

**UCL Doctor in Education**

**Perceptions and perspectives on  
effective student representation**

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I, Alexander Thomas George BOLS, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

## **ABSTRACT**

Students have been increasingly involved in university governance since the late 1960s. Since that time there have been competing paradigms about how students are seen, whether as consumers, service-users, stakeholders, democratic participants or as partners. Each of these paradigms has been used to justify increased involvement of students but with quite different expectations of how and why they are involving students.

This study explores the factors of what makes effective student involvement in university governance. Student involvement in university governance has been widely researched but in most cases student involvement is considered in relation to one, or possibly two, of these paradigms but not all of them. This study identifies key gaps in the literature around the important role of university staff as gatekeepers; the extent to which committee structures consider how they engage students including how they address power differentials; as well as considering the perceptions of the effectiveness of the representatives themselves and the activities that they undertake. The study argues that the way in which students are seen in relation to key paradigms identified in the literature review impacts on how effective the processes are seen to be. The study is based primarily on perceptions of key stakeholders gathered through a national survey of university quality managers and students' union course-rep co-ordinators. The study contributes to knowledge by conceptualising a theoretical framework within which to consider effective student involvement in university governance.

The study develops a new theoretical framework on effective student involvement in university governance placing the key factors of effective student representatives, staff engagement and university committees within Ashraf and Kadir's (2012) effectiveness model. This is then situated within a wider set of paradigms that emerge from the literature which highlighted the impact of how students are seen.

## **IMPACT STATEMENT**

Demonstrating the impact of research has become increasingly important in higher education. In the context of a professional doctorate it was important to consider the impact within the professional context as well as wider definitions of impact. It was therefore important to consider the audiences that the research sought to influence and the best ways of targeting them. The student representation field has many audiences including fellow academics researching the field, professionals that are working in the field which will include university managers, students' union staff and officers as well as academics that sit on university committees involved in representation activities. There is also a wider audience of policy-makers involved in shaping interventions in student representation, this will include

those in a wide range of organisations from civil servants in government departments, regulatory bodies including the Office for Students, Quality Assurance Agency and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education and enhancement agencies such as AdvanceHE as well as sector organisations such as GuildHE and Universities UK.

In order to reach academics researching the field of student representation, and also to have credibility with those academics working within institutions and sitting on university committees, it will be important to get the research published in peer-reviewed publications. I have already published two chapters based on this research in a book on student engagement (August 2020) through a noted academic publishing house, and these have been referred to in several presentations by the Office for Students in developing their new student engagement strategy.

As part of the process of reaching a wider audience of those involved working in the field and also policy-makers I will seek to disseminate the findings widely through conference presentations, written articles and blogs in the relevant sector media. I have already presented the findings of my research at two conferences. Firstly, one organised by The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP), a sector body based within NUS. This was an audience of primarily students' union officers and staff. Secondly, I was invited to speak at a conference on "The Secret Life of Students" organised by WonkHE, a major blog-site with significant reach into university management and wider policy-makers.

I will also identify other media outlets targeted at different groups including ChangeSU.org aimed at students' unions managers, ResearchFortnight and the Times Higher Education. In addition, I will disseminate the findings through different networks including through the GuildHE students' union and quality managers network as well as similar networks of mission groups to ensure the widest possible reach for the research findings.

### **Acknowledgements and thanks**

I would like to thank all those that have supported me during my doctorate, my supervisors Professor William Locke and Dr Bryan Cunningham, your time and patience has been much appreciated, and in particular Dr Vincent Carpentier for your enormous support in finalising the thesis. I would also like to thank my family for their understanding and encouragement and especially my step-father Dr Andy Stove for reading and commenting on various drafts. Thanks also to those in institutions and students' unions that responded to the survey and have been involved in the research.

# Contents

Section Number	Title	Page
	Abstract	2
	Impact Statement	2
	Acknowledgements and thanks	3
	List of figures and tables	6
<b>Cpt 1 Introduction</b>		
1.1	Introduction	8
1.2	Historical and policy background	10
1.3	Professional journey	12
1.4	Expected contribution to academic knowledge and professional practice	12
1.5	Summary of previous research	13
1.6	Structure of the thesis	16
<b>Cpt 2 Literature Review</b>		
2.1	Introduction	18
2.2	What is student engagement?	18
2.3	Various identities of student engagement	21
2.4	Key issues arising from student representation	32
2.5	Developing the theoretical framework of student involvement	36
2.6	Literature on evaluating effectiveness	38
2.7	Conclusion and drawing together the theoretical framework	46
<b>Cpt 3 Research Design</b>		
3.1	Introduction	50
3.2	Research questions	50
3.3	Research method	52
3.4	Survey development	57

3.5	Research respondents	58
3.6	Survey distribution	60
3.7	Ethics	61
3.8	Data analysis	63
3.9	Accuracy of the Survey data	67
3.10	Conclusion	69
<b>Cpt 4</b>	<b>Findings</b>	70
4.1	How effective is student representation perceived to be?	70
4.2	How do university staff impact on effectiveness of student representation?	85
4.3	What impact do university committees have on student representation?	90
4.4	What is the main purpose of student involvement in university governance?	99
4.5	Conclusion	101
<b>Cpt 5</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	103
5.1	Introduction	103
5.2	Perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation	104
5.3	The impact of university staff engagement on student engagement	108
5.4	Effectiveness of university committee structures	111
5.5	How the purpose of student representation is impacted by the wider identities of students	114
5.6	Conclusion	118
<b>Cpt 6</b>	<b>Conclusions</b>	119
6.1	Conclusions – what makes student representation effective	119
6.2	Suggestions for improving practice	126
6.3	Limitations of the research	127
6.4	Further research	128

	<b>Bibliography</b>	130
Annex 1	Survey questions	144
Annex 2	Glossary	150

## List of figures and tables

<b>Figure or table</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Page</b>
Figure 1	Key dates of policy interventions impacting on students and students' unions since 1994	11
Figure 2	Enhancing student involvement in university governance	16
Figure 3	Various identities of student engagement	22
Figure 4	Collective student engagement literature – interactions between concepts	30
Figure 5	Collective student engagement literature – mapping different forms of engagement	32
Figure 6	Enhancing the framework for student involvement in university governance	37
Figure 7	Conceptual framework – student participation in university governance	38
Figure 8	Enhancing student representation systems, concepts of student engagement and organisations effectiveness models	44
Figure 9	Evaluating the effectiveness of student participation in university governance through the different lenses and concepts	46
Figure 10	Considering the effectiveness of student representation	102
Figure 11	Evaluating the effectiveness of student participation in university governance through the different lenses and concepts	115
Figure 12	Evaluating the effectiveness of student participation in university governance through the different lenses and concepts	125
Table 1	Survey response rate	59
Table 1a	Survey response rate	64
Table 2	Survey response rate – university type	65
Table 3	Simulated regression coefficient versus sample noise	67
Table 4	Effectiveness of student representation on institution-wide committees	71

Table 4a	Effectiveness of student representation on institution-wide committees – by HEFCE Peer Group	73
Table 5	Representativeness of student representatives on institution-wide committees	74
Table 6	Effectiveness of student representation on faculty/departmental committees	76
Table 6a	Effectiveness of student representation on faculty/departmental committees – by HEFCE Peer Group	77
Table 7	Representativeness of student representatives on faculty/departmental committees	78
Table 8	Effectiveness of staff/student liaison committees	79
Table 8a	Effectiveness of student representation on staff/student liaison committees – by HEFCE Peer Group	80
Table 9	Representativeness of student representatives on staff/student liaison committees	81
Table 10	Representativeness varying between faculty/schools	84
Table 11	Extent to which staff see the value of engaging students in representation activities	86
Table 11a	Extent to which staff see the value of engaging students in representation activities – by HEFCE peer group	87
Table 12	Does your institution provide training for academic staff on engaging students effectively?	88
Table 13	How effective would you consider your committee structure at engaging student representatives?	91
Table 13a	How effective would you consider your committee structure at engaging student representatives?	92
Table 13b	How effective would you consider your school/faculty committee structure at engaging student representatives? – by HEFCE Peer Group	93
Table 13c	How effective would you consider your school/faculty committee structure at engaging student representatives? – by HEFCE Peer Group	94
Table 13d	How effective would you consider your institutional committee structure at engaging student representatives? – by HEFCE Peer Group	95
Table 14	How does the effectiveness at engaging student representatives in your committee structure vary between departments/schools/faculties?	96
Table 15	How effective are programme committees at engaging students in specific activities	97
Table 16	Activities student representatives undertake	99

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

*“The provider actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience.” (QAA & UKSCQA, 2018)*

In March 2018 the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA) jointly published the revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education (QAA & UKSCQA, 2018). In England the “Expectations and Core Practices” make up the regulatory baseline by which the Office for Students (OfS) assesses providers. One of these Core Practices, quoted above, explicitly refers to student engagement, with Guidance referencing the importance of student representation structures.

This caps over a decade of interest in student voice, representation and engagement by national policy makers. The Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) report (Little et al, 2009) to the Higher Education Funding Council in England (HEFCE) exploring student representation resulted in HEFCE funding for a joint National Union of Students (NUS) and Higher Education Academy (HEA) project on student engagement; the Government’s 2011 White Paper (The Stationery Office, 2011) sought to put *Students at the Heart of the System* and a new section of the Quality Code was developed to look at Student Engagement, published in 2012 and then updated and re-launched in 2018.

It has been argued (Bols, 2014) that this focus on student engagement dates back even further to the introduction of tuition fees and the rise of the “student as consumer” discourse. This might be linked to the suggestion of a possible “reverse Hawthorne effect” (Watson, 2009) with students becoming more demanding the more they are encouraged to see themselves as consumers.

There are many different understandings and definitions of student engagement (Trowler, 2010). This wider discourse of student engagement covers a wider range of sub-fields including student voice and student representation. Student engagement looks at individual engagement with their study as well as non-representative collective engagement, such as student research schemes including Students as Change Agents at the University of Exeter (Dunne and Owen, 2013). Raaper and Komljenovic (2021) describe the “messy field” of students in HE governance referring to a number of different fields: representation in governing bodies (Boland 2005; Lizzio and Wilson 2009); course level representation



(Carey, 2013; Flint et al 2017); students' unions (Brooks et al, 2015; Raaper 2020a, 2020b); student surveys, metrics/data, complaints procedures (Freeman, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017). The literature review will consider these wider dimensions of student voice and student engagement, but this research will be primarily considering student involvement in university governance through the perceptions of student representation in university committees at course, faculty and institutional level. This research will be based on the definition of student representation as outlined in the above Core Practice in the Quality Code, namely the collective engagement of students in the quality of their educational experience.

The increased national policy focus on student involvement in university governance, over a number of years, has rightly given rise to questions about its purpose and effectiveness. There are many stakeholders involved in the collective engagement of students in the quality of their education experience, including the students themselves, their representatives and students' unions as well as the academic and professional services staff of the university and university's higher management. These multiple stakeholders in student representation mean that there are many different perspectives about its effectiveness.

This research explores what factors contribute to effective student involvement in university governance, considering the different elements that can impact on student representation including the perceptions of key stakeholders, engagement of staff, the university committee structures, the different levels that representatives are engaged at as well as the different types of activities that they undertake. It then seeks to place this within a theoretical framework drawing on both organisational effectiveness theory and the wider paradigms impacting on how students are seen – whether as consumers, service-users, stakeholders, democratic participants or partners. In order to explore these questions the empirical objective of the research was to gather data to better understand these factors, based on the following research questions:

- What are the perceived key factors of effective student involvement in university governance?
- How effective is student representation perceived to be at different levels within an institution by university quality managers and students' union course-rep co-ordinators?
- How are university staff perceived to impact on effectiveness of student representation?
- What perceived impact do university committee structures have on the effectiveness of student representation?

- What is the main purpose of student involvement in university governance and is this reflected in the activities that representatives undertake?

These questions were addressed by gathering views on how effective student representation is currently seen to be by the two key stakeholders in student representation systems - representatives from students' unions and institutional managers - by examining their different perceptions and perspectives. This research draws on the views of key stakeholders coming out of critical theory which is based on the idea that gathering the views of stakeholders as a way of evaluating the effectiveness of the organisational processes, as outlined further in Chapter 2. The empirical research is based on a national survey of students' union course representative coordinators and university quality managers from universities with taught degree awarding powers in England drawing on both the quantitative data and free-text qualitative responses.

## **1.2 Historical and policy background**

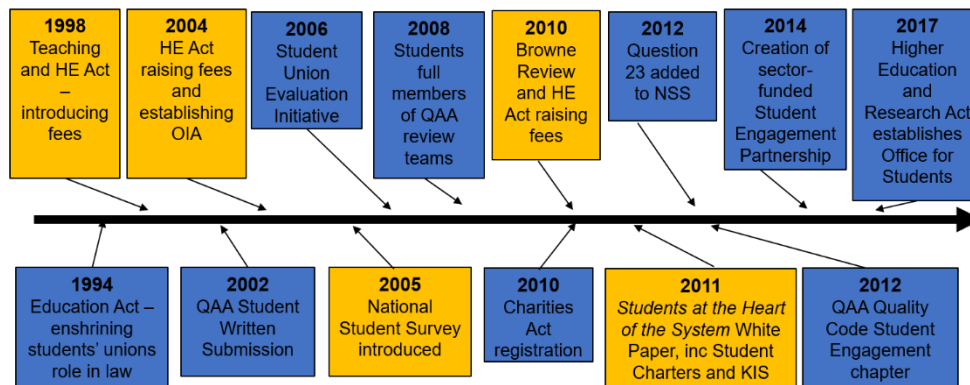
This section provides a brief examination of the historical and policy background to the current situation in which an examination of the effectiveness of student involvement in university governance has been important for future policy formation, and refers to many of the points in Figure 1 (p12).

It is, however, important to take it back a bit further. The idea of different phases – or “periodisation” (Raaper and Komljenovic, 2021) relating to student engagement is a helpful way of segmenting developments relating to the field. They argue that before the Second World War and the development of the welfare state across Western Europe there was relatively little engagement by students in university governance, however since that period how students have been involved in university governance and the extent to which they have agency has changed and evolved. Raaper and Komljenovic (2021) refer to a three-stage evolution from students as partners in the welfare state, to students as consumers following the 1973/4 oil crisis and rise of neo-liberalism, through to students emerging as digital users following the 2008 financial crash. They note that periodisation is a contested space where different societal forces struggle for hegemony at a particular time (Klemencic, 2011; Troschitz 2018). Whilst the specific designation of these three phases isn't without challenge the idea of periodisation is a helpful one and one that will be utilized later in the literature review.

This “messy field” (Raaper and Komljenovic, 2021) of student engagement in higher education governance and this sense of the competing policy interventions is demonstrated in the timeline below (Bols, 2020) which highlights just some of the key dates over the last

25 years impacting on students and students' unions that have driven enhancements in student representation in England.

**Figure 1: Key dates of policy interventions impacting on students (yellow) and students' unions (blue) since 1994**



In England there emerged a growing discourse around students as consumers, starting in the 1980s when international students started having to pay tuition fees but then accelerating as home students started getting loans for their maintenance costs and particularly following the introduction of tuition fees for full-time undergraduate courses in England in 1998. This notion of marketisation (Williams, 1992) and market incentives and forms of organisation accelerated further following the increase in tuition fees to £3,000 in 2006 and again following the rise to £9,000 from 2012 (Temple, 2016). Against this backdrop many university leaders, students' union representatives and higher education policy opinion formers sought to develop an alternative narrative focusing on students as partners in their education. These discourses increased the emphasis on the role of students and student feedback, as is shown, for example by the development of the National Student Survey, National Student Forum, Key Information Sets and the recent creation of the Office for Students (Freeman, 2016).

The middle and late 1990's also saw the rise of the new public management discourse (Hood, 1995; McLaughlin et al, 2002; Deem and Brehony, 2005) as a guiding framework for enhancing the efficiency of public services. In higher education this was manifested through the rise of a "quality assurance culture". Quality was defined in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 as "how, and how well, the higher education provider supports students to enable them to achieve their award" and there has been a systematic attempt to engage students in this (Coates, 2005; Little et al, 2009). There has also been an expansion of professional and administrative staff within higher education and changing identities of staff

(Whitchurch, 2008), many of whom were responsible for quality, data, registry and other assurance type functions within universities. There was also an enhanced emphasis nationally on transparency and on the information required to enable consumers to make informed choices and to enhance accountability. The rise of this quality assurance culture has been linked to the undermining of the idea of the professional 'don', with a shift in the importance from academic governance to executive management (Scott, 2015). Against this backdrop there has been a shift in emphasis from teaching to learning, and listening to the voices of students and raising the profile of the individual, something that student representation structures have been developed to support.

The literature review (Chapter 2) will consider these factors in the context of the growth of student engagement literature, of the emphasis on students as consumers and of the impact of the new public management theory. The review of the literature will seek to draw out the different factors that feed in to inform the views on the effectiveness of student involvement in university governance systems.

### **1.3 Professional journey**

My own professional journey has featured strong engagement with student representation and engagement in university governance from different perspectives, having been a course, faculty and university representative at my first university before going on to the national and international level of student representation. As well as having been involved in university governance I have also worked in various organisations supporting student representatives. Reflecting back on Raaper and Komljenovic's (2021) "messy field" of students in HE governance refers to a number of different fields I have been involved in each of the different elements of that they refer to: representation in governing bodies; course level representation; students' unions; student surveys, metrics/data, complaints procedures; throughout my career and my experiences have shaped my research, as outlined in the next section, but also my research has influenced my practice too.

### **1.4 Expected contribution to academic knowledge and professional practice**

My professional journey has been steeped in student representation. This experience over two decades has led me to reflect deeply on student involvement in university governance, considering the different levels of engagement within an institution, what the purpose of student representation is at these different levels within a university and how this representation could be enhanced. This has helped shape my research and raise questions that I wanted to research in more detail and the structure of a professional doctorate

provided a way of reflecting both on my career journey to date, but more importantly on considering how student representation and involvement in university governance might be enhanced in the future. This influence has been a two-way process with my professional experience influencing my research, but also my research influencing my practice through raising important questions of power differentials but also the impact of the different theoretical drivers of whether student representation is seen in the context of a students as consumers, service-users, stakeholders, democratic participants or partners narratives.

The study contributes to knowledge by conceptualising a theoretical framework within which to consider effective student involvement in university governance. The study represents one of the most comprehensive studies into the factors that feed into views on the effectiveness of student involvement in university governance and student representation. The research will explore the different factors that inform whether student involvement in university governance is seen as effective and will draw on different elements feeding into this including the perceptions amongst both students' unions and university representatives, staff engagement and committee structures and will seek to place wider questions of the effectiveness of student representation systems within a broader theoretical framework.

## **1.5 Summary of my previous research**

This thesis is part of my wider Doctor in Education, EdD, which has all been looking at different elements of student involvement in university governance. It was always intended that the individual elements of the research should not be looked at in isolation but rather build on each other and this earlier research informs this study.

### **1.5.1 Foundations of Professionalism**

The first module of the EdD, Foundations of Professionalism, considered student representation and whether it could be called a profession and therefore the extent to which enhancement of student representation systems should be considered "professionalisation" rather than just enhancing the effectiveness of the representation systems. The essay produced for this module reflected on the increasing expectations on student representatives as a result of the twin drivers of the expectations arising from student consumerism and new public management within universities. It argued that these increasing expectations had resulted in student representation moving away from the "honourable amateur" model, where simply doing one's best was enough, and moving towards a system based on the effectiveness of representation, or moving "from an ethic of service to an ethic of performance." (Barnett, 2008, p197).

This ethic of performance has resulted in an increased emphasis on attracting the best candidates to become student representatives through the creation of job descriptions and celebrating the achievements of previous representatives, selecting the best individuals through competitive elections, and then providing representatives with training to support them to undertake the role so they can become effective advocates through researching issues and involving students in identifying the solutions. As a result, student representation now has many of the features of a profession with an emerging literature and knowledge base, supported by students' unions and a National Union which provides much of the support of a professional body. This essay suggested that student representation could therefore be considered as a quasi-profession with many of the features of a new profession.

### **1.5.2. Methods of Enquiry (parts 1 and 2)**

The second module, Methods of Enquiry 1, developed the method for the research and Methods of Enquiry 2 included a pilot research study through four interviews. The four interviews included two senior students' union managers who had overseen student representation systems for several years and so were able to provide a longitudinal perspective and two national student representatives – from NUS and The Student Engagement Partnership (a sector-wide project supporting student engagement in England).

One of the key themes that emerged from the four interviews was the idea that there is a mismatch in the views of the effectiveness of student representation systems between students' union and universities. One of the interviewees reflected on the *“different perspectives of what the rep system is for between an institution and SU”* with many institutions almost *“co-opting”* the students in their quality assurance system to support a *“performance culture”*. Whereas students' unions, whilst also recognising the role for student representation in quality assurance systems, considered a more important role around driving education change. Another interviewee thought that there is still not universal recognition of the value and importance of student involvement in university governance across their institutions, particularly amongst some academics. He quoted academics as saying that *“the problem with student reps is that you can lead a horse to water but can't make them (sic) drink”*. These questions of differing perceptions and perspectives between student representatives, academics and professional services staff is an area that will be explored in more detail in this research.

One trend that was particularly commented on was the increased resources that students' unions have invested in student representation over the previous decade. This included increasing numbers of students' union staff to support involvement in university governance

and providing good policy support *“the fundamental shift has been that before 2009 most students’ unions had a single course rep coordinator, someone to do the admin and organise the training, I now see student engagement professionals that are good on policy, that are experts on chunks of this agenda beyond admin and I think that has been the big move out of just coordination and into actual education policy”*.

This research further developed the idea of student representation as a profession with the suggestion that it would be helpful to develop a set of behaviours for the ideal student representative. Initial ideas that emerged were themes around student representatives being good communicators, policy actors and “chameleonic” – or able to fit in with both the students they’re representing and also with university management.

