- Staff & students jointly ☐
- Other ☐
- It varies between faculties/schools ☐

**q16** Who feeds back the outcomes of discussions to students?

- Staff ☐
- Students ☐
- Staff & students jointly ☐
- Other ☐
- It varies between faculties/schools ☐

**q17** How do you rate the effectiveness of staff-student liaison committees in your institution in terms of:

	Very effective	Reasonably effective	Not very effective	Do not know
Raising issues relating to the quality of students' learning experiences	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Providing a forum for students' views to be heard	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Informing debates on the quality of learning experiences more widely across the faculty/department	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Providing feedback to students on issues raised and actions taken previously	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Section Five: Your overall views on the effectiveness of your institution's practices on student engagement and current challenges (if any) to improving that effectiveness**

**q18** Has your institution recently introduced (or is planning to introduce in the near future) any other student engagement mechanisms?

Yes ☐  
 No ☐  
 Do not know ☐  
 If yes, please indicate what these are in the box below

**q19** Please indicate what, if anything, your institution is doing to measure the impact and effectiveness of your student engagement processes

**q20** Would you like to be doing more or less? Please give reasons for your answer in the space below

More ☐  
 About the same ☐  
 Less ☐

**q21** Do you think your student engagement processes need to be more effective?

- Yes ☐  
No ☐

If yes, what do you think are the main barriers to improving their effectiveness (please identify up to three in the box below)?

**Section Six: Please provide some information about your institution. This information will not be used to identify individual institutions.**

**q22** Please tell us whether your institution is a

- Multi-faculty institution ☐  
Specialist institution ☐  
Decline to state ☐

**q23** Please tell us whether your institution is a member of the following groups (*tick all that apply*)

- Post-1992 university ☐  
Post-2004 university ☐  
HE college ☐  
Russell Group ☐  
Other pre-1992 university ☐

<p><b>THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR TAKING THE TIME TO COMPLETE THIS SURVEY. YOUR INPUT IS MUCH APPRECIATED.</b></p>
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## **Appendix D: Institutions and student unions involved in fieldwork**

### **Higher education institutions**

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth  
Birmingham City University  
University of Derby  
University of Essex  
University of Kent  
University of Leeds  
Norwich University College of the Arts  
University of Southampton  
University of Surrey

### **Further education colleges**

Havering College  
Newcastle College  
Stockport College  
Wigan and Leigh College

### **Student unions**

Birmingham City University  
University of Brighton  
University College London  
University of Essex  
University of Kent  
University of Liverpool  
Norwich University College of the Arts  
University of Southampton  
University of Surrey  
University of the West of England



## Appendix E: Interview schedule

For the purposes of this study, we understand student engagement to be the process whereby institutions and sector bodies make deliberate attempts to involve and empower students in the process of shaping the learning experience (HEFCE, ITT). We interpret this to mean that **the study is concerned with institutional and student union processes and practices, such as those relating to student representation and student feedback, which seek to inform and enhance the collective student learning experience**, rather than specific teaching, learning and assessment activities that are designed to enhance an individual student's engagement with their own learning.

1. How does 'student engagement' fit with the aims and policies of your institution?
  - How important is it within the overall priorities?
  - Are staff and students made aware of this 'fit' with overall priorities? (If so, how?)
2. What, in your view, is the present extent and nature of student engagement in your institution?
  - Is it more or less widespread than you would like?
  - Is it more or less widespread in certain faculties/departments than in others?
  - Does this matter?
3. What are your institutional and student union approaches to formal and informal student engagement?
  - What is the rationale for them?
  - Are the approaches consistently applied across (and within) faculties/departments?
  - How do they 'fit' with institutional processes for quality assurance and quality enhancement?
4. How effective are these various approaches?
  - What does 'effective' mean to you? (e.g. issues of representativeness of students' views; opportunities for input to relevant discussions; level and extent of input; nature of decisions taken; feedback to students on decisions and actions taken)
  - What evidence do you have/collect about the effectiveness of student engagement?
  - Are certain approaches more/less effective than others? (How do you know?)
  - Does effectiveness vary by faculty/department? (How do you know? Does it matter?)
  - Does effectiveness vary by learner constituency? (How do you know? Does it matter?)
5. What steps, if any, is your institution taking to ensure that the effectiveness of student engagement is maintained or enhanced?
  - What are the main challenges to improving student engagement?
  - Are they being addressed, and if so, how and by whom?
  - How will you know if effectiveness has been improved, as a result of addressing the challenges?
6. What is the relationship between faculties/departments and the student union in respect of student representation? (e.g. representation organised and managed by faculty without clear links to SU; representation organised and managed by faculty and supported by SU; representation organised by institution through student services, or equivalent)
7. Are you aware of various external agencies' work in the area of supporting and promoting effective student engagement (e.g. QAA; NUS; Higher Education Academy)? If so, what?
8. Do you think external agencies could/should be doing more in this area?
9. Finally, our study is based on an interpretation of student engagement that focuses on formal and informal processes which seek to 'inform and enhance the collective student learning experience'. Does this fit with your institution's view of the purposes of seeking engagement with students? Do you perceive other purposes? If so, what are they?

## Appendix F: Range and number of interviewees

Staff in HEIs:	Senior academic/central units	23
	Heads of department (or equivalent)	31
Students in HEIs:	Student union	15
	Student representatives	49
	Students	3
Staff in FECs:	Senior academic/central units	16
	Heads of department (or equivalent)	11
Students in FECs:	Student representatives	8
	Students	16

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## Glossary

CHERI	Centre for Higher Education Research and Information
DIUS	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills
FE	Further education
FEC	Further education college
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher education institution
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
ICT	Information and communications technology
IQER	Integrated quality and enhancement review
LIS	Learner involvement strategy
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
NSF	National Student Forum
NSS	National Student Survey
NUS	National Union of Students
PG	Postgraduate
QA	Quality assurance
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
sparqs	student participation in quality scotland
SSLC	Staff-student liaison committee
SU	Student union
VLE	Virtual learning environment