### **1.5.3 The Institution Focused Study**

The themes emerging from these four interviews were then explored further in the Institution-Focused Study which was based on nine interviews, three people – a students’ union representative, senior academic and senior manager - from each of three different types of institution - a large research-intensive university, a smaller teaching-focused university and a small private provider.

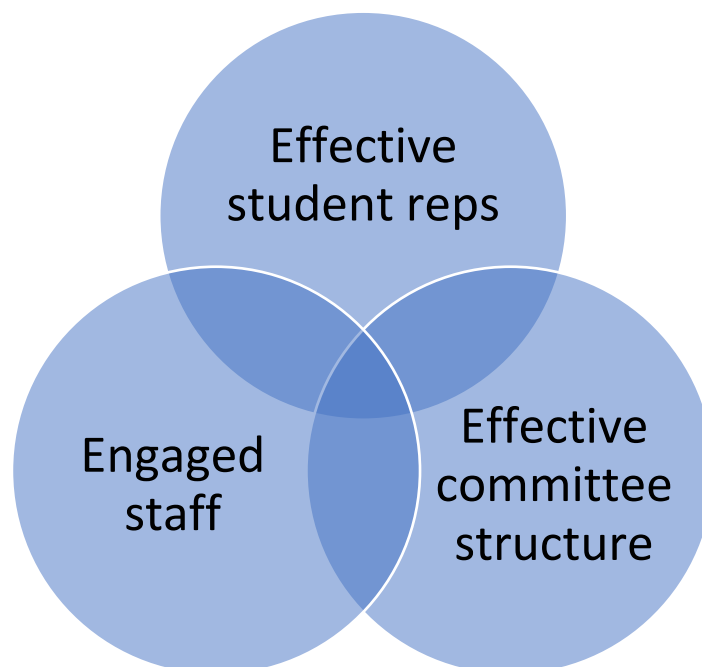
Across the nine interviewees there was broad agreement that there have been significant improvements to student involvement in university governance across the sector in recent years. One university quality manager considered this focus to be deliberate, *“an active choice by the academic community to want to get on the front foot, to shape the relationship with students”*.

Whilst there had been improvements in student involvement in university governance this was not without caveats. The quality manager in the smaller teaching focused university raised some comments about the consistency and representativeness of the representatives and this was reiterated by the quality manager in the small private provider. He believed that the system overall was effective, but that this depended on the representatives themselves, commenting that *“50% of them are great and really effective, but I think 50% sign up in the first couple of weeks, thinking it’ll be exciting and then see how much work it is talking to your peers and slowly drop off.”* There were also comments about the variability of representatives at different levels within the institution, with institution-wide representatives being considered the most effective.

Another theme that emerged in the interviews was the idea of a power differential between student representatives and the institution. This was epitomised by the academic in the large research-intensive university, who commented on the power differential. *“The bigger the committee the more that that kind of thing is likely to happen...and so the bigger the committee the more [student representatives are] outgunned...there's more obviously a sense that they're intimidated by that kind of setting”*.

The key finding that emerged from the interviews was that to consider student involvement in university governance it was not possible to look solely at processes of student representation. There was a view that one could significantly focus on student representation structures but that this would only ever be of limited impact if one did not also consider the effectiveness of the committee structure as a whole and also how staff are supported to get the most out of student representation. It is therefore suggested that one should consider enhancing student involvement in university governance within a wider framework, which can be represented as a Venn diagram with all three factors inter-locking, as in Diagram 1, below. Bols (2015) argues that it is only by focusing on all three aspects of the Venn diagram that an institution will be able to effectively enhance student involvement in university governance.

**Figure 2: Enhancing student involvement in university governance**



## **1.6 Structure of the thesis**

This chapter has provided an introduction to the themes being explored in this research as well as exploring both my professional journey and my previous research. The previous



research points towards a number of themes that could be explored further in this research including considering what makes student involvement in university governance effective and the different factors within that. The research questions will be explored through the analysis of a new a national survey to gather empirical evidence on the perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation, differences at different levels within a university as well as differences across different types of universities. Other themes that emerged included power differentials, the role of staff as gatekeepers and the impact of the wider committee structure. These questions will help develop a wider understanding of the factors that result in effective student involvement in university governance, as well as whether these have changed over time.

The next chapter will examine these themes in more detail through a review of the literature relating to student engagement and involvement in university governance. The literature will consider the broad area of student engagement as well as the more specific factors that impact on effective student involvement in university governance and student representation. The literature review is structured around key themes in the literature: effective student representation, the engagement of staff and the effectiveness of committee structures as identified in the framework presented as the Venn Diagram, Figure 2, above, as well as wider questions such as power differentials and representativeness. The literature review will also consider evaluation models to consider questions of effectiveness and wider paradigms that can impact on student involvement in university governance such as how students are positioned within higher education. This will then be used to develop a conceptual framework within which to consider the research questions.

Chapter 3 outlines the research design and method including the development of the national survey, the respondents, distribution and key ethical and analysis issues. Chapter 4 presents the data exploring the key findings around the three central factors of effective student representation, engagement of staff and effective committee structures as well as the activities that representatives undertake. Chapter 5 analyses and discusses the survey results in the context of the conceptual framework and the literature before Chapter 6 draws it all together into a conclusion.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## **2.1 Introduction**

The first section of the literature review discusses the overarching research field of student engagement of which student participation in university governance and student representation are just a subset. This broader field of student engagement will help provide a wider context within which discussions surrounding student involvement in university governance sit. Considering this wider literature will help frame some of the key theoretical ideas that underpin this area of research. This broader overview of the research into student engagement will outline some of the different forms of student engagement and draw out some lines of inquiry for the research question looking at the different activities that those involved in student engagement undertake. The literature review draws on some of the different debates surrounding student engagement including the extent to which students are engaged in university governance on the basis of them being stakeholders, consumers or partners in their education.

The second section considers the specific literature relating to student involvement in university governance and student representation. Whilst the literature looking specifically at these areas is relatively limited, it is of increasing interest to researchers. It does, however, highlight a number of key themes, such as the potential impact of power differentials between student representatives and universities. The engagement of staff, and power differentials, is likely to be a key factor in what makes student involvement in university governance effective and this will be one of the empirical objectives of the research.

The third section of the literature review explores the effectiveness of student involvement in university governance and the literature relating to evaluation and organisational effectiveness. This critical consideration of the literature relating to organisational effectiveness will help to develop a framework within which to consider questions of effectiveness of student involvement in university governance and the ways in which it can be evaluated.

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

Student engagement literature covers a wide number of fields. It ranges from considering the individual student to students as a collective. The literature also spans engaging students in their learning through to engaging students in the processes – or governance - of shaping their education experiences.

Student engagement literature in the US and Australasia has tended to focus of 'educationally purposive activities' and outcomes of student success such as satisfaction, academic achievement, persistence and social engagement (Kuh, 1995; Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh and Vesper, 1997; Coates, 2007). Trowler (2010) traced the origins of student engagement literature back to Astin (1984, p307) and his work on student involvement which referred to the "quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience" which helped shape much of the subsequent literature. These educationally purposive activities or "individual student learning" (Trowler, 2010) cover issues such as student attention, interest, involvement and (active participation) in learning; as well as 'student-centredness' and student involvement in the design, delivery and assessment of their learning (Kuh et al., 2007; Krause and Coates, 2008; Hu and Kuh, 2001).

The UK has a much longer tradition of students' unions and representation which is reflected in the literature (Jacks, 1973), with the student engagement literature drawing on student feedback, student representation and participation in governance (Rodgers et al, 2011; Carey, 2013; Chervona, 2019), perhaps best defined as "the process whereby institutions and sector bodies make deliberate attempts to involve and empower students in the process of shaping the learning experience" (HEFCE, 2008).

### **2.2.1 Student involvement in university governance**

There has been considerable focus on increased student participation in university governance and strengthening of the student voice in university governance in the last five years (Shenstone, 2019). This would suggest that there has been improvement since the 2003 report for the Council of Europe (Persson, 2003) which looked at student participation in university governance, considering the opinions of members of university governing councils, academics and students, and found that all three were in favour of increasing student participation. Across Europe the involvement in the Bologna Process to create a European Higher Education Area have made student participation in university governance one of the priorities (Ferrer-Balas et al, 2013; Bols, 2013). This is not just a European phenomenon with university governing bodies in Canada reviewing the function of the senate as a space for student participation, in order to adapt it to current times (Jones, Sanan, and Goyan 2004). On another level, but with a similar purpose, the study by Kuruuzum, Asilkan, and Bato (2005), proposes that university departments give more responsibility to the students in activities concerning them, involve them in problems related to the budget and physical resources, and have them participate in setting standards.

This process of engaging students in university governance is more than how well a committee works, well written papers or minutes. Indeed, given the wide variety in models of

university governance across the globe, and even within the UK, it is difficult to define what “good” governance looks like and different stakeholders – such as academics, students, governments, media – are all likely to have different views. A search for “universality” is likely to be near impossible and it will depend on the context of the individual institution and will rely on the active endorsement of stakeholders and likely to change over time as standards and expectations change (Strike, 2019).

### **2.2.2 Student involvement moving beyond a few to engaging wider group of students**

Over this period student participation in higher education governance has gone from an activity of just a few interested students (Freeman, 2016) to an activity that engages a much wider group of students. Student participation in university governance covers a wide range of fields considering how students can be engaged in the decision-making processes surrounding the student learning experience, and can be described as a “messy field” (Raaper & Komljenovic, 2021).

This student participation in university governance ranges from how students are engaged in existing university processes such as representation in governing bodies (Boland 2005; Lizzio and Wilson 2009) through to representation at the course level through structures such as departmental faculty meetings and staff/student liaison committees (Carey, 2013; Flint et al 2017). This field also includes how students themselves self-organise and advocate their views, through for example students’ unions (Brooks et al, 2015; Raaper 2020a, 2020b). As well as considering the processes of how students themselves participate in this field it has expanded to consider wider ways in which the student voice can be heard through student surveys, metrics/data and complaints procedures and other market tools (Freeman, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017; Bols, 2020) and more recently through other forms of student data, such as online data analytics (Holmwood & Marcuello Servos 2019; Williamson et al 2020; Raaper & Komljenovic, 2021).

### **2.2.3 Student involvement in university governance can be tokenistic**

One of the key issues emerging from the literature is that whatever the actual structures or processes one of the key questions relates to the power of the student representatives (McCulloch, 2009). There has been a significant increase in the visibility of student participation (Bols, 2020) but a question about the extent to which this is based on tokenism and transaction (Klemencic, 2012). This was noted as early as 1973 by then NUS President Digby Jacks who argued that students may not be involved in the right committees, or that important decisions are taken outside the committee in a working group, subcommittee or just informally and even where the decision came to committee, student

representatives could be “easily out-voted or not allowed to vote at all on major questions of importance” (Jacks, 1973, p258).

In some institutions there can be concerns that student involvement in university governance can be primarily “oppositional in nature” or “on the left in terms of ideology and politics” (Altbach, 2006, p335). Student organisations can therefore be seen as “problematic as well as potent” (Klemencic, 2012, p4) and so better to involve students but then exclude from the real decision-making, as implied by Jacks (1972). It was of interest that the European Students’ Union’s Göteborg Student Declaration in 2001, in the lead-up to students’ unions being formally involved in the Bologna Process for the first time, emphasised that students should be involved in the decision-making processes as “students, as competent, active and constructive partners” (ESU, 2001, p1) rather than as a point of principle.

This research addresses the issues raised in these documents by focussing on the ways in which students participate in university decision-making through engagement in governance structures at the course, department and institutional level and consider some of the key themes emerging from the literature relating to student participation as considered in section 2.4 below.

### **2.3 Various identities of student engagement**

Collective student engagement literature brings together concepts around student participation in university governance, representation and feedback. This notion of representative democracy and engaging individuals to speak on behalf of groups often considers the “why?”, why should students be collectively involved in shaping the quality of their educational experience? However, the literature rarely acknowledges the “complex imperatives and ideologies that have informed the development” of student representation (Freeman, 2016, p859).

To anticipate one conclusion of the literature review, it will be seen that all the analyses of student engagement are based on one, or occasionally on more than one, of the following five models:

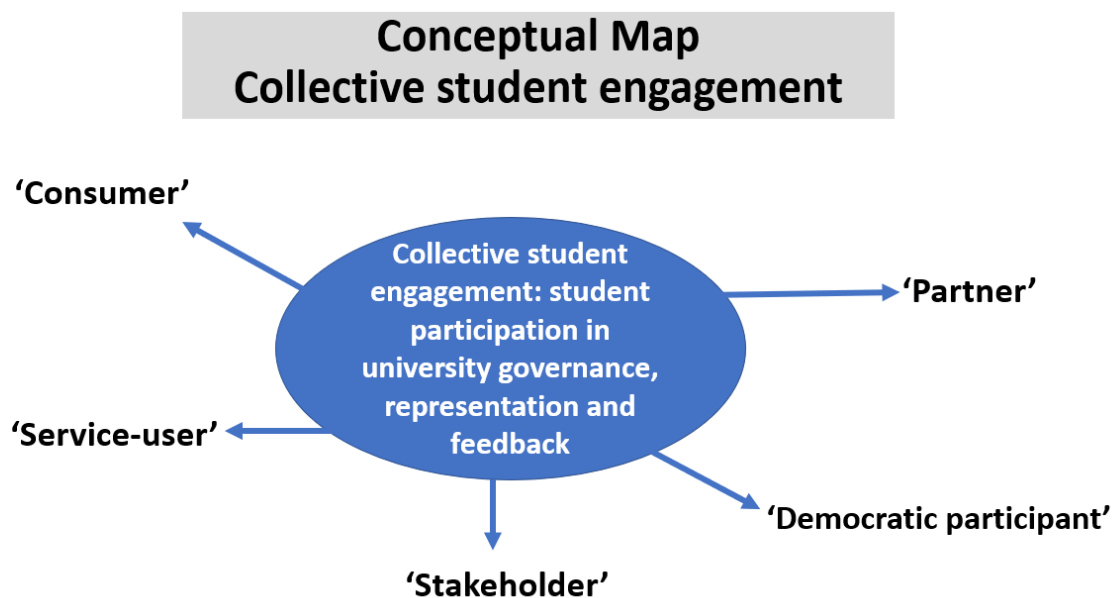
- students as stakeholders
- students as consumers
- students as service users
- students as partners or
- students as democratic participants

The framework of these five categories: Stakeholder, Consumer, Service User, Partner and Democratic Participants will be used to structure the analysis in this thesis. As mentioned

above, most previous work looks at the issues from only one of these perspectives, although two are considered in a few studies, but this provides a reason why the new work described later in this thesis will consider the issues from all these perspectives.

The purpose and form of student involvement in university governance will vary significantly depending on whether you view them through the lens of being consumers, service-users, stakeholders, democratic participants or partners. As we will explore through the literature the way in which students are seen, through one of these key lenses, impacts on both why and how stakeholders believe that students should be involved in university governance. At its simplest it can be illustrated in the figure below which draws out some of the concepts that might be used to justify collective student engagement.

**Figure 3: Various identities of student engagement**



We will return to this figure at several points throughout this chapter and develop it into a theoretical framework within which to consider the effectiveness of student involvement in university governance. The following sections will consider each of these concepts in turn.

### **2.3.1 Students as stakeholders**

Student representation on university governing bodies and committees has a long history. From the late 1960s, particularly across Western Europe and North America, there was an increasing sweep of university democratisation (Altbach, 2006) and the sense that students should be involved in all decision-making processes on issues that affected them (Luescher-Mamashela, 2010). This was usually achieved through opening up of existing university committees to student membership (Moodie and Eustace 1974). This then moved to a point of consideration of the rights and responsibilities of students including their right to participate in university governance (Bryan and Mullendore 1992), although it is questionable

whether this meant students having real power or it being based on a tokenistic opening up of university processes still run by others (Mason, 1978).

From a student perspective this had a purpose namely to drive educational change, or as Digby Jacks, NUS President 1971-3 said "Representation must never be seen, except in strategic and practical terms, as an end in itself. Too many union officers see it as a question of communication and merely sitting on the appropriate committee. The purpose of representation is to secure educational and social change." (Jacks, 1975, p172).

In the subsequent 50 years student engagement in decision making has become further embedded across the university, and student representation systems are just one of the ways in which that has happened. This could be summarised as the 'stakeholder' view, or communitarian view based on a community of interests (Wolff, 1969) of student engagement. It is suggested that students should be involved in the key decisions that impact on them and have an important stake in how the institution is governed, on the basis of "affected interests" (Thompson, 1972). This desire for universities to be more responsive to the needs and expectations of students was perhaps a recognition of the pedagogical relationships and the imbalance in power between the teacher and the taught (Bernstein, 1971).

This idea of students as stakeholders is perhaps the purest of the rationales for collective student engagement. It reflects that these debates were being held against a backdrop of the fight for civil rights and the principle of enfranchising voices that was being fought at different levels across society and so universities was just one of the many fronts. This idea of students as full members of the community is not without challenge, with some highlighting the hierarchical and rigid structure based on academic expertise and so students will always be junior members, or novices, within this hierarchy (Clark 1978; Moodie and Eustace 1974; Morrow 1998). There is also a concern that due to their transient attendance at the university the participation of students will only ever be shallow participants (Zuo and Ratsoy 1999). Although more recently this perception of universities as a community can be an important way of resisting more consumerist or managerialist approaches with one student saying "The university should be a community not necessarily a hierarchical or managerial organisation, although it is. I think student voice is important to maintain the community aspect in terms of the student direction for institutions. Students should have a voice in that" (Freeman, 2013, p152). The justifications for student engagement in university governance have multiplied and evolved, perhaps unsurprisingly as the purpose and impact of collective student representation was balanced against the resources of doing it well.

### **2.3.2 Students as consumers**

The perception of students as clients, users or consumers of education has been closely linked to their economic contributions, but also more widely with market driven reforms of higher education (Brown and Carasso 2013; Shattock 2012) and more fundamentally to the erosion of the idea of higher education as a public good (Carpentier, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Naidoo and Whitty, 2014). In England the perception of students as consumers gained ground during the 1990s as students started taking out increased student loans for maintenance, and then for their tuition fees. This gave rise to calls that the customer voice needed to be heard and universities had to be more responsive to students (Appleton and Abernethy, 2013). This has given rise to students feeling more empowered to demand more in terms of things like contact hours (Robinson, 2012) and therefore strengthening the need for providing an outlet for these demands through the collective student voice. The example of students concerned about contact hours is just one example where students might be more demanding of their short-term interests (Epstein, 1974) and result in a commodification of learning and a more passive approach to learning (Naidoo and Whitty, 2014). This can lead to a more instrumental approach to learning where getting a good job is seen as more important than the learning (Entwistle, 1998; Naidoo and Williams, 2015) and indeed there is even a view that the positional value of education can become almost more important than the quality of the teaching (Hirsch, 1977; Marginson, 2006; Naidoo and Whitty, 2014) reinforced by the institutional (and resource) differentiation between universities (Naidoo 2018; Carpentier, 2021).

In the last twenty years there has been a move towards the development of a “quasi-market” in higher education (Palfreyman, 2019) with the shift towards higher tuition fees and reduction of public funding, and with the creation of this quasi-market students becoming more “consumerist minded” going on to suggest that “it is one thing to tolerate a shoddy but free “public good” service, but another to do so when stumping up a significant level of tuition fee” (ibid, 2019, p203). McMillan and Cheney (1996) suggest that when the student as consumer discourse was first proposed there were many positives including introducing a more accountable, transparent and “real-world” (sic) experience into higher education although they do go on to discuss the problems of using consumer principles given that these are the antithesis to the core values of higher education.

Whilst Palfreyman (2019) suggests that the way for student-consumer voices to be heard is through greater use of consumer law and robust regulation this consumer narrative is also used to justify giving greater voice to the consumers within university governance supported by students themselves taking a more “responsible attitude” to the studies and universities experience (Brown, 2011, p173).



There is a view of the growing consumer approach having changed the relationship between institution and students (Carey, 2013). Freeman (2013) referred to a link between student satisfaction and customer satisfaction, with many student representatives and academics referring to students as consumers in relation to experiences of student representation, and whether they accepted the narrative or not almost all engaged with it. This changing relationship was noted by policy-makers as well as researchers with, for example the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Strategic Plan 2003–2008 said that, “...students increasingly see themselves as consumers, entitled to agreed standards of provision and to full information about the quality of what is provided” (HEFCE, 2003, para. 3).

This quasi-market approach and increased focus on accountability has radically altered governance in higher education (Doherty, 2007). Appleton and Abernethy (ibid) outline that the rise of the student as consumer discourse has resulted in increased focus and enhancement on student representation structures and suggest a mismatch in views between the institution and the students’ union, which is usually more focused on enhancing the student learning experience. Little et al describe institutions viewing student engagement as central to improving 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.*” (Little et al, 2009, p4).

However, the recognition of the power of students as consumer was highlighted in a 2010 blog the then NUS President, Aaron Porter, when he quoted a NUS report (2011) stating that “65% of students said that they would have higher expectations if they were being asked to pay considerably more for their education”<sup>1</sup>. Porter then went on to predict a “consumer revolution” in higher education and even suggested that student representatives might become consumer-rights champions in the future. This view of the potential impact of students was echoed by Kay, Owen and Dunne (2012, p359) who suggested that the increasing tuition fees would impact on “*attitudes and identity*” of students. Indeed in 2015 the Competition and Markets Authority asserted their role in higher education by issuing advice for higher education providers to help them comply with consumer law when dealing with students<sup>2</sup>. It should be noted however that whilst students becoming consumers may give them additional rights the ability to exercise these rights will not be spread evenly, with some middle-class students more easily able to navigate the choice mechanisms and

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Porter blog. Retrieved 28<sup>th</sup> December 2016. <https://aaronporter.wordpress.com/2011/07/17/blue-skies-book-contribution-the-students-of-tomorrow/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/cma-advises-universities-and-students-on-consumer-law>

bureaucracies than students from poorer families and certain ethnic backgrounds (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005). It is also possible that the consumer narrative may empower students in the short term this may come at the expense of longer terms benefits of deeper learning and more powerful knowledge (Naidoo and Williams, 2014).

This view of students as consumers empowered students to demand higher quality services that they were now paying for, was coupled with the sense that institutions wanted to keep their customers happy and so wanted to be seen to be responsive to their demands (Appleton and Abernethy, 2013). There are however questions around who maintains the power in a customer relationship with it resulting in a more passive relationship of students identifying problems for the university to solve, rather than an empowering relationship between participants. These concerns about the impact of students as consumers and the underlying issues of marketisation of higher education and the impact of performativity on education have been subject to much critique (Ball, 2001, 2003, 2012).

### **2.3.3 Students as service user**

Another key discourse that has driven a focus on student representation is that of “new managerialism” (Deem, 2001; Dill, 1997; Carey, 2013). This discourse arose out of the idea of increasing levels of service responsiveness to meet the expectations of the ‘service-user’ (Clarke et al. 2007; Pollitt 2007). In higher education this resulted in enhanced quality processes with an increased reliance on accountability and transparency in higher education as contributing to the rise of the importance of students, particularly in the context of feeding into quality assurance procedures. Deem and Brehony (2005) provide a comprehensive introduction to new managerialism and its reliance on accountability, key performance indicators and an emphasis on efficiency and the resulting creation of a quality assurance culture.

As Alexander put it, “The accountability movement currently inundating many OECD nations is premised on the perception that traditional measures of institutional performance and effectiveness such as peer review and market choice are not sufficient indicators of institutional value” (2000, p414). There are many links between new managerialism and the Third Way, which seeks to find an alternative to social democratic traditions and neo-liberalism (Giddens, 1998, 2000) by seeking to knit together democracy and public welfare services with private sector partnerships creating organisations that are less bureaucratic and more responsive to consumers (Deem, 2001).

Coates (2005) considers the importance of the quality assurance culture within institutions and links this to student representation structures. Student representation structures can be

a key way of engaging students in quality assurance process (Maringe, 2010) and QAA (2009). Lizzio and Wilson (2009) suggest that this managerialist approach can be a way of student voices being heard in an often hierarchical institution. However, there needs to be conscious thought given to how this is done in an empowering way rather than just reinforcing the more service-user approach (Weller and Mahbubul, 2018).

It could therefore be argued that this approach of engaging students in quality assurance processes was a way of engaging the collective student voice in a more empowering way than the consumer one. However, there could still be a view that this rationale for strengthening student representation is more based on enhancing managerialist accountability measures (Maringe, 2010). It is a way of meeting the external expectations of quality assurance systems, and what funders such as government, think are important and what they consider as important to students rather than actually considering the views of students directly. This critique of new managerialism as a tool of the market, creating the data not only to hold institutions to account but for this data to also feed the competition between institutions feeding into league tables (Gewirtz and Ball, 2000). This shift from individual to collective engagement of students was however not a principled decision of collective engagement, with this period also being linked to a weakening of trade union engagement with staff (Storey, 1992). Indeed at a time when student involvement in university governance was being strengthened it could be argued that staff involvement in university governance was being weakened, highlighting the different status of students as service-users. This goes to underline the importance of developing a shared understanding of the purpose(s) of student representation.

### **2.3.4 Students as partners**

Finally, perhaps in response to the consumer paradigm, or as a more nuanced recognition of the transformative role of education and therefore the central role of students as 'partners' in a negotiated process of learning (Harvey, 2006). The consumer approach separates the student from the process of their own education encouraging passivity (Molesworth et al, 2009). This counter-narrative of students as co-producers of their education does however recognise the role of the students and consumer narrative as a way of helping to overcome the power imbalances within an institution (McCulloch, 2009).

As partners the students are members of the university, but as members of the organisation they only have three options – exit, voice and loyalty (Hirschman, 1970) and so if the university does not want the students to exit then they must strengthen their voice, including in university decision-making, and through that hope to build their loyalty (Cuthbert, 2010). The point was emphasised by heads of European universities in the Glasgow Declaration

(European University Association, 2005) which stated that 'Universities are committed to improving their governance structures and leadership competencies so as to increase their efficiency and innovative capacity and fulfil their multiple functions'. In section four, point 19, it adds: 'In order to fulfil these commitments, universities highlight the importance of student involvement as full partners in the process and will search for the means of reinforcing this co-operation in the future' (ibid 2005, p3). This approach of viewing students as partners or co-producers of their learning could perhaps be seen as a return to the more principled view of students as stakeholders but as a result of having been developed in response to the students as consumer approach it does perhaps address some of the weaknesses of the stakeholder approach, through for example attempting to consider how the power differential between student representatives and the institution can be overcome.

### **2.3.5 Students as democratic participants**

In the literature there has also been a recognition of universities as democratic organisations and a "site for democracy" and therefore the benefit to students of democratic engagement. Students were initially involved in university governance as a way of democratising decision-making (Jacks, 1971). Planas et al (2013) describe the importance of democratic participation as an "educational and social process" (2013, p571) and go on to refer to the role of universities in transmitting democratic values which should be considered at all stages of the education system. Indeed, there is evidence this democratic engagement of students carries through to later life with higher levels of democratic engagement amongst graduates (The Stationary Office, 2011, p15).

It has been argued that this instilling of democratic engagement amongst students may not be entirely altruistic, with suggestions that by improving the communication between students and the university management it reduces the number of student protests and more disruptive student activism. Student engagement in democratic processes can be a way of reducing activism (e.g. Alence 1999; Bergan 2004; Boland 2005) but whether that is why universities engage students, or just a happy by-product, it has been noted that engaging students in democratic process creates a more open and positive organisational atmosphere (Menon, 2005). This has also been referred to as the "politically-realist" approach (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013) where students are co-opted into university processes (Thompson, 1972; Carey, 2013).

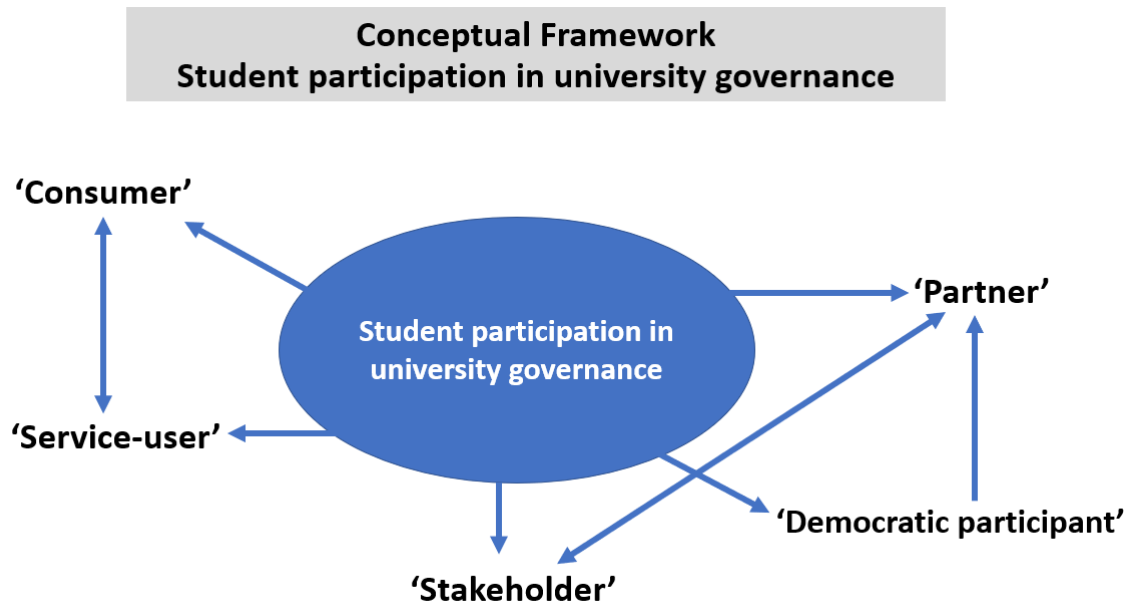
### **2.3.6 Developing the theoretical framework**

So reconsidering Raaper and Komljenovic's (2021) periodisation of student representation it might be possible to consider students as having limited engagement in university governance structures before the late 1960s, at which point the university democratisation gave rise to a period of students as participants. By the 1970s in the US and the 1980s in

England there arose the notion of students as consumers. Whilst this initially had some benefits for students, by the mid-1990s there were increasingly competing narratives with students as service-users emerging from the new managerialist perspectives. It could be argued that this then evolved into, or was layered on top, that students were seen as digital users following 2008 with the increasing use of student data that many students have little control over (Komljenovic, 2021). This more passive view of students as either consumers or service-users was not without challenge and the counter-narrative of students as partners or co-producers emerged partly in recognition of the nature of education and the power imbalances underpinning them. This notion of students as engaged partners also supports a suggestion of students being democratic participants but at the same time perhaps limiting the more radical elements of student activism. This would perhaps suggest that the idea of the messy field of student engagement in HE governance with different theories emerging and competing with each other over recent decades, results in a messy consideration of periodisation rather than a series of clear periods. One of the rare examples of previous work which recognised the need for multiple views (Cuthbert, 2010) suggested that the role of students in higher education is still being contested and multi-dimensional with students having different identities at different times or situations.

Section 2.3 outlines a number of key identities of students – as stakeholders, consumers, service-users, partners and democratic participants – and can be seen as underpinning the rationale for having collective student representation structures. It is however important to recognise that there are many links between the concepts. It could be argued that the students as consumer discourse evolved as a result of new managerialism and so creating many links between students as consumers and students as service-users, which emerged from notions of getting value for money for public services funded through taxation, with the state taking a similar role to that of the consumer. There are also many links between the students as stakeholder and students as partner approach and also between the students as democratic participant approach with that of students as partners. So thinking back to Figure 3 it is perhaps more of a complex web of interactions between the different underpinning concepts, which is better articulated in Figure 4.

**Figure 4: Collective student engagement literature – interactions between concepts**

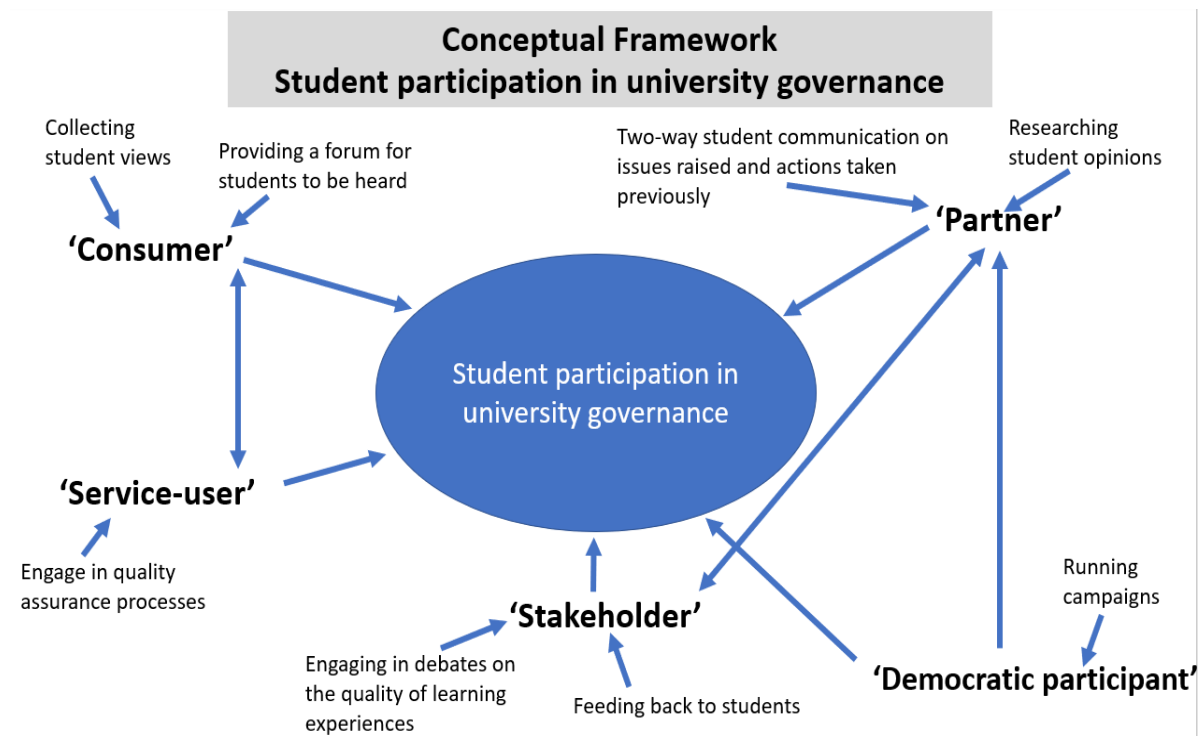


There have been numerous models developed to consider student engagement including the NUS and Higher Education Academy's 2010 "arrow of student engagement" (Healy et al, 2014, p16), the "four tiers" of student engagement (Kay, Dunne and Owen, 2013) and Bovill and Bulley's 2011 ladder of student participation in curriculum design (Healy et al, 2014, p49). These models suggest different levels of student engagement moving from consultation to involvement to participation to partnership (NUS & HEA, 2010) or from Evaluator to Observer to Expert and Partner (Kay, Dunne and Owen, 2013) or along different rungs of the ladder with students taking increasingly active participation (Bovill and Bulley, 2011). Each of these models, and many other similar variants on the theme, suggest a way of shifting the power dynamics between the students and academics from a deficit model to one of true partnership, with students and their representatives as co-creators. Although they do recognise that there will be value in each of these different stages and that there will be overlap between the stages they do however suggest a relatively linear approach to student engagement. They imply moving from stage to stage along the arrow, or up the tier or ladder, rather than recognising the more complex range of interactions that students have with universities and during each of these interactions the relationship with the university is likely to be different. Whilst students may ideally be partners in the university governance and even in their learning, they are also likely to be clients when interacting with careers, counselling or welfare services, or customers when interacting with catering or residences (Cuthbert, 2010).

The theoretical framework outlined in Figure 4 places the five concepts around the central notion of student participation in university governance in a way that gives a nod to the previous models but without suggesting a clear hierarchy. The framework places the least engaged “consumer” on the far-left side and then moving round from left to right students becoming more engaged through service-user, stakeholder, democratic participant through to partner. However, by keeping this implicit rather than explicitly suggesting a hierarchy between the concepts the framework suggests a more nuanced approach with students having different identities at different times. This more nuanced inter-relationship is reflected by the arrows between the different concepts which shows a more fluid inter-relationship between the concepts and that they may not be as linear as previously suggested in earlier models. These arrows between the concepts are designed to be indicative of the different inter-relationships, and the arrows on the model focus on the key likely areas of interplay. It would have been possible to have a whole series of arrows between all the concepts but this would have resulted in an overly confusing model and so the model focused on the key inter-relationships.

In Figure 5 below based on my professional experiences and previous research I start to highlight some of the possible ways that students are engaged in HE governance and link them to the different theories to begin to tease out some of the ways that this might impact on the perceptions of effectiveness that are highlighted in the research questions. The way in which student engagement is approached can be based on the underpinning ideologies, with questions of enhancing the student experience, listening and being responsive, nipping problems in the bud and developing learning communities all coming from different approaches (Freeman, 2013). Figure 5 below seeks to begin to map some of these approaches to the different ideologies and further explore these in section 2.7 below.

**Figure 5: Collective student engagement literature – mapping different forms of engagement**



## **2.4 Key issues arising from student representation**

This section will now consider the specific literature relating to student representation around a number of key questions relating to student representation. Much of the research starts by assuming that student representative structures and student involvement in university governance is a good thing, but there are a number of key themes that arose. The first relates to the extent to which elected representatives are actually representing the whole student body or whether it reinforces privilege within society by empowering the powerful student voices and deauthorising marginal voices. Secondly, the power imbalances between student representatives and university staff is a key consideration questioning the extent to which students are being co-opted into university structures to disempower them. This also gives rise to questions about the role of staff.

### **2.4.1 Representativeness**

One of the key questions emerging from the literature is the extent to which student representatives reflect the views of all students. This was the particular focus of a special edition of the *Journal of Education Innovation, Partnership and Change* (2017) which considered the outcomes of the HEFCE-funded REACT project (Dunne, 2017). The project focused on engaging “hard to reach” students in representation activities, but also provided evidence that students engaged in student representation activities are more likely to achieve higher grades, complete their course and have better employment outcomes (Sims



et al, 2017) and therefore raising the concern that these opportunities should be available to all and not just reinforcing social capital.

Not only are there social justice reasons for ensuring that student representatives reflect the whole student body there was a view that where there is a lack of trust by staff that student representatives are reflective of the whole student body it can give rise to a reluctance to fully implement what they say without further testing of the views (Carey, 2013). Menon (2003) suggests that there is a perception of “a small elite of student representatives dominating student opinion” which links to Fielding’s (2001, p134) question of “who is allowed to speak and to whom?”. These views on the extent to which the views of student representatives are actually representative of the wider student body could have a significant impact on the extent to which they are perceived as being effective. Kane et al (2008) suggest a mismatch in what the student representatives were raising in university committee compared to what the students were raising in wider surveys of their views. Wintrup (2012) suggests some challenges in student representatives engaging some groups of students, referring particularly to mature and part-time students. Grove (2013) reported on a pilot study of electing more representatives per course as a way of overcoming this and engaging a wider group of students.

Wintrup (2012) refers to some groups of students being less willing to speak to their tutor directly and that the student representative can provide a useful intermediary. This notion of student representatives as advocates for less confident students is also mentioned by Carey (2013). Lizzio and Wilson (2009) suggest that student representatives should listen to views that they do not agree with, and be objective and approachable. However, this desire to advocate on behalf of less confident students is not without criticism, particularly from the emancipatory and radical literature, where there are concerns about the way in which representation structures can simply reinforce existing hierarchies (McLeod, 2011). This way of engaging a wider set of voices is even more important as agendas around widening participation are expanded and the student body becomes more diverse (Gale, 2010) and the ‘monolithic, falsely representational, essentializing concept’ that does not do justice to the different experiences of groups and complexities across society. (Baker, 1999, pp. 369–370). There is also a concern that speaking on behalf of other people can seek to authorise or de-authorise different perspectives as well as privilege those doing the talking (Dance, 2013; Alcoff, 1991). McLeod outlines that as important as it is to give students voice, it is as important to prioritise listening to that voice. It should, however, be noted that these critiques pre-date much of the discussions around power imbalances in representational structures and the need for representatives to be ‘representative’.

In addition to questions of representativity, questions of consistency of representation structures across an institution were raised (Little et al, 2009). This can again have an impact on the perceptions of effectiveness and was raised as a concern by student representatives (Carey, 2013). However, Carey did go on to suggest that being responsive to the different needs of different departments and their students might not necessarily be a bad thing, something also suggested by the differences between different departments in CHERI (Little et al, 2009). The ability of student representatives to engage students across several campuses was highlighted by Gray (2014) and the students' union uses a "Virtual Voice" system to capture and collate student representative voices. This consideration of the representativeness of students involved in university governance is still under-researched and could be a key area to gather data as part of this study.

#### **2.4.2 Power dynamics**

The theme of power dynamics and imbalances was an important theme in the literature review, ever since Freire (1968) the idea of a power imbalance between the teacher and student has been an influential discourse, with considerations for how students could become co-creators of their knowledge rather than just repositories for other people's knowledge. In 2009 Seale suggested a lack of critical discussion about power in higher education voice compared to schools, but a number more recent articles emphasised this point. Carey (2013) highlighted this, suggesting that the student representative structure was often based around the needs of the university rather than students. However, recognising and exploring these power differentials can result in more productive relationships (Freeman et al, 2014). Fielding (2004) takes this further to suggest power imbalances between both the students and the institution but also between groups of students, and indeed that the notion of students speaking on behalf of others is inherently problematic as they will always view things through the prism of their own experiences.

Streeting and Wise (2009) critique the student as consumer power model as being a passive identification of a problem that is then dealt with by the institution, something reiterated in Freeman (2016) with these processes being seen as a way of maintaining control. NUS (2012) argue that student representation should be more dynamic, bringing about educational transformation and Robinson (2012) believes that the institution will benefit from hearing all student voices, even the "obnoxious" ones.

Freeman (2013) also considers the power differential and suggests that this is even embedded in the language used with an expectation that the student representative will learn the language of the institution with its talk of enhancement, feedback loops and transferable skills. The NUS Student Experience Report (2011) also highlighted this power

differential with 94% of students believing that they were able to provide feedback on their course but only 45% believing that this feedback was acted upon. These questions of power imbalances are an important theme if student representation is to be seen as more than just tokenistic and this research will explore the extent to which these imbalances exist and whether they are being actively mitigated. As outlined above the theme of power imbalances is becoming increasingly important in the literature but as yet primarily discussed from a theoretical perspective rather than developing an evidence based to explore these issues in more detail.

### **2.4.3 Role of staff in enabling student involvement**

The role of staff as gatekeepers (Carey, 2013) is important, suggesting that even the best student representative systems will only be as good as the practitioners allow them to be. Whilst many staff are supportive of student engagement processes there is a view that some staff may be sceptical of student engagement processes resulting from their concern about the impact that it may have on their workload (Flint et al, 2018). There are other examples of where staff are keen to support student engagement but have concerns about the resourcing of the systems and questions about whether the processes are fit for purposes or not (Crabtree, 2020) or the extent to which the students themselves want to engage (Sheard et al, 2010). However, exploring the views of staff on enabling student involvement in university governance is a key gap in the literature.

The way in which staff are engaged is key to success of student engagement Fielding (2003) and in particular where this shifts from a passive gathering of student views through feedback to where it becomes a more proactive dialogue (Freeman and Dobbins, 2013). There was also a lack of clarity in the purpose of student representative structures between students and staff (Little et al, 2009; Lizzio and Wilson, 2009) which can result in staff not seeing the benefits of their involvement and this would suggest that it might be helpful to focus on involving staff to understanding the benefits of engaging students to them. This was echoed by Wawrzinek et al., (2017) who suggest that whilst universities support students to understand the benefits of engagement this rarely happens with staff and so they need to see the benefit themselves and learn from each other.

The issue of the power differential between staff and students also emerged from the research and this could be an area that staff should be supported to reflect on in the context of their own practice (Verill, 2007; Seale, 2009). There were feelings expressed by staff that student representatives were able to comment on some aspects of their experience but that others strayed into academic autonomy (van der Velden, 2013) indeed there is a view that

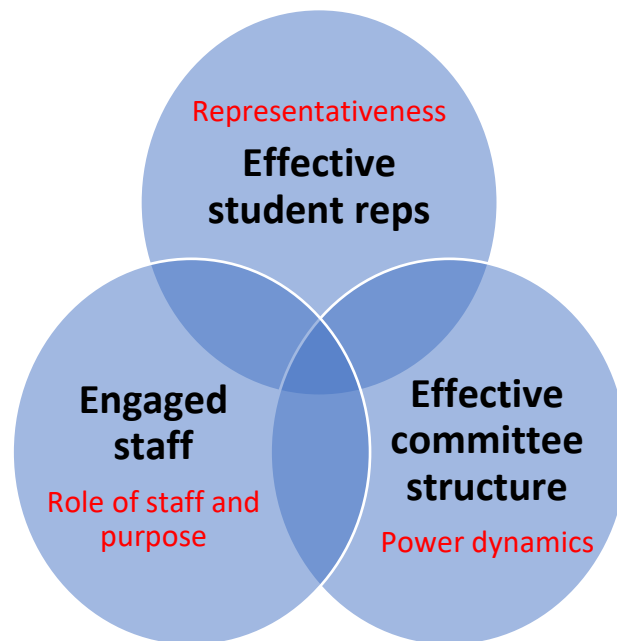
this increasing focus on student voice can result in a shift in the identity of the academics involved from teachers to managers of expectations (Freeman, 2016).

## **2.5 Developing the theoretical framework of student involvement**

There are many benefits of involving students in university governance highlighted in the literature, best summed up by Lizzio and Wilson (2009) as functional, developmental and social. But Flint (2017) argues persuasively that the systems to measure the impact and outcomes of student representative systems are still relatively poorly defined. Indeed, it is worth noting that a majority of research starts from the assumption that student involvement in university governance was a 'good thing' and were considering wider questions of what student representation ought to be doing and/or how this was being done, rather than whether it should be done.

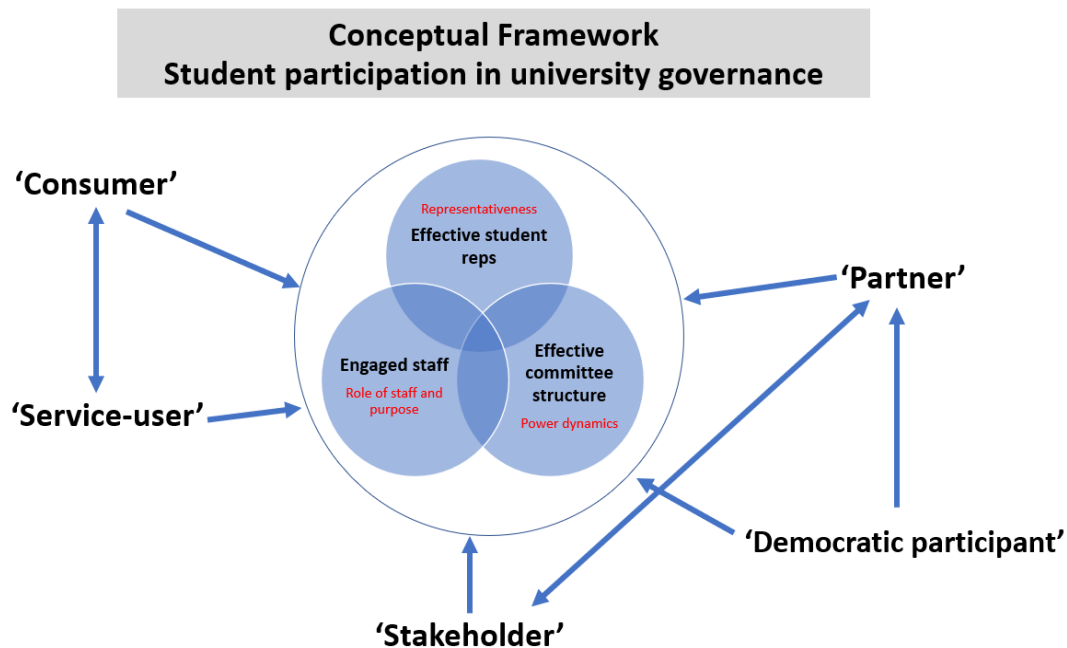
When thinking of the key conditions or features of student involvement in university governance it is worth thinking back to the framework from Chapter 1, presented as the Venn diagram. This image brought together the interlocking issues of effective student representatives, engaged staff and committee structures and could be a useful starting basis for developing the new theoretical framework. The themes of the representativeness of student representatives, power dynamics, role of staff can be mapped across to the different elements of the framework to start to provide a bit more nuance to each of the areas. For example, the representativeness of the student representatives can be seen as an element within the effective student representatives circle, the role of staff including defining their purpose as part of the engaged staff circle and the power differentials feeding into the effective committee structure circle, as outlined below in Figure 6. But as outlined above each of these areas is relatively under-researched in the literature and this study will seek to develop an empirical evidence base to explore these areas.

**Figure 6: Enhancing the framework for student involvement in university governance**



It is then worth considering whether it is possible to take this further still by placing this Venn diagram at the centre of the conceptual framework diagram that mapped the different theories impacting on how students are seen (Figure 4). This then places the three central features of student involvement in university governance at the heart of the web of different concepts and drivers behind student participation in university governance. This recognises that the various different competing theories of how students are seen – as consumers, service-users, stakeholders, democratic participants or partners – may impact on the why and how of student involvement in university governance and therefore how the effectiveness may be considered.

**Figure 7: Conceptual framework – student participation in university governance**



## **2.6 Literature on evaluating effectiveness**

This section looks at literature on effectiveness and examines how it might be applied to students in university governance. When considering the perceptions of the effectiveness of student involvement in university governance it is important to first reflect how “effectiveness” is defined. When looking at a dictionary definition there is a focus on producing an actual effect, or in other words to be “effective” is for a given task to achieve its purpose or specific outcome that was intended, or “does it work?” (Zidane, 2017). A key element therefore when considering what we mean by the term effectiveness is that there needs to be a shared, and accepted, definition of the “problem, process and result” (Peters et al., 2018, p. 14). This section will consider wider questions of “effectiveness”, including considerations of organisational effectiveness, how this has been applied to higher education and wider questions of “realistic evaluation” (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Once we have considered what student representation is trying to achieve, then we can consider what techniques exist which may be able to measure its effectiveness.

It is also worth highlighting that in the literature on effectiveness the term was often closely associated with other concepts such as efficiency – producing an outcome with minimum wasted resources (Ika et al, 2012) and efficacy – the ability to produce a defined result (Zidane et al, 2017). Whilst this study does not consider these wider questions it is worth reflecting that once questions of effectiveness start to be raised then these wider questions

of efficiency are not too far behind. These questions of efficiency can then result in wider considerations such as effectiveness relating to the long-term impact of the activity (Martinsuo et al., 2013).

### **2.6.1 Organisational effectiveness**

There is a significant literature on the effectiveness of higher education, but little on the effectiveness of student representation as such. Since student representation is a part of the wider activity of higher education, it is appropriate to consider that discussions of the effectiveness of higher education in general will shed light on how to evaluate the effectiveness of student representation.

Ayuk and Jacobs (2018) suggest that there is “no single best way” (ibid, p2) to evaluate the effectiveness of higher education, recognising that HEIs have many different stakeholders, holding different and sometimes competing ideas of what they mean by effectiveness. They go on to suggest that one way of considering institutional effectiveness is through a strategic constituency approach which draws on the approach of participant satisfaction (Cameron, 1978; Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983). This approach comes out of the stakeholder theory approach (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984), whereby stakeholders are defined as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the activities of an organization” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). This does however result in the challenge of deciding which stakeholder’s views should be prioritised, particularly given the point above about the different views of effectiveness and therefore what different stakeholders might value (Balduck & Buelens, 2008).

Ashraf and Kadir (2012) consider organisational effectiveness and how it could be related to higher education. They outline that there is no one single model of organisational effectiveness that fits all organisations and they group the different approaches into four main models which they describe as “the goal approach, the system resource approach, the process approach and the strategic constituency approach” (ibid, p81). Indeed, elements of these approaches are outlined in the introduction to this section in 2.6. When considering how we might consider the effectiveness of student representation these models provide a helpful framework by considering different elements of their model including the goal of student involvement in university governance, the resources allocated to it, the views of the strategic constituency and the processes.

### **2.6.2 The Goal approach**

The goal approach was outlined over 80 years ago “When a specific desired end is attained, we shall say that the action is effective.” (Barnard, 1938, p19) or in other words a programme is effective by achieving the desired set of objectives (Etzioni 1987). However, in order for this approach to be successful there need to be specific agreed objectives,

understood by all participants and that everyone is agreeing to achieving. It is also necessary for these objectives to be few in number, progress must be measurable and have the resources to meet them (Robbins 1983).

It has been suggested that this goal-driven approach is best suited for the private sector where factors such as profitability and high quality products can be measured (Schermerhorn et al. 2004), in the context of higher education this can be more challenging with less clearly defined, or agreed, objectives and results (Altschuld and Zheng, 1995).

However, as outlined in Chapter 1 it emerged from my earlier research and other research, particularly CHERI (2009) and Freeman (2016) that there is not a single agreed purpose of student representation systems, rather there are several possible purposes depending on whether you are speaking to students, academics, university managers or national policy-makers and also whether it is framed as support for students as consumers, partners or other ideologies. This would make the goal approach very difficult to use as part of the evaluation of the effectiveness of student representation systems.

### **2.6.3 The system resource approach**

This approach considers the effectiveness of the organisation in relation to its ability to secure resources from external sources (Schermerhorn et. al., 2004). This method of considering effectiveness can be particularly reliable when there is a clear relationship between the resources acquired and the products that it produces (Cameron, 1981).

However, in the context of considering the effectiveness of student representation there would not only be challenges to identify and therefore measure the various inputs (funding from the university, staff time, subsidised or free room hire etc) but more importantly the relationship between the resources and effectiveness of the system are unlikely to be linear. There is likely to be an increase in the effectiveness of student representation if there is some investment as opposed to no investment (whether through staff support, training and so on) but it is unlikely there will be a direct correlation between the more resources and improved system.

In relation to considering the effectiveness of student representation processes the system resource approach would provide challenges in terms of being able to compare resources allocated across different institutions, differences in the size of institutions bringing in additional questions about whether this should be a per student figure or based in a minimum resource investment as well as questions of how to identify the resource allocated. Student representation systems draw on a wide range of resources which would be difficult to measure in a comparable way across institutions. For example, from my professional experience these system resources include the direct funding received from either the



university or students' union, staff time in delivering training for student representatives as well as administrators within departments to run elections and more broadly time taken from lectures for hustings and elections, there are also other resources including room hire – which may be allocated on a pro bono basis in some institutions and require bookings in others.

#### **2.6.4 The Process approach**

The third model is based on the transformation process or the creation of the product and so considers the ways in which resources are used to develop the services or goods (Schermerhorn et. al., 2004). Ashraf describe effectiveness in this process as meaning the organisation is working smoothly and that processes and procedures are well-oiled, in an organisation they highlight that there is no stress or strain in the system and the relationships between members are “based on trust, honesty, and good will” (Ashraf et al, 2012, p81).

In higher education this can translate into quality management processes basing perceptions of effectiveness or value for money on data about the processes such as the proportion of academics with teaching qualifications, staff/student ratios and student surveys that consider the process as a proxy for the outcome (Kleijnen et al, 2009; Stensaker, 2007). The effectiveness of quality management is explored in various papers including Brennan & Shah (2000) and Newton (2001) with questions about the translatability of this data without considering the context of the institution (Sitkin et al, 1994). Indeed there are deeper fundamental differences with the use of this kind of data and the impact of performativity on what it means to be an academic and a university (Ball, 2001, 2003, 2012).

In the context of student representation, as outlined above in section 1.2, there has been significant focus on enhancing the different elements comprising the process of student representation including elections, training, support and development and the NUS/AMSU Course Rep Benchmarking Toolkit<sup>3</sup> could be a way of framing this, however it is important to recognise that many of these process measures are input rather than outcome measures, which can only provide a partial picture.

#### **2.6.5 Strategic Constituency Approach**

Evaluation is inherently political in nature (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) but politicians rarely read research (Weiss, 1987), rather they rely on the exchange of ideas with lobbyists, think-tanks, journalists and academics, moulding this into ammunition for debate (Weiss, 1980). If evaluation is primarily political in purpose then considering what those involved in the proposals think about the programme could be a sensible approach to consider evaluation.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/ch/E3%20Benchmarking%20Student%20Rep%20Systems.pdf>

This fourth approach considers the impact of the institution on the main stakeholders and their interests (Schermerhorn et. al., 2004). Ashraf et al (2012) refer to all those impacted by the organisation as the strategic constituency, although it is important to note that they are likely to have different roles and be impacted differently (Cameron, 1981). Ashraf goes on to consider that the effectiveness in this approach could be based on the satisfaction of these stakeholders.

Horkheimer (1937) outlined that social experiences will always be mediated by the experiences of the individual and indeed when researching these experiences they will be doubly mediated by both the perception of the person being interviewed but also by the researcher, as 'observer', themselves. The critical school, which emerged out of the Frankfurt School theoreticians is an approach to social philosophy that reflects on and critiques society and culture to consider, reveal and challenge power structures. This approach therefore considers the impact of different ways of understanding experiences and further emphasises the importance of considering the perceptions of the individuals.

Theories of perception emerge from the critical school and in particular notions of "discourse" (Habermas, 1971) whereby through discussing issues through reflexive processes with these legitimate decisions and opinions being formed through "rational consensus". The naturalism approach emphasizes the importance of the third-person, or explanatory perspective, which requires things to be seen from other people's points of view. This approach was however criticized by Habermas (1971) as a "technocratic" approach based on the detached observer rather than reflective participant. The first-person perspective is a more practical knowledge but requires the individual to reconstruct their own reasons and is not without its own challenges.

It is however possible for second-person participants to develop their own practical understanding (Bohman, 2000) by engaging in discussion with the participants. This phenomenological approach argues that these second-hand views are developed through "dynamic interaction" with others (de Bruin et al, 2012). This view of the second person perspective is based on interaction theorists (de Jaegher et al, 2010; Ratcliffe, 2007; Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008). They distinguish this from the third-person stance which is more observational and is based on a more passive observation which can be quite rare (de Bruin et al, 2012). The distinction between second- and third-person interactions is based on the difference between reciprocal and non-reciprocal interactions. Interaction theorists describe social cognition as being based on a "sandwich model" with "perception as input from the world to the mind, action as output from the mind to the world, and cognition as sandwiched in between" (Hurley, 2008, p. 2).

This approach of considering the views of the stakeholders is a fundamentally constructivist one recognising that all social programmes consist of complex “process of human understanding and interaction” (Pawson and Tilley, 1997, p17). Pawson and Tilley go on to highlight some of their concerns with this approach including that all stakeholders will each understand the process differently based on their own experiences, assumptions and understandings, and so with no objective reality to report on “the researcher’s account...must therefore be selective and rest upon his or her preferred assumptions” (ibid, p17). The use of perceptions is a contested area with concerns about the potential for illusions, objectivity of information, the mediation of experiences Crane and French (2021); Robinson (1994); Smith (2002), and Martin (2006) but can at the same time, whilst being referential, nonetheless have significant internal structures and are “objective representations” (Burge, 2010).

In the context of considering the effectiveness of higher education this approach of considering the views of the strategic constituency or stakeholders is a well-used approach considering elements of students and staff relations (Anita and Cuthbert, 1976), students’ perceptions of effectiveness (Kleeman and Richardson, 1985; Ayuk and Jacobs, 2018) and job satisfaction and organisational involvement (An, Yom and Ruggiero, 2011). Indeed, some have gone further suggesting not just that the strategic constituency approach should be used but that the views of students should be prioritised (Ayuk and Jacobs (2018) and this builds on the student voice literature over the last few decades (Leckey & Neill, 2001; Levin, 1998; Subramanian, Anderson, Morgaine, & Thomson, 2013). Student involvement in university governance is often seen as a way of gathering the views and feedback of students about university processes and so using this approach as a way of considering the processes by which this feedback is given could be seen as completing the circle. The approach to evaluation could be used to gather the views of the key stakeholders involved in the processes and to use this to reflect on how well the processes are meeting their intended aims.

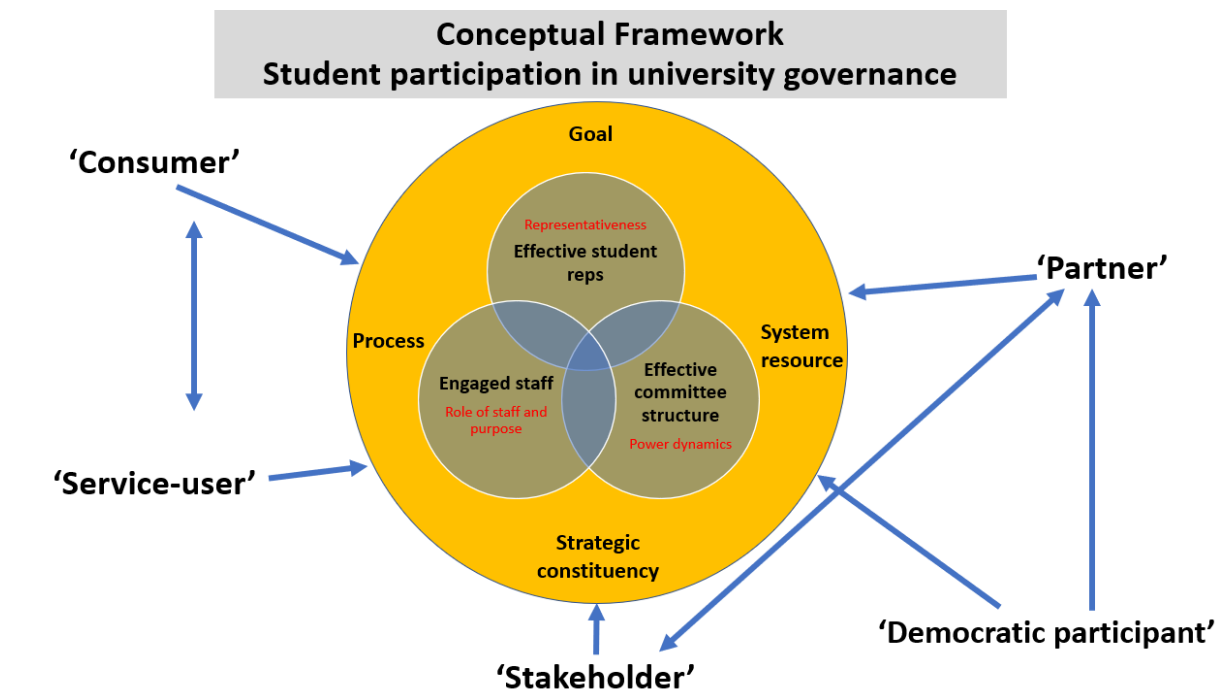
### **2.6.6 Further developing the theoretical framework to consider effective student representation structures**

As a pragmatist there are attractive elements of each of the four models for considering the effectiveness of organisations (Ashraf et al, 2012) which could be used in different contexts, or where the resources allowed. It would be possible to consider them as four elements within a single model, creating an overarching framework, rather than four different models to choose from. Drawing on the notion of comprehensive evaluation (Rossi and Freeman, 1985) by building on the strengths of the four elements of evaluation it might be possible to gain a deeper and more rounded understanding of the process in question. Similarly Cronbach (1963) argued for both a breadth and depth of evaluation, saying “Many types of

decisions are to be made, and many variations of information are useful. It becomes immediately apparent that no set of principles will suffice for all situations.” (p672), so some prioritisation is necessary (Shadish et al, 1991) as Pawson and Tilley (1997) go on to suggest this can often run up against the practical challenge of not having enough resources to research everything. When considering the effectiveness of student representative systems it would be by developing clear goals that are agreed by the stakeholders, by considering the resource invested in the systems, the extent to which the processes and procedures work well as well as the views of the stakeholders.

When thinking about the conceptual map in Figure 3 it is possible to overlay the Ashraf and Kadir four-model view of considering organisational effectiveness. This places the three interlocking circles of the student representation within a wider dimension of considering how the effectiveness of student representation might be considered and places that within the wider web of theoretical concepts that impact upon student representation.

**Figure 8: Enhancing student representation systems, concepts of student engagement and organisational effectiveness models**



### 2.6.7 Realistic evaluation

The four-method evaluation approach is important in considering whether it can tell (experimentally) whether something works or not in particular circumstances, but we need theoretical models to tell over what range of circumstances it will work (Chen and Rossi, 1983). It could therefore be argued that the four-model approach might be helpful within an individual university to assess whether their student representative system is effective in

their context, but it is much harder to use this approach to assess the effectiveness of different systems across the university sector as a whole across a wide range of universities and contexts.

The idea of context is key. Cronbach (1982) demonstrates in the context of educational evaluation when the evaluation is often whether a particular programme, such as say Reading Recovery in schools, works or not. The evaluation would usually seek to measure whether a group of children are better readers if they are involved in the programme or not, but often without considering the wider context such as the experience of the teachers, the backgrounds that the pupils come from or even wider issues such as the quality of the school meals, all of which can potentially have an impact. Although this approach whilst likely to ensure better evaluation fails to take into consideration the practical considerations of developing evaluations in contexts outside of the laboratory experiments when other factors can all be controlled. Pawson and Tilley having highlighted the challenges with all the different approaches, and the difficulties with ever being able to find objective truth do go to suggest that does not mean that we shouldn't try to develop better processes, quoting Gordon (1992) that "perfect cleanliness is also impossible, but it does not serve as a warrant for not washing."

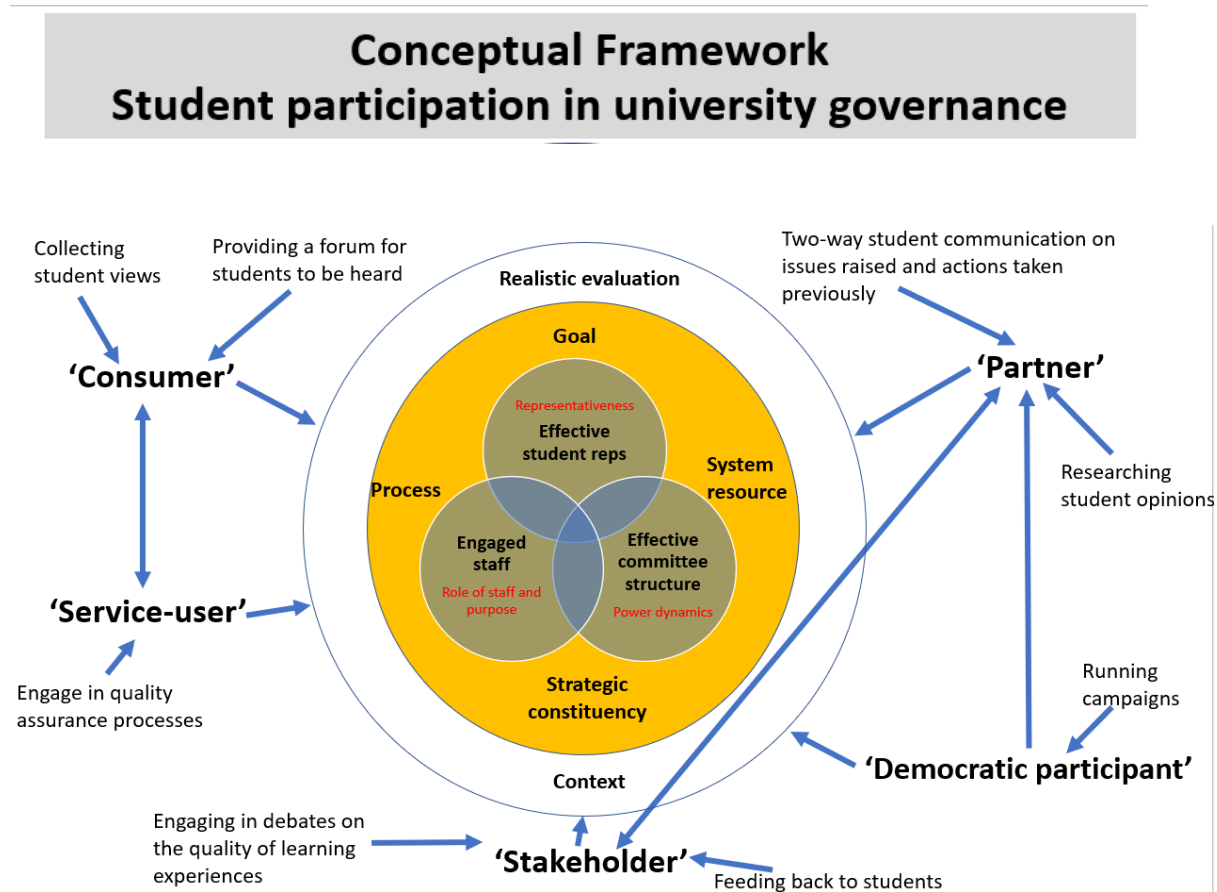
Following their critique of other approaches Pawson and Tilley (1997) developed a "realistic evaluation" model based on the principle not that programmes work or do not work, but rather that they work for certain people in certain circumstances. It is therefore possible for a particular programme to "work" for some people at a particular time but that same programme may not work for the same group of people at a different time, or for a different group of people now. In other words, an action will only cause a specific outcome if the mechanism is triggered in a specific context, but – as highlighted above - the context is key.

They argue that the context is as important as the mechanism itself in determining whether the outcome will be achieved. They describe this as Context + Mechanism = Outcome or "CMO" for short. So rather than looking at whether a programme works or not, their "realistic" approach considers what is it about the programme that makes it work in specific circumstances. It is therefore about developing a theory of why a specific programme might be effective, and a theory of the conditions under which it might be so.

Therefore, when considering the model in Figure 5 there is perhaps an additional ring outside the yellow one. The yellow ring focuses on whether the system works and the outer ring considers why and under what circumstances this might work, and by placing this model

within the wider theoretical framework of the key theories impacting on how students are seen provides an important wider context.

**Figure 9: Evaluating the effectiveness of student participation in university governance through the different lenses and concepts**



## 2.7 Conclusion and drawing together the theoretical framework

The overarching research question considers the perceptions of the effectiveness of student involvement in university governance systems in England. Chapter 2 explored the key literature relating to student engagement, representation and organisational effectiveness to provide a framework to consider the effectiveness of student representation systems. The review identified a number of key theories surrounding student representation and raising some areas for further exploration which were synthesised into various diagrams throughout the chapter (Figures 3-9). These drew together the interplay between effective student representatives, engaged staff and an effective committee structure, within the framework of four models of evaluation and the wider concepts impacting on student engagement such as students as consumers or partners in their education.

The first section of the review identified and discussed a number of key concepts emerging from the literature relating to student engagement including students as consumers, partners, service-users, stakeholders and democratic participants. These concepts are important when considering the factors that determine the effectiveness of student involvement in university governance as participants involved in the processes will have different views on the effectiveness of the systems depending on whether they are viewing the systems through the lenses of consumers, partners, service-users, stakeholders and democratic participants. The impact of these concepts is further elaborated in Figure 9 exploring the different activities that representatives undertake and outlining ways of questioning research participants to explore effectiveness through the different concepts.

The next section reviewed the literature relating specifically to student representation and student participation in university governance. This identified three key themes that emerged from the literature considering the representativeness – the extent to which student representatives do, or are able to, represent the views of the whole student body. The second key theme that emerged in this section related to the question of power dynamics and power differentials between university staff and student representatives and finally the role of staff – as gate-keepers, enablers or potentially blockers of effective student representation. These three themes of representativeness, power dynamics and the role of staff are central to perceptions of effectiveness, and the existing gaps in the literature, will be explored through the research. These key themes were placed within the framework of student involvement in university governance Chapter 1 (Figure 2) or further develop the new theoretical framework.

The third section of the literature review considered how to measure effectiveness and organisational effectiveness in higher education in the context of student involvement in university governance. Four key approaches emerged to measure effectiveness, reflecting on the goals, system resources, processes and the views of the strategic constituents, but also recognising the wider considerations of under what contexts they might be considered effective drawing on realistic evaluation. When seeking to develop a view of the effectiveness of the national student representation systems it will not currently be possible to examine this through the goals, resources or processes due to a lack of agreed national goals or ways of measuring the resources or evaluating the processes. However, it will be possible to develop a view on how effective student involvement in university governance is perceived to be by drawing on the views of the strategic constituents who are most involved in the processes. The research will therefore focus on the perceptions of these strategic constituents, considering the questions of representativeness, power dynamics and staff engagement through the different lenses of students as consumers, partners, service-users,

stakeholders and democratic participants, as outlined in the conceptual framework, Figure 9. The research focuses on how effective student involvement in university governance is perceived to be, but by considering these perceptions it may also be possible to draw wider conclusions about the effectiveness of the systems as a whole.

Figure 9 is the complete framework used in this research. It is multi-dimensional, considering:

- Factors which support Student Participation in University Governance
- Aspects of Effectiveness
- Principles Governing Evaluation
- Modes of Student Interaction with the Institution and Related Goals for Student Representation

#### Factors which support Student Participation in University Governance

- I) Representativeness – enabled by Effective Student Reps
- II) Staff Engagement - appropriate role for the staff, defining the purpose of their engagement
- III) Effective Committee Structure - Addressing the power dynamic

#### Aspects of Effectiveness

- A) Defining and Meeting the Goals for Representation
- B) Provision and Utilization of (system) resources
- C) Understanding the strategic constituency
- D) How efficiently does the process operate?

#### Evaluation Principles

- α) Realistic Evaluation
- β) Context

#### Modes of Student Interaction with the Institution and Related Goals for Student Representation

- 1) Consumer - Collecting Student Views (1a)



- Providing a Forum for students to be heard (1b)
- 2) Service User - Engage in Quality Assurance Processes (2a)
- 3) Partner - Two-way student communication on issues raised & actions taken previously (3a)
- Researching student opinions (3b)
- 4) Democratic Participant - Running Campaigns (4a)
- 5) Stakeholder - Engaging in debates on the quality of learning experiences (5a)
- Feeding back to students (5b)

Figure 10 shows this framework in graphical form, with the different dimensions as concentric circles. The modes of interaction are shown as nodes on a graph connected by edges to the central concept. Further edges show the relationships between these modes of interaction, and these emphasise the connection between the modes of Consumer and Service User on the one hand and between Partner, Democratic Participant and Stakeholder on the other. We will return to this framework in Chapter 6 when we consider the data from the research in the context of this broad model.

# Chapter 3: Research design

## **3.1 Introduction**

Chapter 3 presents the design of the research method to examine the perceptions of what makes effective student involvement in university governance and to explore the factors that determine the effectiveness of student representation, drawing on the perceptions of key actors involved in the process. The conceptual framework outlined in Figure 10 provides the underpinning framework to examine the themes that emerged from the literature review and this chapter will develop the empirical method to explore these.

This chapter starts by outlining the process of developing the research questions, then considering the research method to explore the empirical objectives, whilst at the same time considering some of the challenges with the approach. Having identified a national survey of course representative coordinators and quality managers as the most appropriate method to explore the research questions the chapter then considers the various elements of the research including identifying the respondents, how to distribute the survey, ethical dimensions, giving an overview of how the data was analysed before considering the accuracy of the survey data.

## **3.2 Research questions**

EdD's comprise various different elements and whilst it is not necessary for all the different sections to fit together to explore a single research area it can work better when there is this golden thread running through each of the different aspects of the research. In the case of this study the golden thread that emerged during my professional career, explored in the previous elements of the EdD research (described in Chapter 1) and then reinforced by the literature review in Chapter 2 is the question of the effectiveness of student involvement in university governance.

It should be noted that research is rarely a completely linear process but more often cyclical (Wellington, 2013) based on constant reflection during the research as different findings and results emerge. Research is an iterative process and as such as the research questions in both the earlier research and during this research have evolved from the initial questions as the research and review of the literature has established new themes. As Robson (2011, p. 59) suggests, "Your initial set of research questions is provisional...this provisionality is maintained throughout the research process." This flexibility enables a more nuanced process based on reflecting on the evidence and emerging findings. However, notwithstanding those caveats, the broad theme of the effectiveness of student involvement in university governance has remained.

The research data presented in Chapter 4 are primarily quantitative, although with some qualitative data through open-text questions in the survey. However, this data builds on qualitative elements conducted earlier in the doctorate, with semi-structured interviews carried out during the Methods of Enquiry 2 module and in the Institution-Focused Study. It should therefore be considered a mixed methods approach, drawing on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches in a pragmatic way (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005). The earlier qualitative research suggested some areas to explore further through the literature review and fed into the development of the research questions.

The main research question will consider the perceptions of what makes effective student involvement in university governance. As outlined in the literature review previous research has considered particular elements of student involvement in university governance without looking at it as a whole. The research aims to take a more holistic view of student involvement in university governance by considering what are the key features of effective student involvement in university governance. In order to examine this question the objectives of the fieldwork are to gather data on current views of how effective student representation is seen to be by key stakeholders. This will identify key areas where student involvement in university governance is seen as less effective – such as any differences within universities, consistency across universities or between different types of institutions. The second key objective will be to gather empirical evidence on perceptions of staff engagement with student representation and whether there are power differentials between staff and students. This is an area that the literature review highlighted has been studied at a theoretical level but without gathering data to explore this issue more fully. Thirdly, the study will gather data on how effectively university committees are seen at engaging students. This area is a gap in the literature when considering student involvement in university governance. Finally, the study will gather data on the type of activities that student representatives undertake, again an under-researched area, and this will then be considered through the lens of how students are considered – whether as consumers, service-users, stakeholders, democratic participants or partners.

The research method will draw on the phenomenological approach coming out of critical theory. This will use the second-person perspective to gather the views of the “strategic constituency” – or key stakeholders - as a way of evaluating the effectiveness of the organisational processes. This research explores the key factors that inform what makes effective student involvement in university governance drawing on different perceptions amongst those responsible for overseeing student representation systems within an

institution. From the university management this will usually be the quality manager or equivalent, and within students' unions it is likely to be the course representative co-ordinator position that is responsible for student representation systems. The survey introduction made it clear that they are responding on behalf of their whole organisation and so should seek a wider range of views as well.

These four key areas will be explored through the research as articulated in the research questions below:

- What are the perceived key factors of effective student involvement in university governance?
- How effective is student representation perceived to be at different levels within an institution by university quality managers and students' union course-rep co-ordinators?
- How are university staff perceived to impact on effectiveness of student representation?
- What perceived impact do university committee structures have on the effectiveness of student representation?
- What is the main purpose of student involvement in university governance and is this reflected in the activities that they undertake?

The research seeks to explore the perceptions of what makes student involvement in university governance effective and consider the different factors that inform this. In order to explore these research questions the empirical objective is to gather data on the perceptions of key stakeholders and consider wider issues of staff engagement and university committee structures. Having developed the research questions the rest of this chapter will consider the different methods to use to gather and analyse the data and consider the methodological strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches.

### **3.3 Research method**

This section will consider the ontological underpinning for the research design, outline different research methods and develop an approach to explore the research questions outlined in the previous section.

#### ***3.3.1 Ontological underpinning***

Evaluation is based on the idea of understanding whether something works or not, drawing on many of the managerialist concepts of 'review', 'audit', 'quality assurance' and

'performance management' becoming an 'evaluation movement' considering programmes across social welfare, education and the social sectors (Shadish et al, 1991). Whilst this initially emerged as a way of evaluating expenditure in the social welfare budgets, the costs of which seemed to be ever-expanding (Bell, 1983) there is now a view amongst some in the evaluation movement that everything can be evaluated (Scriven, 1980, p4). This view does not go unchallenged (Stufflebeam, and Coryn, 2014) but it does however suggest that there are ways of evaluating a wide variety of activities which could be used to consider the question of what makes effective student involvement in university governance.

There are a multitude of ways in which things can be evaluated including 'formative', 'summative', 'comprehensive' and 'theory-driven' evaluation. However, picking one of these methods can often result in taking to choose a side in the 'paradigm wars' of the positivism versus constructivism debates (Bryan, 1988). In many ways this can be caricatured as a belief that things are external or internal. The positivist ontology is that the world is external (Carson et al., 1988) with a single objective reality that can be discovered whatever the researcher's belief (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). The idea of the single objective reality is to identify the truth free of generalisations based on context or time. Whereas phenomenology draws together interpretivists who believe that there are multiple and relative realities (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider that these multiple realities should be seen in relation to other systems. Knowledge is therefore seen from a first-person point of view and is socially constructed rather than determined and perceived objectively (Carson et al., 2001, p.5; Hirschman, 1985; Berger and Luckman, 1967, p. 3: in Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). As a researcher I am much more drawn towards a more pragmatic epistemological position, charting a way between the positivist or constructivist ends of the spectrum and drawing on the strengths of both approaches. So when seeking to evaluate the features of effective student representation I will develop a mixed method approach that utilises both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Pawson and Tilley (1997) group the different forms of evaluation into four main perspectives "the experimental, the pragmatic, the naturalistic and the pluralistic" (1997, p4) before going on to critique and discount these approaches. In essence the Pawson and Tilley critiques are based on the experimental being too rooted in identifying the causation of a specific intervention which suggests a more clear-cut approach to programme impacts than is usually the case and ultimately is an "heroic failure" that ends up as an "ironic anti-climax" (1997, p8). The pragmatic approach is dismissed as being too beholden to political masters and decision-makers objectives, with methods being undermined by "political feasibility, cost effectiveness and incrementalism" (1997, p14). They dismiss naturalism as being based on

the idea that social programmes are based on complex human interactions and understandings and so the programme will work through a process of negotiation, persuasion and battle of wills, without recognising the power imbalances between different groups and the researcher. The pluralist approach seeks to draw on the strengths of the other approaches but ultimately, they suggest, is undone by a lack of resources to “research everything, a matter of not being able to see the wood from the trees.” (1997, p25) They developed a “realistic evaluation” model based on the principle not that programmes work or do not work, but rather that they work for certain people in certain circumstances. So when considering the research question of the perceptions of what makes effective student involvement in university governance there are many different factors which feed into this that should be considered as part of any evaluation and also many different stakeholders involved. As a pragmatist I will seek to develop an approach that draws on the strengths of both the positivist and constructivist approaches whilst also drawing on Pawson and Tilly to consider under what circumstances student representation might be considered effective and the factors that feed into this.

### **3.3.2 Developing a research method to gather a national overview of student involvement in university governance**

I am proposing to use a method that draws on both qualitative and quantitative approaches, and it will seek to build on the qualitative research that was conducted earlier in the EdD and outlined in Chapter 1. The overarching research question considers the perceptions of what makes effective student involvement in university governance. To understand this my empirical objectives are: to get an understanding of the views of key stakeholders on effectiveness and the representativeness of students; explore how engaged staff are perceived to be at enabling student involvement and examine questions of power differentials; consider perceptions of committee effectiveness at engaging students; and identify the activities that representatives undertake. In order to understand the features of effective student involvement in university governance I will develop a research method that draws on the views of those most closely engaged with these processes (students’ union course representative co-ordinators and university quality managers). The research method will seek to gather the perceptions of these stakeholders and to form a view of what make student involvement in university governance effective across England.

In my Institution Focused Study, outlined in Chapter 1, the research sought to explore questions of the perceptions of the effectiveness of student involvement in university governance in more detail in the context of individual institutions. The research looked at three different types of higher education institutions, a large research-intensive university, a

smaller teaching-focus university and a small, specialist private provider to assess whether there were similarities and differences across different types of providers. The earlier research was based on the views of a small number of engaged stakeholders (three people representing the student, academic and management perspectives) within these three institutions. The small number of stakeholders views being gathered meant that a semi-structured interview method was able to explore the issues in depth with the respondents. This also built on four previous semi-structured interviews in the Methods of Enquiry module that interviewed national student representatives and policy actors to set the research within the broad landscape. These interviews provided the opportunity to explore in a high degree of detail the experiences of national policy makers as well as staff within an individual institution. The interviews provided a rich source of data for the experiences within an institution but were also based on a narrow range of experiences and so it was difficult to draw wider conclusions for the sector as a whole. Interviews are, however, a valuable way of gathering data including the benefits of being able to consider social cues – such as body language, intonation – as well as a chance to follow a particular theme (Opdenakker, 2006). The challenges of gathering a wider view of the sector as a whole would be equally true of other qualitative research approaches such as focus groups or institutional case studies (Bell, 1993), where the research would explore a context in depth but without being able to explore the breadth of the whole sector.

These challenges of drawing wider conclusions were reinforced by the earlier qualitative research in the EdD where the research showed that there were differences between the views of students' union interviewees and those within the university management, but that there were also differences between the different types of institutions. The interviews highlighted diverging views and issues across these different types of institutions, and so a series of case studies, interviews or focus groups would not be able to gather a robust view of the higher education sector as a whole. The research method would therefore need to gather the views of a wider range of stakeholders to be able to compare the situation across different types of universities.

However, with the large number of providers across England, and the number of staff that it would have been necessary to interview, within the resource limitations, it became clear that a different approach would be needed for this research. In order to answer the research questions considering the perceptions of the effectiveness of student involvement in university governance across higher education institutions in England it would be necessary to use a more quantitative approach to gather data from a wide range of providers, including a representative sample of each of the main different types of universities. Reflecting on

these considerations I believed that the most appropriate way of gathering this data was through conducting a national survey. This would give a “wider view” (Wellington, 2000, p. 101) and enable the creation of a large enough dataset that would facilitate analysis by different types of universities. The quantitative elements of the survey would ensure that respondents are being asked the same questions in the same order, enhancing the reliability of the data. In addition to the breadth of the responses to the survey, this approach would also have the benefit of being more manageable within the constraints of the scale of the research project. It is important to note that the wider, shallower, responses from the research questionnaire complements the narrow, deep view of the earlier interviews as their quantitative data complements the qualitative data from the interviews.

It should be noted that surveys are not without their problems, including the extent to which the respondent understood the survey question and had a shared understanding of the possible responses. For example, one person’s understanding of “very effective” might be quite different than another person’s. This will in part be mitigated by the fact that respondents are responding on behalf of their institution rather than themselves and are encouraged to discuss with colleagues, which should result in a more shared understanding of the questions. It should also be noted that part of the aim of the survey is to reflect on whether there are shared understandings of the different terms. Survey data can also be impacted by low response rate, or an unrepresentative sample with only those that are particularly positive or negative likely to reply (Rogelberg et al, 2001). These issues are addressed later in the research design, through user testing and ensuring a high response rate, but should nonetheless be considered as a caveat to the findings. One of the key challenges with surveys is that they can provide answers to questions such as What? Where? When? And How? But it can be harder to answer the Why? question. The research method therefore included both open as well as closed questions within the survey to gather a more qualitative, as well as the quantitative, dataset through the open-text comments.

The literature review identified the CHERI Report to HEFCE (Little et al, 2009) as the only national study of perceptions of student representative systems. This research was based on an online national survey of higher education institutions (HEI) and their students’ unions in England. The 2009 CHERI report provided a good snapshot view of perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation systems at the national level from ten years ago, their data was gathered in the Summer of 2008 with the report published in 2009. As part of my research I therefore decided to develop my own survey drawing on some of the questions from the CHERI survey. My survey also includes additional sections to consider wider questions of perceptions of university staff and the effectiveness of the university



committee structures. However, in order to compare the data in my survey resulting from questions which were also in the CHERI survey it was necessary to use a research method that replicated the approach of the CHERI survey.

### **3.4 Survey development**

One of the challenges with a survey as a research method is getting a large enough sample and so creating an easily distributable and easy to fill-in survey is central to the robustness of the method. The survey was developed using the online tool, SurveyMonkey, which created a link that it was easy to circulate and analyse the results. The survey questions can be separated into two parts, firstly those questions that were drawn from the survey that underpinned the CHERI Student Representation Report (Little et al, 2009) exploring perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation at different levels within the university and secondly the new questions exploring themes such as perceptions of staff engagement with student representation, perceptions of the effectiveness of university committee structures at engaging students and activities that student representatives undertake.

The aim of the first group of questions was to enable comparison with the 2009 data and to identify if there have been changes in the ten years since that survey was run. However, in order to enable comparison it was necessary to use both the same wording and order of the questions. Most of the survey questions contained three possible responses from “very” to “not at all” with an additional response of “don’t know”. This three-scale response meant that it was possible to focus on the two ‘extreme’ answers. However, by only using a three-point scale it could result in some respondents deciding to opt for the “reasonably” rather than the “very” option, especially when being expected to respond on behalf of students across the entire institution. The challenge of whether the respondents had a shared understanding of the responses was addressed by targeting the survey at those most engaged with student representation systems within their institution so that they would be more likely to approach these questions with a common understanding. It was also important to ensure comparability with the 2009 data and so the same scale was used.

The second group of questions surrounding the engagement of staff and effectiveness of committee structures arose out of the interviews in the earlier research and from the literature review. The previous research and the literature review identified a number of possible themes to explore and a number of questions were developed to explore these areas.

This draft survey was then piloted with 10 people that were either previously or currently responsible for overseeing student representation systems to test the questions and to

gather their feedback. This piloting identified a number of key issues including the crucial ability of being able to sort the responses. As a result of this feedback a new question was introduced to identify whether the respondent was from a students' union or institution, as well as which part of the UK they were from, these two additional questions were crucial in order to segment the data, especially since the survey was circulated more widely than just England. The piloting also resulted in amending a number of questions so that they were clearer and would result in the data that was intended to be gathered. These amendments included correcting a number of spelling and grammatical mistakes, unlabelled columns, and clarifying the language of the question or explanatory text. One example of this was where a question following another question asked about both institutional and programme level representation, whereas the next question was only asking about programme level and so clarifying the question to make this distinction more explicit.

This piloting process was extremely helpful to sense-check the survey and tighten up the language in certain places. It also meant that some of the key stakeholders that would later receive the survey felt involved at this stage and so were more likely to consider circulating it at the distribution stage.

### **3.5 Research respondents**

The research questions seek to examine the features of effective student involvement in university governance by considering the views of stakeholders most engaged in the systems. This approach replicated much of the research method of the CHERI report which sought to gather an organisational view from both the HEI and also the students' union and therefore the online survey was circulated to those within each of these organisations that were responsible for student representation systems. Within the university this will usually be the quality manager or equivalent, and within students' unions it was likely to be the course representative co-ordinator position.

The CHERI research targeted 130 HEIs with at least 300 students and their students' unions. Over the intervening 10 years since the CHERI research the higher education sector has become increasingly diverse with new private providers, further education colleges delivering higher education qualifications as well as SCITTs (School-Centred Initial Teacher Training) and international universities delivering qualifications in this country.

The CHERI report does not list the 130 institutions that they surveyed and therefore in order to get as similar a sample as possible the research used a list of higher education institutions with Taught Degree Awarding Powers (TDAP). These are institutions responsible for their own academic standards and have the power to award their own qualifications. Many of those institutions with over 300 students in 2008 have either increased their number of

students or applied for TDAP over the last decade, and using a list of English higher education institutions with taught degree awarding powers<sup>4</sup> (TDAP), as at August 2017, there were 127 institutions. The list is not exactly the same, not least with the new private providers that have entered the higher education sector, and therefore it will be important to note this caveat when considering comparisons with the 2009 report.

It was important to consider the sample size required to consider the research representative. In order to get a representative sample of the higher education sector the research aimed to gather responses from at least 30% of the overall cohort for both the 127 HEIs and their students' unions. It would be likely that those that respond most quickly to a survey of this nature are most likely to have either very positive or very negative views and so the larger the response rate the more reliable the data.

**Table 1: Survey response rate**

	<b>Response from institution (either SU or HEI)</b>	<b>Students' union</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Both SU and HEI</b>
Total	89 (70%)	59 (46%)	60 (47%)	29 (23%)

In addition, given the diversity of the higher education sector highlighted above, the sample also needed to be representative of the different types of universities to enable further segmentation. The English higher education sector is hugely diverse with institutions ranging from tens of thousands of students delivering a wide range of subject disciplines through to quite specialist institutions with just a few hundred students. Rather than using the mission groups (such as the Russell Group, University Alliance and Million Plus), which as well as being self-selected groupings, would also exclude large numbers of institutions, there are now over 40% of institutions who are now not aligned to any mission group. Instead the research used the HEFCE peer groups for Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) benchmarking for 2016-17<sup>5</sup>, this listing groups HEIs into seven broad categories based on

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<sup>4</sup> List of English HEIs with TDAP accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2018  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_universities\\_in\\_England](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_universities_in_England)

<sup>5</sup> Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> June 2018 <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/funding/finsustain/trac/peer/>

their complexity and income, see Table 2 below for the full definitions of each of the different Peer Groups.

The research considered all those institutions on both the list of English higher education institutions with taught degree awarding powers and the TRAC benchmarking (ie not all of the English institutions on the TRAC list are included). In addition to the HEFCE TRAC benchmark groups, which only includes publicly funded universities the research also included an additional group of private providers with TDAP.

When considering the required response rate it was necessary to consider how the data would be segmented. It was decided that the data would be analysed in three main ways. Firstly, the students' union responses were considered against the HEI responses which gave a maximum of 127 in each group. Secondly, when considering responses by different types of institution these groups consist of different numbers of universities ranging from 36 in one group (Peer Group E) to 8 in the smallest group (private providers). Therefore, in the analysis of these responses it was necessary to combine responses from both the HEI and the students' union and so doubling the maximum size of each group and therefore giving a more representative sample for the groups with the fewest universities. It was important to consider any major divergence in the views of universities and students' union to ensure that one group is not unduly influencing the results.

Given the decreasing response rates based on smaller subsets it was harder to draw robust conclusions for some of the groupings. Given the overall size of the sample, and a targeted response rate of 30% rate it was not possible to consider further segmentation. In a relatively small overall research population of 127 the more responses there were the higher the confidence that could be placed on the results and the lower the margin of error. For example, broadly speaking in a sample size that small, to have 90% confidence in the results on a 7% margin of error you would need just over a 50% response rate of 67 responses. Section 3.9 below considers the statistical significance of the results in more detail.

### **3.6 Survey distribution**

The online survey was distributed in a series of waves to ensure a robust and representative response rate. In the first wave, in week 1, the survey was distributed directly to the GuildHE students' union presidents and quality managers email list, a list of over a hundred people and they were given six weeks to complete the survey, with follow-up time built-in for chasing respondents. In this wave a number of key gatekeepers were contacted, these contacts provided access to number of networks to access the participants identified above including the Quality Strategy Network and the Academic Registrars Council (ARC) Quality

practitioners group to target staff within institutions and The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) and ChangeSU, to reach students' union staff. All of these gatekeepers circulated the survey via email to their members. In addition to circulating the online survey directly to key contacts the research was also publicised via Twitter. The first tweet was retweeted 45 times with 15 likes and received over 8,000 impressions, and the research was also publicised via LinkedIn. This social media activity helped raise the profile of the research, encouraging respondents to fill in the survey and also for other organisations to publicise the research. This initial push resulted in responses from 55 institutions (40 from institutions and 33 from students' unions).

The second wave, in Week 3, focused on the mission groups – the Russell Group, University Alliance and Million Plus – as well as the Association of Colleges – targeting their heads of quality or teaching and learning networks. In week 4 those institutions not in mission groups were emailed directly, contacting named individuals via emails on their institutional websites.

During the first four weeks of survey collection a record was kept of those institutions and students' unions that had responded. In week 5 those that had not already replied were contacted directly via email. During the research it was clear that the response rate amongst some particular types of institutions was not as high as hoped. For the three groups that had a response rate of below 30%, students' unions in private providers and institutional responses from peer groups B and C a more targeted approach was needed to try and elicit a response and ensure a robust response rate from each of the individual categories.

The CHERI research was conducted in June-October 2008, however the report noted that this resulted in a lower students' union response rate than would have been hoped for, with the report noting the impact of the handover period for students' union officers. The survey as part of this research was therefore circulated slightly earlier, going out in May and June, as a way of counter-acting some of the challenges of the earlier research.

### **3.7 Ethics**

It has been argued that “the MAIN CRITERION” for educational research is that it is ethical (Wellington, 2000, p54). Saldana also emphasised the importance of an ethical approach, arguing that in order to maintain the integrity of research it is necessary to be “rigorously ethical” (2013, p37). This rigorousness should encompass all elements of the research to ensure that ethics are embedded throughout. This will range from the way in which participants are dealt with during the research and the methods that are used, as well as the way in which the data is analysed and the findings are presented and how the data is stored (Gillham, 2005).

It was also necessary to give considerable thought to the way in which the research is undertaken and reflect on any preconceptions that the researcher may have about the data to start with to ensure that they are not subconsciously manipulating it to fit their own hypothesis. For example, as part of considerations it was important to ensure that the research did not start by making value judgements (Robson, 2011) about whether student representation is a good thing, but rather seek to explore the perceptions of others.

The research has been informed by the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011) to inform and guide the ethical development of this research proposal and method. As part of the process for ensuring the ethical nature of the research the proposal was submitted for ethical review and approved by a panel within the university.

As part of this research survey respondents had their confidentiality fully protected, both in terms of not using their name or institution but also not describing them in a way which would enable accidental identification. In order to prevent accidental identification of institutions the data was only analysed by group – whether all respondents, all students' union or all institutional responses, or looking at the results by the type of institution. This ensured that all responses are grouped into at least several respondents to prevent identification.

All survey respondents were fully informed about the purpose of the research, how their contribution would form part of the research and given the “right to withdraw” (BERA, 2011, p6) at any time. This included making it clear that by completing the survey they are consenting to the use of their data, whilst also making it clear that they can withdraw at any point.

As part of the research design the degree of inconvenience for those involved in the research was considered including the amount of time it would take them to complete the survey. As part of this consideration the survey restricted the number of questions that were asked and the survey also made clear at the start the amount of time it was likely to take to complete it (“approximately 10 minutes”). In addition, participants were made aware of the outcomes of the research and will be sent a link to the final research outcomes.

In terms of protecting the data, it has been kept in password-protected computer files and is not accessible to other people than the researcher. The data will be destroyed two years after the completion of the EdD, enough time for anyone to come back and request to review the data and within the limits of the Data Protection Act (BERA, 2011, p8).

It should be noted that given the researcher's position, both currently as Deputy Chief Executive of one of the recognised representative bodies in UK higher education as well as having held several senior positions at NUS that this may have impacted on how respondents replied to the survey. Whilst it may have promoted a more positive response it might also have encouraged respondents to reply to the survey. This was a consideration in the research method and the use of a survey was considered a more effective way of mitigating this, than for example an interview-based approach.

The data was analysed by different types of university and therefore it was important to know which institutions respondents were from and also their job role in order to deal transparently with multiple surveys from the same institution. However, it was not necessary to gather the names of the respondents and so their confidentiality was further protected. Not being required to supply their name should have further mitigated any perceived power imbalance with the researcher's role or prevented respondents feeling the need to say things that they may think the researcher wanted to hear given their previous roles. It was important in the survey introduction to make clear to respondents the importance of giving an organisational perspective rather than their own view, and therefore that they should both consult other colleagues.

### **3.8 Data analysis**

#### **3.8.1 Duplicate surveys**

One of the challenges of sending the survey through various communications channels was that there are several duplicate survey responses from some institutions. By asking for their job title it was possible to do a two-stage process for the consideration of these duplicates. Firstly, it was possible to make a judgement about whether one of the responses came from a more appropriate person than the other.

For example, in several students' unions both the Vice President Education and the Representation Coordinator (Course Reps) replied. Since the research was seeking a longitudinal perspective about how representation was perceived to have changed over several years it was therefore the Representation Coordinator that would be more likely to provide this response and so their survey results were used. In one university both the Deputy Academic Registrar and an Educational Developer replied. In this case the Deputy Academic Registrar would be more likely to have closer links with the student representative system due to responsibility for student representation sitting with this role in many institutions and so their response was analysed. In both cases the results were broadly similar but enough differences to need to make a choice. In another university both the

Student Engagement Manager and Student Engagement Officer replied. In this case the Manager was more likely to have a wider overview, and probably have been at the institution longer, and therefore their response was used. If however, there are several responses from one institution and no obvious distinction between who is filling in the survey then it was possible to combine the survey responses to create a single response.

However, it should be noted that in most cases there was just a single response from either the students' union or the institution, and in many cases they made it clear that they were responding on behalf of the whole organisation.

### 3.8.2 Cleaning the data

Looking at initial responses there were 183 responses from either the students' union or HEI, however on closer analysis a number of these were responses where the respondent had filled in their name but then not gone on to complete the survey. After removing those that had not responded to any of the questions the remaining number of survey responses was 142.

The next stage was to look at any multiple responses from either the same institution or the same students' union. This removed another 22 survey responses leaving a still robust 119 survey responses. The table below shows the full break-down of responses with a completed survey from either the HEI or the students' union from 89 institutions, or 70% of English institutions with DAPs in August 2017. In addition to the overall response rate there was a 46% response rate (n=59) from students' unions and 47% (n=60) from HEIs and 23% (n=29) from both the students' union and HEI in the same institution.

**Table 1a: Survey response rate**

	<b>Response from institution (either SU or HEI)</b>	<b>Students' union</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Both SU and HEI</b>
Total	89 (70%)	59 (46%)	60 (47%)	29 (23%)

In addition to overall response rate the research looked at responses by HEFCE TRAC peer group. The HEFCE TRAC peer groups group institutions, using research income as a proxy for their size and complexity. There was at least a 30% response rate from both the students' unions and HEI from all the categories except students' unions in private providers,



which was 25%, and could perhaps reflect the less developed student representation structures in many private providers. This provided a representative sample of the sector as a whole and of the diversity of types of providers within the sector and allowed some analysis of any differences amongst types of providers. Table 2 provides a more detailed analysis of the responses.

**Table 2: Survey response rate - university type**

<b>HEFCE Peer Group</b>	<b>Definition of peer group</b>	<b>Number in peer group</b>	<b>Students' union responses</b>	<b>Institution responses</b>
A	Institutions with a medical school and research income of 20% or more of total income	24	12 (46%)	12 (46%)
B	All other institutions with research income of 15% or more of total income	16	8 (50%)	7 (44%)
C	Institutions with research income of between 5% and 15% of total income	18	11 (61%)	8 (44%)
D	Institutions with a research income less than 5% of total income and total income greater than £150mn	14	8 (57%)	7 (50%)
E	Institutions with a research income less than 5% of total income and total income less than or equal to £150mn	36	15 (42%)	16 (44%)
F	Specialist music/arts teaching institutions	10	3 (30%)	6 (60%)
Private		8	2 (25%)	4 (50%)

### **3.8.3 Comparison with CHERI 2009 data**

As part of the data analysis, in addition to comparing different groups within the 2018 data the research also compared the results to the research published in the CHERI report. This research took place in 2008 and was published in 2009. In order to aid comparison the 2018 questions replicated many questions from the 2008 survey, and the second-half of the 2018 survey asked some additional questions. It should be noted that it was not possible to directly compare the responses since, although care was taken to replicate the questions and the order of the questions, this was not possible in all cases and the ordering of questions and relationship between questions would have had an impact on the way in which people responded to the survey questions.

The 2009 research had a 62% response rate from HEIs (n=80), slightly above the 47% response rate in 2018, and a 30% (n=39) amongst students' unions, compared to 46% response rate in this research. This variation in the response rates would also have an impact on the ability to make direct comparisons between the two datasets, as would changes in the size of institutions and an increase in the diversity of providers, with more providers having TDAP in 2018, all of which will impact on the comparability. Recognising these caveats about the comparability of the data it should, however, be noted that the ability to have a longitudinal dataset, and to provide some comparisons to ten years previously following many policy interventions and enhancements to student representation over this period, will provide a hugely valuable opportunity to consider any significant movement over time in the data.

### **3.8.4 "Not applicable"**

There are a number of institutions that replied "not applicable" in response to questions about student representation at the faculty/departmental level. There was a specific comment on one of the surveys that this was because as a specialist institution they did not have different departments or faculties and so this should be noted in the presentation of the data.

### **3.8.5 Analysing the data**

Data analysis is an iterative process, looking at the data in different ways to identify any trends or differences. The data was looked at through four different sub-sections, firstly comparing students' union and institutional responses. Having identified a mismatch in the perceptions of students' union and institutional managers views on the effectiveness of student representation during the earlier interviews and the literature review, in particular in the CHERI research, the first consideration of the data was whether there were any significant differences in the views of the two groups. The second view to test, as emerged during the Institution-focused study, was whether there were differences between different

groups of universities. Following discussion with my supervisor the next area that was considered was whether there were any differences in the data between the overall results and those institutions where both the HEI and the students' union had responded. There should perhaps be a note of caution that the respondents, even though responding on behalf of their organisation, were likely to be more engaged, and therefore invested, in student representation and so potentially more positive. The final area was whether there had been any changes in the perceptions over time, and therefore a comparison with the CHERI data from 2008.

### **3.9 Accuracy of the Survey data**

When considering the accuracy of the data and the extent to which we can rely on the findings it was important to test the robustness of the data. For a sample of 'n' responses from a large population, the standard deviation would normally be considered to be  $\sqrt{n}$  and there would be a 95% chance that the true percentage of responses in a particular category would be about  $100 \times 1.68/\sqrt{n}$  percent. For a group of 127 answers we would thus expect that only differences greater than about 16% would be reliable. But if we sample the whole population of 127 samples, there will be no statistical uncertainties, so the use of standard sampling theory in this case is clearly inappropriate. We can, however, use Monte-Carlo simulation to estimate what level of uncertainty gives rise to some of the variations seen in the data.

We can see that in Table 4a in Chapter 4, the percentage who rated the representation as "very effective" varies almost linearly with the "index" of the HEFCE Peer group, for example taking 'A' = 0 and 'F' = 5. The regression coefficient is then 0.89, with a slope of 6.25 and an intercept of 4.97.

If we take a perfectly linear fit as a test case, with sample pairs (1,1), (2,2)...(6,6) and perform the regression 100 times, adding Gaussian noise to the second element in each data pair, we find the following table:

**Table 3: Simulated Regression Coefficient versus Sample Noise**

<u>Standard Deviation</u>	<u>Mean Regression Coefficient</u>	<u>Mean Intercept</u>	<u>Mean Slope</u>
0	1	0	1
0.2	1.00	-0.01	1.00
0.4	0.98	-0.03	1.01
0.6	0.96	-0.03	1.01
0.8	0.92	0.10	0.99
1.0	0.90	0.05	0.99
1.2	0.87	-0.17	1.05

1.4	0.81	0.04	0.98
1.6	0.79	-0.27	1.05
1.8	0.71	0.05	0.94
2.0	0.69	-0.32	1.04

The two right-hand columns of the table are not relevant to the argument, but are included to give an indication of how the accuracy of the estimation changes with noise level. It can be seen that the regression coefficient of 0.89 observed in the data corresponds to a standard deviation (s.d.) in the measurements of about 1.07 times the slope, which is here itself 1. For the data from the survey, the slope is 6.25 so the s.d. of the results would be about 6.7%. This would therefore suggest that any effects over this level in the data could be considered significant.

On the assumption that the errors have a Gaussian distribution, there is a 5% chance that a measurement will have an error of 1.68 times the s.d. Since in the comparison of two measurements, both have this distribution, the observed difference between them must be at least  $\sqrt{2} \times 1.68$  standard deviations, or, for this data about 16%, before we can be 95% sure that the observed difference was not due to chance.

This estimate is conservative for two reasons:

- a) since all the proportions must add up to 100% the variations in each category are not independent.
- b) There is no reason to think that the true relationship between “effectiveness” and “index” is linear and any deviation from this will decrease the regression coefficient leading to an over-estimation of the standard deviation of the data.

The second of these factors is believed to be the more significant and means that estimates of statistical significance obtained by this method will be conservative.

### **3.9.1 Probability of observed regression coefficient being due to chance**

The analysis which led to the observed correlation between the ‘Very Effective’ response and the Peer Group Index is made for six different questions (Tables 5a, 6a, 13a, 15b, 15c and 15c, all in Chapter 4 below). The values obtained for the regression coefficient were 0.89, 0.25, 0.91, 0.57, 0.48 and 0.07. The other salient value of 0.91 occurred in the answers to the question “would you say academic staff see the value of engaging students in representation activities.”

There does not seem to be any combination of measurement variance and underlying linear variation (even with slope zero) which would reproduce anything like the observed

distribution of correlation coefficient, so the apparent correlation in some of the results rather than the others does not seem to be a matter of chance – both the events of obtaining the lower values of correlation coefficient from an underlying linear correlation or that of obtaining a high correlation coefficient where there is no underlying correlation are vanishingly unlikely ( $p < 0.01$ ), so the variations in correlation between different sets of responses would seem to be real. As a cross-check: if we consider the two data sets with higher correlation values together, the chance of obtaining a correlation coefficient of 0.9 in two out of six samples implies that the true value of the standard deviation must be less 1.3 times the slope, i.e. 8%. This is slightly higher than the most likely value of 6.7% estimated above, but the difference is not enough to change the practical reliability of the conclusions drawn from this data. Since the CHERI data set was about the same size as the new data, its reliability will be similar.

### **3.10 Conclusion**

Chapter 3 outlined the research questions considering the factors that contribute to effective student involvement in university governance. These key themes were explored and further developed through the literature review in Chapter 2 to identify key factors that inform whether student involvement in university governance is perceived to be effective. The empirical objectives of the study are to explore the impact of staff, committee effectiveness, level of representation and types of activities undertaken on the wider question of the perceptions of what makes student representation effective.

The objective of the research method is to gather data on these research questions to form a national view on the perceptions of what makes student involvement in university governance effective in England. In order to develop this nation-wide perspective it is proposed to undertake a survey gathering the views of those most engaged in student representation from an institutional and students' union perspective.

The national survey of institutions with degree awarding powers in England will explore these factors and the data will also be analysed to examine whether there are differences in the data by type of institution, between the students' union and institution and this analysis is presented in Chapter 4. Finally, this chapter outlined the various considerations when looking at the data, such as the reliability of the data, ensuring the ethical dimension and cleaning the data.

# Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the data from the 119 responses to the national online survey of English institutions with degree awarding powers and their students' unions. The overarching research question considers the perceptions of what makes student involvement in university governance effective, and the additional research questions consider particular factors that feed in to inform this wider view. Each of the sections in this chapter explore the data relating to different research questions drawing on different parts of the survey and analysing it in different ways, such as comparing the perspectives of respondents from students' unions with those from institutions, examining whether there are differences amongst different types of institutions and comparing 2018 data to that from 2009. As outlined in Chapter 3 in the method section due to the sample size of the data, differences of one or two percent should not be considered as significant, but rather only differences of at least 7%, as outlined in section 3.9, should be considered statistically significant.

This chapter will present the data gathered relating to each of the research questions, before analysing the data in relation to the literature and theoretical framework in Chapter 5. It is therefore worth restating the research questions at this point.

- What are the perceived key factors of effective student involvement in university governance?
- How effective is student representation perceived to be at different levels within an institution by university quality managers and students' union course-rep co-ordinators?
- How are university staff perceived to impact on effectiveness of student representation?
- What perceived impact do university committee structures have on the effectiveness of student representation?
- What is the main purpose of student involvement in university governance and is this reflected in the activities that they undertake?

The answers to the first research question will arise from the discussion in Chapter 5 which is why this chapter starts with the second research question.

## **4.1 How effective is student representation perceived to be?**

The second research question sought to explore how effective student representation is perceived to be in terms of informing and shaping the student learning experience at different levels within an institution by university quality managers and students' union course-rep co-ordinators. The survey asked respondents for their perceptions of the

effectiveness of student representation at various levels, looking at institution-wide committees, faculty/departmental committees and staff/student liaison committees.

#### 4.1.1 Representation on institution-wide committees is seen as highly effective

There was broad agreement between responses from HEI staff and those in students' unions about the perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation on institution-wide committees in terms of informing and shaping the student learning experience. There was a 4.5% difference between those that rated it as "very effective" and a corresponding 3.4% difference in "don't know" but less than a one per cent difference between students' union and institutional responses to both the "reasonably effective" and "not very effective" categories. 73.3% of responses from HEIs and 74.1% of responses from students' unions perceived the effectiveness as "reasonably" effective and 20% and 15.5% as "very effective" respectively.

When combining the "very" and "reasonably" effective responses it gives an overall effectiveness rating of 93.3% amongst HEI responses and 89.6% amongst students' unions. This would suggest a high level of agreement that the representation on institution-wide committees is seen as effective. This perception that institution-wide representation was seen as effective was also reflected in the interviews in the earlier research. Interviewees suggested several reasons for this effectiveness including that representatives at the institution-wide level were more likely to have been representatives at lower levels or to be full-time students' union sabbatical officers, and therefore receive more structured training.

##### 4.1.1.1 Slight drop in perception of institutional level effectiveness in the past decade

Despite the high levels of agreement about the perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation at institution-wide committee level, when this data is compared with the 2009 CHERI research it looks a little less positive.

**Table 4: Effectiveness of student representation on institution-wide committees**

	<b>Very effective</b>	<b>Reasonably effective</b>	<b>Not very effective</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
<b>HEI 2018</b>	20%	73.3%	6.7%	0%	0%
<b>Students' union 2018</b>	15.5%	74.1%	6.9%	0%	3.4%
<b>Combined 2018</b>	17.8%	73.7%	6.8%	0%	1.7%
Source: Online survey – HEIs, n=60; students' unions, n=58					
	<b>Very effective</b>	<b>Reasonably effective</b>	<b>Not very effective</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
<b>HEI 2009</b>	37%	53%	8%	0%	0%
<b>Students' union 2009</b>	37%	52%	10%	0%	0%

The overall levels of effectiveness combining “very effective” and “reasonably effective” show broadly comparable results with 90% amongst HEI responses compared to the 93.3% in the 2018 research, and 89% amongst students’ unions compared to 89.6%. However, when looking at the split between “very effective” and “reasonably effective” it shows a divergence. In 2009 37% of both HEI and students’ union responses perceived student representation on institution-wide committees as “very effective” compared to the 20% amongst HEI responses and 15.5% from students’ union respondents in 2018, showing a big shift in the perception of the effectiveness from “very” to “reasonably” effective.

The research did not explore whether this was based on a real drop in perceptions of the effectiveness or whether it was now a more robust figure based on many policy interventions and resources invested in student representation, and therefore a better shared understanding of purpose of student representation systems: at the very least, however it suggests that there is work to be done to enhance the perceived effectiveness of student representation to get it back to 2009 levels.

#### **4.1.1.2 Smaller institutions more likely to consider institution-wide representation very effective**

Whilst there were few differences between the responses from HEIs and students’ unions when considering the perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation on institution-wide committees, given the diversity of higher education providers it was worth exploring whether there were any significant differences between different types of institutions.

As outlined in section 3.5 Research Respondents Section, when considering the data by type of institutions it was necessary to group HEIs and students’ union responses to ensure large enough sample sizes. Given the similar responses from students’ unions and HEIs to this question it would be appropriate to group them in this way. Overall 17.8% of HEIs and students’ unions perceived the effectiveness of student representation on institution-wide committees to be “very effective” and 73.7% responded that they believed it to be “reasonably effective”. However, there were significant variations amongst different types of institutions – ranging from 4.2% of respondents from HEFCE Peer Group A institutions replying that it was “very effective” to 33.3% in HEFCE Peer Group F. Broadly speaking HEFCE Peer Group A are large, research intensive universities, often based in a city, whereas HEFCE Peer Group F are much smaller, more specialist institutions. The HEFCE



TRAC Peer Groups organise institutions, primarily on their research income, which acts as a proxy for the size of the institution.

It should be noted that the response rate when considering types of institutions results in much smaller cohorts – with only 9 responses in HEFCE Peer Group F compared to 24 in Peer Group A – which impacts on the statistical robustness of the data, and meaning that larger differences are needed for these to be considered significant. However, the second highest rating of “very effective” was from respondents in HEFCE Peer Group E institutions, which are also, generally speaking, significantly smaller than the sector average, and there were 31 responses from these institutions.

It might therefore be worth exploring whether there is an impact on the perceived effectiveness of student representation based on the size of the institution and whether this is impacted by issues such as the sense of community often described in smaller institutions and the ability of representatives to speak to more students and therefore be seen as more representative.

Overall only 6.8% of respondents perceived student representation to be “not very effective” on institution-wide committees, but again there were some significant differences amongst different types of institutions. Amongst three groups (Peer Group B, F and Private Providers) no one believed institution-wide representation to be “not very effective” increasing up to 13.3% amongst Peer Group D and 16.7% amongst Peer Group C. The latter institutions would broadly be defined as large teaching focused institutions, often based in city centres, but whilst this may be a factor it is still above the 4.2% from Peer Group A and so there may also be a question about the diversity of the modes of delivery and the student body that may also be a factor.

**Table 4a: Effectiveness of student representation on institution-wide committees – by HEFCE Peer Group**

	<b>Very effective</b>	<b>Reasonably effective</b>	<b>Not very effective</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>	<b>Do not know</b>	<b>n=</b>
Would you say that academic staff see the value of engaging students in representation activities						
HEFCE Peer Group A	4.2%	87.5%	4.2%	0%	4.2%	24
HEFCE Peer Group B	13.3%	86.7%	0%	0%	0%	15
HEFCE Peer Group C	22.2%	61.1%	16.7%	0%	0%	18
HEFCE Peer Group D	13.3%	73.3%	13.3%	0%	0%	15
HEFCE Peer Group E	25.8%	67.7%	6.5%	0%	0%	31

HEFCE Peer Group F	33.3%	55.6%	0%	0%	11.1%	9
Private Providers	16.7%	83.3%	0%	0%	0%	6
Source: Online survey – HEIs and Students’ Unions n=118						

#### 4.1.1.3 Broad agreement that student representatives are “representative” on institution-wide committees

When considering the perceptions of the effectiveness of student representatives, one of the key themes that came out in the qualitative research was considering how representative of the wider student cohort the student representatives were and whether they were just speaking about their own experiences or whether they reflected a wider set of experiences.

There were high levels of agreement about the perceptions of the representativeness of student representatives on institution-wide committees, with 76.3% agreeing that they are “very” or “reasonably” representative.

There was broad agreement amongst students’ unions and HEI responses to the question about the representativeness of student representatives on institution-wide committees. With 8.3% of HEI respondents agreeing that it was “very representative” compared to 5.2% from students’ unions, 71.7% of HEIs believing that it is “reasonably representative” compared to 67.2% of students’ unions responses and 20% of HEIs responding that they believed it “not very representative” compared to 22.4% of students’ unions. This would give an overall representativeness rating of 80% amongst HEIs vs 72.4% amongst students’ unions, but much of the difference could be due to the 5.2% of students’ union responses that replied “do not know”.

In the interviews one of the key themes was the link between the effectiveness and representativeness of student representatives at the institution level. However, this link was less strong in the survey responses. Overall 91.5% agreed that student representatives are seen as effective this compared to 76.3% that agreed that student representatives are seen as representative. This was reinforced by the overall proportion that replied that student representatives were “not very representative” 21.2% compared to only 6.8% that replied that student representatives were “not very effective”.

**Table 5: Representativeness of student representatives on institution-wide committees**

	<b>Very representative</b>	<b>Reasonably representative</b>	<b>Not very representative</b>	<b>Not representative</b>	<b>Don’t know</b>
<b>HEI 2018</b>	8.3%	71.7%	20%	0%	0%

<b>Students' union 2018</b>	5.2%	67.2%	22.4%	0%	5.2%
<b>Combined 2018</b>	6.8%	69.5%	21.2%	0%	2.5%
Source: Online survey – HEIs, n=60; students' unions, n=58					

Whilst the overall representativeness rating looked quite high they were, however, slightly lower than the results in the 2009 data. The perception that student representatives on institution-wide committees are representative was 80% amongst HEI respondents in 2018 compared to 84% in 2009 and amongst students' union respondents the view of the representativeness dropped from 80% in 2009 to 72.4% in the 2018 survey.

#### **4.1.2 Representation on faculty/departmental committees seen as slightly less effective**

There was broad agreement between HEI and students' union responses about the perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation on faculty/departmental committees. 13.6% of HEI responses perceived it as "very effective" compared to 15.5% amongst students' union responses. 59.3% of HEI respondents thought that student representation on faculty/departmental committees was "reasonably effective" compared to 56.9% amongst students' unions and 20.3% of HEI responses thought it was "not very effective" compared to 19% amongst students' unions.

Compared to the perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation on institution-wide committees it was clearly seen as significantly less effective, although still receiving high levels of agreement. Amongst HEI respondents 72.9% agreed that student representation was seen as effective on faculty/departmental committee and 72.4% of students' union responses, although this compares with the 90% and 93.3% of respondents from HEIs and students' union when considering the perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation on institution-wide committees. This is particularly noticeable when comparing the levels of responses that replied that it was "not very effective" with an average of 19.7% when considering student representation on faculty/departmental committees compared to 6.8% when looking at institution-wide committees.

Over many years that I have been considering these issues there are often comments about the challenges to represent students at the faculty level, where the representatives are both further removed from the experiences of students across a number of departments whilst also being volunteer representatives and therefore have restrictions on their time.

#### 4.1.2.1 Greater agreement on the effectiveness between students' union and institutional responses than a decade ago

When comparing the 2018 data to the 2009 data the responses about student representation on faculty/departmental committees are broadly similar in terms of perceptions of being “very effective”. 13.6% of HEIs thinking it was “very effective” in 2018 compared to 16% in 2009 and amongst students' unions it was 15.5% in 2018 compared to 13% in 2009.

Amongst HEIs there was a perception that student representation has become less effective with 59.3% describing it as “reasonably effective” in 2018 compared to 71% in 2009 and the perception that it is “not very effective” rising to 20.3% in 2018 compared to 9% in 2009. However, amongst students' union responses there is an interesting disparity. By 2018 56.9% of students' union responses believed student representation to be “reasonably effective” compared to 39% in 2009, with 19% thinking it “not very effective” compared to 37% in 2009.

Whereas there were significant disparities in the views of the effectiveness amongst HEI and students' union responses in 2009, there was however much greater agreement between the two sets of respondents in 2018. In the interviews there was a belief that student representation had improved over time and so this greater agreement between students' union and institutional responses could be due to an improved shared understanding of the roles of student representatives amongst HEIs and students' unions.

**Table 6: Effectiveness of student representation on faculty/departmental committees**

	<b>Very effective</b>	<b>Reasonably effective</b>	<b>Not very effective</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
<b>HEI 2018</b>	13.6%	59.3%	20.3%	1.7%	5.1%
<b>Students' union 2018</b>	15.5%	56.9%	19%	0%	8.6%
<b>Combined 2018</b>	14.5%	58.1%	19.7%	0.9%	6.8%
Source: Online survey – HEIs, n=60; students' unions, n=58					
	<b>Very effective</b>	<b>Reasonably effective</b>	<b>Not very effective</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
<b>HEI 2009</b>	16%	71%	9%	4%	0%
<b>Students' union 2009</b>	13%	39%	37%	0%	11%
Source: Online survey – HEIs, n=80; students' unions, n=39					

There is a question about the extent to which there had been a real drop in the perceptions on the effectiveness over time or whether there are now more robust and shared view on what the role of student representatives are and therefore how their effectiveness should be judged. This could be the focus of further future research to explore this in more detail.

#### 4.1.2.2 More differences in those thinking that representation is “not very effective” at this level between types of institution

Whilst there were few differences in the data between HEI and students’ union responses I wanted to explore whether there might be differences by type of institution. Table 6a below shows that there were some differences in the “very” and “reasonably” effective but not the same level of differences as there were at the institutional level. Indeed the size of institution seems to be less of a factor at this level with Peer Group A at 16.7% not significantly different from Peer Group E (16.1%) or Peer Group F (22.2%).

**Table 6a: Effectiveness of student representation on faculty/departmental committees – by HEFCE Peer Group**

	Very effective	Reasonably effective	Not very effective	Not applicable	Do not know	n=
Would you say that academic staff see the value of engaging students in representation activities						
HEFCE Peer Group A	16.7%	58.3%	20.8%	0%	4.2%	24
HEFCE Peer Group B	6.7%	66.7%	6.7%	0%	20%	15
HEFCE Peer Group C	11.1%	50%	27.8%	0%	11.1%	18
HEFCE Peer Group D	13.3%	53.3%	33.3%	0%	0%	15
HEFCE Peer Group E	16.1%	61.3%	16.1%	3.2%	3.2%	31
HEFCE Peer Group F	22.2%	55.6%	22.2%	0%	0%	9
Private Providers	20%	60%	0%	0%	20%	5
Source: Online survey – HEIs and Students’ Unions n=117						

There were, however, some differences when looking at the “not very effective” responses. The overall responses of 19.7% masked a range of 0% from private providers and 6.7% from Peer Group B institutions up to 27.8% in Peer Group C and 33.3% in Peer Group D.

It should also be noted that there is a much higher “do not know” response rate at this level compared to the institutional level, up to 20% in both Peer Group B and Private Providers.

#### 4.1.2.3 Representatives “reasonably” representative on faculty/departmental committees

There were similarly high levels of agreement about the perceptions of the representativeness of student representatives on faculty/departmental committees, with 77.6% agreeing that representatives are “very” or “reasonably” representative.

Indeed, at the level of faculty/department there was even more consistency amongst both HEI and students' union responses, with 8.6% of both groups believing it to be "very representative" and 70.7% of HEI respondents believing it to be "reasonably representative" and 67.2% of respondents from students' unions.

Whilst there were 15.5% of respondents in Table 7 that perceived student representatives were "not very representative" this was still a smaller proportion than at institution-wide committee level which was 21.2%. This is perhaps because these representatives were seen as being closer to the students and their own experience and so are therefore considered to be more representative than those at institution-wide level. This proportion was also lower than those that believed student representation was "not very effective" 19.7%.

There were however, slightly more "do not know" responses to this question, although still relatively small – 6.9% from HEIs and 5.2% from students' unions.

Whilst the responses about the perceptions of the representativeness of student representatives on faculty/departmental committees was slightly lower than that at institution-wide committees it was interesting to compare it with the 2009 report. As with the comparison between the 2009 and 2018 data at the institution level there was a slight dip in the perception of the representativeness of student representatives on faculty/departmental committees, dropping from 84% in 2009 to 79.3% in 2018. However, it was interesting to note that perceptions amongst students have changed, with a view that student representatives have become more representative with the proportion agreeing increasing from 62% in 2009 to 75.8% in 2018. It is also worth noting that the proportion believing it to be "not very representative" has decreased from 28% in 2009 to 17.2% in 2018.

**Table 7: Representativeness of student representatives on faculty/departmental committees**

	<b>Very representative</b>	<b>Reasonably representative</b>	<b>Not very representative</b>	<b>Not representative</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
<b>HEI 2018</b>	8.6%	70.7%	13.8%	0%	6.9%
<b>Students' union 2018</b>	8.6%	67.2%	17.2%	1.7%	5.2%
<b>Combined 2018</b>	8.6%	69%	15.5%	0.9%	6%
Source: Online survey – HEIs, n=60; students' unions, n=58					

### 4.1.3 Representation on staff/student liaison committees seen as reasonably effective

Amongst responses about the perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation on institution-wide committees and on faculty/departmental committees there were high levels of agreement between the responses from HEIs and students', this was less true when looking at perceptions of the effectiveness of staff/student liaison committees. There was a degree of agreement about whether it is "very effective," with 15% of those from HEIs agreeing compared to 19% from students' unions. However, 78.3% of those responding from HEIs thought that staff/student liaison committees were "reasonably effective" this dropped to 58.6% amongst students' unions. This was echoed by those responding that staff/student liaison committees were "not very effective" with only 5% of HEIs agreeing compared to 19% of those from students' unions.

#### 4.1.3.1 Respondents less likely to agree that representation is "very effective" than a decade ago

When comparing the perceptions of the effectiveness of staff/student liaison committees between 2018 and 2009 in overall terms 93.3% of HEIs respondents agreed in 2018 that they were effective compared to 91% in 2009. Although not as high, there were similar levels of agreement amongst students' union responses, with 77.6% agreeing in 2018 compared to 72% in 2009. Amongst HEI responses there was a drop in the proportion perceiving that it was "very effective" from 33% in 2009 to 15% in 2018. However, amongst students' union responses there has been a shift from 19% believing that staff/student liaison committees were "not very effective" in 2008, dropping to 10% in 2018 and a corresponding increase in those agreeing that they were "very effective" increasing from 10% in 2009 to 19% in 2018.

It is also worth noting that whereas in 2009 15% of responses from students' unions responded "don't know" to the survey, however in 2018 no one from students' unions responded that they did not know about the effectiveness of staff/student liaison committees. This ability to respond to the question might suggest that students' unions are better informed about the role of staff/student liaison committees than they were ten years ago.

**Table 8: Effectiveness of staff/student liaison committees**

	<b>Very effective</b>	<b>Reasonably effective</b>	<b>Not very effective</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
<b>HEI 2018</b>	15%	78.3%	5%	0%	1.7%
<b>Students' union 2018</b>	19%	58.6%	19%	3.4%	0%
<b>Combined 2018</b>	16.9%	68.6%	11.9%	1.7%	0.8%
Source: Online survey – HEIs, n=60; students' unions, n=58					
	<b>Very effective</b>	<b>Reasonably effective</b>	<b>Not very effective</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>	<b>Don't know</b>

<b>HEI 2009</b>	33%	58%	5%	3%	1%
<b>Students' union 2009</b>	10%	62%	10%	3%	15%
Source: Online survey – HEIs, n=80; students' unions, n=39					

There was more variation in the responses from HEIs and students' unions when considering the perceptions of the effectiveness of staff/student liaison committees. This would impact on the robustness of any more granular analysis when combining students' union and institutional responses to create an overall response rate due to the differential response rate amongst HEIs and students' unions. However, having looked at differences by institution type at both institution and faculty/department level it was important to at least consider the data at this level as well.

However, whilst there were differences between the HEI and students' union responses they were broadly in line with the 2009 data, and in both sets of responses respondents were slightly more positive than they were a decade ago. This might therefore suggest that there was more work needed for institutions and students' unions to agree what the role and purpose of staff/student liaison committees so that they can narrow this gap in the perceptions of the effectiveness. However, it should also be noted that students' unions were a lot less likely to reply that they "don't know" about the effectiveness of staff/student liaison committees than they were in 2009 suggesting that they were now better informed about the activities of the committees.

#### **4.1.3.2 Type of institution again has an impact, but less difference based on institution size**

The combined HEI and students' union response of 16.9% that believe student representation on staff/student liaison committees to be very effective again masks some significant differences by type of institution, ranging from just 5.6% of Peer Group C institutions agreeing that they perceived it to be "very effective" compared to 25% on respondents from Peer Group A. This divergence amongst institution type is also reflected when looking at the "not very effective" responses. The overall 11.9% of respondents believing it to be "not very effective" is based on a range of 6.7% agreeing with the statement from Peer Group D institutions up 22.2% of respondents from Peer Group F reversing some of the trends at institution and faculty/department level.

**Table 8a: Effectiveness of student representation on staff/student liaison committees – by HEFCE Peer Group**

	<b>Very effective</b>	<b>Reasonably effective</b>	<b>Not very effective</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>	<b>Do not know</b>	<b>n=</b>



Would you say that academic staff see the value of engaging students in representation activities						
HEFCE Peer Group A	25%	58.3%	12.5%	0%	4.2%	24
HEFCE Peer Group B	6.7%	80%	13.3%	0%	0%	15
HEFCE Peer Group C	5.6%	77.8%	11.1%	5.6%	0%	18
HEFCE Peer Group D	13.3%	73.3%	6.7%	6.7%	0%	15
HEFCE Peer Group E	22.2%	67.7%	9.7%	0%	0%	31
HEFCE Peer Group F	22.2%	55.6%	22.2%	0%	0%	9
Private Providers	16.7%	66.7%	16.7%	0%	0%	6
Source: Online survey – HEIs and Students' Unions n=118						

#### 4.1.3.3 Respondents most likely to think student representatives on staff/student liaison committees are representative

The perceptions of the representativeness of student representatives on staff/student liaison committees was higher than at either faculty/departmental level (77.6%) or institution-wide level (76.3%), with 83.1% agreeing. Respondents were significantly more likely to respond that they perceived student representatives on staff/student committee to be “very representative”, with 29.7% agreeing as opposed to 8.6% at faculty/departmental level and 6.8% at institution-wide level. There was also less disagreement, with 11% believing it to be “not very representative” compared to 15.5% at faculty/departmental level and 21.2% at institution-wide level.

**Table 9: Representativeness of student representatives on staff/student liaison committees**

	<b>Very representative</b>	<b>Reasonably representative</b>	<b>Not very representative</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
<b>HEI 2018</b>	28.3%	60%	8.3%	0%	3.3%
<b>Students' union 2018</b>	31%	46.6%	13.8%	3.4%	5.2%
<b>Combined 2018</b>	29.7%	53.4%	11%	1.7%	4.2%
Source: Online survey – HEIs, n=60; students' unions, n=58					

There was broad agreement between students' union and HEI responses to this question with 88.3% of HEI responses believing student representation to be representative compared to 77.6% of students' union responses.

#### **4.1.4 How institutions measure the impact and effectiveness of student representation**

The survey asked how institutions measured the impact and effectiveness of student engagement processes. This was an open text response. In total 93 respondents (78%) out of 119 gave a reply of some kind to the question, compared to only 26 (22%) who gave no answer.

##### **4.1.4.1 Not many institutions did not at least try and measure the impact**

Interestingly only 7 respondents replied that they did not know or replied “*nothing*”. One respondent for example replied that “*We’re not doing anything really at present and that is something we’re grappling with.*” This desire to tackle the question was also raised by another respondent, who said “*Nothing but it is something we are working on together in partnership*”.

It was not possible to know what proportion of those that did not fill in the question did so because they either did not know or because they do not do anything, or whether it was just that they were rushing to fill in the survey and so did not want to fill in an open-text comment. However, even if a sizeable majority of those not replying to this question were doing so because they do not undertake evaluations of the impact, this would still be only around 25% of institutions, meaning that almost three in four institutions that do undertake some kind of evaluation.

##### **4.1.4.2 Many different ways of measuring impact**

The ways in which institutions evaluate the effectiveness of student representation varied across institutions. There were a number of key themes that emerged from the responses. These themes are listed below, with the number of responses in which each was mentioned being given in brackets after the theme. These showed that institutions track participation in the different processes, or as one respondent put it “*We have KPIs but currently these are measuring the amount/extent of engagement rather than the impact*”.

This included things like:

- attendance at meetings (7)
- election participation (5)
- number of representatives trained (4)
- positions filled (3)
- whether students know who their representative is (1)
- retention rates of reps (1)
- number of academic staff and professional services staff who have received training and support in encouraging and supporting student engagement (1)

Indeed one respondent replied that they track the impact and effectiveness of the numbers/attendances within the student engagement processes and use them as quantitative metrics for their TEF submission. There were a number of other respondents that measured tracked data but were less specific about the type of data that this included.

A number of respondents (43) referred to surveys as their main method of evaluating the impact of student engagement. Broadly speaking there were three types of surveys: surveys of students through NSS, UKES, PTES and PRES and institutional/module surveys and the questions about engagement in these. This method of survey was the most popular, cited by 20 respondents. One respondent referred to a specific survey of students *“in order to gather feedback on student perceptions and experience of academic representation, including whether they know who their course rep is, how well the students' union represents their academic interests etc.”*

Secondly surveys of student representatives themselves (16), one respondent saying *“We also run an annual Rate Your Rep survey, which captures Course Reps, Staff and Students, gathering feedback of the overall academic representation system allowing us to make improvements that will improve not only the students' and the Course Reps' experiences but also the staff's.”* A couple of institutions also referred to annual interviews, rather than a survey, of student representatives, particularly at faculty level.

Thirdly, surveys of staff (7) were referred to. This included surveying the DVC responsible for representative systems or *“each Chair of School filling out a monthly impact report (completed alongside a 1-2-1 meeting with the students' union vice president (Education))”*.

Some respondents also referred to these reports of the evaluation going to Academic Board, University's Student Experience Committee or other equivalent bodies. A number of respondents replied that this report to the committee included an evaluation against either the NUS Course Rep Benchmarking Toolkit or the TSEP Toolkit.

A number of respondents referred to tracking SSLC minutes, reports and tracking issues raised in these meetings. A few respondents mentioned that the students' union kept a log of issues raised in committees to track the extent to which these were being dealt with, this was seen as going beyond the more traditional “You Said, We Did” schemes. One of the themes that came out in the earlier interviews was the extent to which the feedback raised in the NSS and other institutional surveys was being raised by student representatives as a way of sense-checking how representative the student representatives actually were of wider

student opinion. There was a comment that if the student representation system was working then the institutional survey should provide a “no-surprises” scenario.

Other evaluation approaches included the percentage of course evaluation reports put up onto Moodle and the number of students engaged in developing departmental action plans. There were also several references to an institution-wide committee or student engagement group who were responsible for the implementation of a student engagement plan and another institution referred to a student engagement policy, which was used to measure impact.

#### 4.1.5 Variations in representativeness between faculties or schools

The extent to which there was consistency of representation across an institution was a theme that emerged in the literature review and the 2009 CHERI research. The new survey explored this issue in one of the questions examining the extent to which the perceptions of representativeness of student representatives varied between faculties/schools. Only 5% of respondents from HEIs believed that it did “not vary at all” between faculties/school and 1.7% of students’ union responses, although there were also a group that “did not know” 11.7% amongst HEIs and 5.2% amongst students’ unions.

However, 88.1% of respondents believed that it varied either “a lot” or “a little” between faculties/school. But when looking at the responses from HEIs and students’ unions, whereas 28.1% of HEIs respondents believed that it varied “a lot” this increased to 62.1% amongst students’ unions. Therefore, whether or not this is actually the case, the fact there was such a difference in the perception is notable and could be explored further in future research.

**Table 10: Representativeness varying between faculty/schools**

	<b>A lot</b>	<b>A little</b>	<b>Not at all</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>	<b>Don’t know</b>
<b>HEI 2018</b>	28.3%	55%	5%	0%	11.7%
<b>Students’ union 2018</b>	62.1%	31%	1.7%	0%	5.2%
<b>Combined 2018</b>	44.9%	43.2%	3.4%	0%	8.5%
	Source: Online survey – HEIs, n=60; students’ unions, n=58				

In response to the extent to which representativeness varied between schools/faculties in 2009 82% of respondents on behalf of HEIs believed that it only varied “a little” this was significantly below the proportion that believed it only varied “a little” in 2018 with 55% agreeing with that statement. This perception that the variation between faculty/schools has increased was also reflected in the students’ union responses with those believing that it varies “a lot” increasing from 38% in 2009 to 62.1% in 2018.

The question of the extent to which there is consistency across the institution is a key one. The overall response rate of responses from 59 students' unions and 60 institutions should ensure a broadly representative sample. But since these responses came from 89 different providers it is also worth exploring this question of consistency in those providers where both the students' union and institution responded to see whether there are any significant differences.

#### **4.1.6 Conclusion**

The data supported the conclusion that student representation was perceived to be reasonably effective by university quality managers and students' union course-rep coordinators at different levels within the institution, but that there were ways in which it could be enhanced. There were some areas where there have been improved perceptions over the last decade, in particular in several areas where students' union views had become more positive, but in many cases it seems as though perceptions have become slightly less positive.

When thinking about the empirical objectives of the research the data highlighted a number of key areas impacting on whether student involvement in university governance was seen as effective. One of the key themes running through all the responses is the issue of consistency – in terms of consistency of the effectiveness of the representatives, the engagement of staff as well as the effectiveness of the committee structures. The data suggested key differences within institutions, with student representatives seen as more effective at the department/faculty level and institution level than at staff/student liaison committees as well as differences across the institution between departments and faculties. The data highlighted the key area of differences between different types of universities and the impact that the size and mission of the university can have on the effectiveness of student involvement in university governance.

#### **4.2 How do university staff impact on effectiveness of student representation?**

The second key area that feeds into what makes student representation effective is the role of university staff. The third research question seeks to explore this by asking "How are university staff perceived to impact on effectiveness of student representation?" The research explored a number of key areas relating to this question, firstly the perceptions of whether staff value student representation; secondly questions of the training that they received; and, finally the survey explored the issue of power imbalances between staff and students and the impact that this might have. One of the themes that emerged from the literature and my earlier research was that university staff are not a homogenous group and

are better divided up in academic and professional services staff and so the survey explored the views of both groups to see if there were differences.

#### **4.2.1 Staff perceive themselves as valuing student representation**

The survey explored the perceptions of the way in which respondents from HEIs and students’ unions believed whether staff value student representation activities. In response to the question 84.5% of HEI respondents replied that academic staff saw the value of engaging students, with 12.1% replying that they thought that “all staff” saw the value of engaging students and 72.4% replying that most staff did.

When considering whether professional services staff saw the value of engaging students in representation activities, with 87.9% agreeing that either “all” or “most” professional services staff see the value of engaging students in representation activities. This was a slightly more positive result than for academic staff (87.9% vs 84.5%) but more significantly 22.4% agreed that “all” professional services staff saw the value of engaging students compared to 12.1% of academic staff. It should, however, be acknowledged that most HEI respondents filling in the survey are likely to consider themselves as professional services staff and so might be more inclined to take a more positive view.

#### **4.2.2 Students’ unions were less convinced that staff valued representation**

The responses from staff were very positive about whether they valued student representation, however respondents from students’ unions were a lot less positive. When looking at views of whether they believed that academic staff valued student representation only 54.7% of those replying on behalf of students’ unions agreed that academic staff saw the value of engaging students in representation activities, with only 3.8% agreeing that they thought “all staff” saw the value of this.

When considering professional services staff students’ unions respondents were even less positive with 50% of respondents perceiving that “all” or “most” professional services staff valued the engagement of students in representation activities (compared to 87.9% from HEIs). This was also reflected in the view that 42.6% of respondents thought that only “some” professional services and 3.7% thought “no” professional services staff saw the value of engaging students. Table 11 provides an overview of the responses from both institutional representatives and students’ unions.

**Table 11: Extent to which staff see the value of engaging students in representation activities**

	<b>All staff</b>	<b>Most staff</b>	<b>Some staff</b>	<b>No staff</b>	<b>Don’t know</b>
Would you say that academic staff see the value of engaging students in representation activities					

Respondents from HEIs	12.1%	72.4%	13.8%	0%	1.7%
Respondents from students' unions	3.8%	50.9%	45.3%	0%	0%
Would you say that professional services staff see the value of engaging students in representation activities					
Respondents from HEIs	22.4%	65.5%	8.6%	0%	3.4%
Respondents from students' unions	5.6%	44.4%	42.6%	3.7%	3.7%
Source: Online survey – HEIs, n=57; students' unions, n=54					

This highlights an important point about the differences in the perceptions between staff and students, where staff believe that they are more supportive of student representation than respondents from students' unions. It is positive that staff seem to value the role of student representation but it does suggest that institutions need to get better at articulating the value that staff place on student representation. The mismatch in views could indicate that students either do not feel supported by staff or that they perceive that their contribution is not appreciated.

#### 4.2.3 Staff in smaller institutions more likely to value student engagement

Section 4.2.2 above looked at all the respondents. However, when looking at the data there emerged some quite interesting differences between different types of institution. When looking at the extent to which academic staff were perceived as seeing the value of engaging students in representation activities across different types of institutions this ranged from 0% of respondents in Peer Group A and B institutions agreeing that “All academic staff” see the value of engaging students in representation activities, compared to 33% of respondents in Peer Group F and amongst Private Providers. When combining “all staff” and “most staff” this ranged from 58.3% of respondents agreeing in Peer Group A institutions, compared to 83.3% of respondents in private providers.

**Table 11a: Extent to which staff see the value of engaging students in representation activities – by HEFCE peer group**

	All staff	Most staff	Some staff	No staff	Don't know	N =
Would you say that academic staff see the value of engaging students in representation activities						
HEFCE Peer Group A	0%	58.3%	41.7%	0%	0%	24
HEFCE Peer Group B	0%	78.6%	21.4%	0%	0%	14
HEFCE Peer Group C	6.7%	66.7%	26.7%	0%	0%	15
HEFCE Peer Group D	7.1%	50%	35.7%	0%	7.1%	14

HEFCE Peer Group E	6.9%	69%	24.1%	0%	0%	29
HEFCE Peer Group F	33.3%	44.4%	22.2%	0%	0%	9
Private Providers	33.3%	50%	16.7%	0%	0%	6
	Source: Online survey – HEIs and Students' Unions n=111					

These differences in whether staff in different types of institutions are seen as valuing student representation is an interesting area that could be explored further in future research. This could be due to the type of institutions that they are, whether research or teaching-focused, the size of the institution or indeed the subject mix.

#### 4.2.4 Students less likely to think that staff receive training

The next area of staff engagement was whether there was training provided to staff on how they engage student representatives. In response to whether their institution provided training for academic staff 39.6% of respondents from HEIs agreed that “yes” their institution did provide training or that “some departments” did, although 44.8% replied that their institution did not provide training. Of the 39.6% that agreed that there was some form of training 17.2% believed that this only happened in some departments and so suggesting that it was not an institution-wide activity.

Respondents from students’ unions were less likely to think that there was training for academic staff on engaging students effectively, with 55.6% replying that “no” it did not happen and only 9.3% agreeing that it did.

**Table 12: Does your institution provide training for academic staff on engaging students effectively?**

	Yes	No	Some departments	Don't know
Respondents from HEIs	22.4%	44.8%	17.2%	15.5%
Respondents from students' unions	9.3%	55.6%	16.7%	18.5%
	Source: Online survey – HEIs, n=58; students' unions, n=54			

This mismatch in the views of staff and students’ unions can feed into views about how student representation is valued by staff or indeed by the institution. The difference in views on training may also, from the students’ union responses, be based on that they do not think that staff currently engage well and so are less likely to agree that staff have received training.



#### 4.2.5 Power mitigation for staff

One of the key issues that emerged in the interviews in the earlier phases of the research was the idea of a power imbalance between student representatives and institutional representatives. The survey asked a question about whether their institution has considered how it might mitigate any power imbalances between staff and students.

Of the 119 respondents to this question, 8 respondents did not answer this question. Of those that did answer, 42 replied that they did mitigate the power imbalances, 43 replied that they did not with 26 replying that they did not know. Therefore, of the 111 valid responses 38% agreed that their institution did have measures in places, compared to 39% that did not and the 23% that did not know.

Following on from the question about whether their institution mitigated these power balances the survey then explored how institutions did this, using a free text box. Of those respondents that replied that they did mitigate these power balances there were a number of ways in which they did this. One respondent replied that they were “writing guidance for students on what to do in the event of a power imbalance impeding business and stifling the student voice (although none of this is the terminology we're using).” This point about the terminology was an interesting one, and could be further explored to consider whether institutions are addressing this in different ways.

The most common theme that emerged as a way of tackling the power imbalance, with eight of the 42 respondents commenting on this in their reply, related to the chairing of the meeting. This included either co-chairing of staff/student liaison committees between an academic staff member and a student, or a couple of respondents commenting that the meeting was just chaired by a student.

Another key theme that emerged was the provision of training for staff. This was raised by five of the 42 respondents that agreed that their institution tackled this question. One institution referring to the training for new probationary academic staff as well as for chairs and secretaries of Staff/Student Liaison Committees and Departmental Learning and Teaching Committees. In addition to the training of staff another four respondents commented on training provided to students. This included a respondent highlighting the training that they provided for student representatives around communicating with confidence and also the art of compromise and “win-win” situations.

Other comments made by several respondents was firstly about the agenda. This linked to two areas, firstly was around reordering the agenda to ensure that student issues were discussed earlier in the meeting. One respondent commented that they “*Changed the agenda of meetings so that student representatives speak first. Often the agenda was too*

*full and there would not be sufficient time to discuss student issues and then assign appropriate actions to address the issues.” Secondly was the way in which the agenda was developed, with one respondent commenting that “Student items drive the agenda, with an emphasis on students using pre-meets to receive immediate responses and then force issues to remain on agendas where responses are either insufficient or require more discussion”.*

Another issue raised by several respondents looked at the proportion of students on the committee to ensure that there was a high ratio of students to staff, and another respondent commented that they have a new student experience sub-committee of which half the membership are students. Several respondents commented that the terms of reference of the committee address this, either in terms of the proportion of students to staff or indeed the wider question of a power imbalance.

#### **4.2.7 Conclusion**

When considering the impact that staff can have on the effectiveness of student representation the data identified a number of key areas where the role of staff could impact on effective student representation. Firstly, whilst staff believed that they saw the value of engaging student representative students’ unions were a lot less likely to agree with this. This real mismatch in the perceptions of staff and students’ unions could erode trust between staff and students. This mismatch in the perceptions of staff and students was reinforced through their views on whether staff receive training and whether staff considered the power imbalance between staff and students and sought to mitigate this. The data suggested a positive view amongst staff about student representation and so perhaps better communication of the views of staff might impact on the effectiveness of student representation amongst both staff and students, and Chapter 5 will further consider these issues of the impact of staff on the effectiveness of student representation.

### **4.3 What impact do university committees have on student representation**

The third factor feeding into what makes effective student representation is the perceived impact of university committee structures. This theme forms the third of the subsidiary research questions and also considers the way in which staff are supported to engage students and whether they value this, and the extent to which the committee structure itself enables student representatives to be engaged.

#### **4.3.1 Committee effectiveness differs at different levels within the institution**

University committee structures have been established over many years and have multiple levels within the institution, from the whole institution through to the subject level with usually at least one additional layer in between at the school or faculty level. When exploring the

impact of the committee structure it was important to consider whether there were differences at these different levels.

When looking at the departmental level in response to the question “how effective do you consider your committee structure at engaging student representatives” there was broad agreement that the committee structure engages student representative effectively. Overall 76.4% of respondents agreed, with 15.1% agreeing that the committee structure is “very effective” with 61.3% believing it is “reasonably effective”.

At the next level up at school/faculty it was still broadly considered to be effective but almost 11% less than at the departmental level, with 65.7% agreeing that the committee structure was either “very” or “reasonably” effective compared to the 76.4% at the departmental level. However, at the highest level across the whole institution it was seen to even more effective with 79.8% agreeing that it was “very” or “reasonably” effective.

When looking at responses that perceived the committee structure to be “not very effective” at engaging student representatives, whilst it is broadly the inverse of the responses about the effectiveness this was not entirely the case. Unsurprisingly at school/faculty level, which had the lowest overall positive effectiveness at 65.7%, the perception that it was not very effective was the highest at 25.7%. However, whereas respondents believed institutional committees to be more effective than at the departmental level (79.8% compared to 76.4%) this was flipped in terms of respondents believing that committees were not very effective at engaging student representatives with 17.4% agreeing with the statement at the institutional level compared to departmental level (16%). This was partly due to lower “don’t know” responses at the institutional level (2.8%) compared to the departmental level (7.5%).

**Table 13: How effective would you consider your committee structure at engaging student representatives?**

	Very effective	Reasonably effective	Not very effective	Do not know
<b>Departmental level</b>				
Total	15.1%	61.3%	16%	7.5%
Source: Online survey – HEIs, n=53; students’ unions, n=53				
<b>School/Faculty</b>				
Total	8.6%	57.1%	25.7%	8.6%
Source: Online survey – HEIs, n=53; students’ unions, n=52				
<b>Institution</b>				
Total	22.9%	56.9%	17.4%	2.8%
Source: Online survey – HEIs, n=56; students’ unions, n=53				

So overall, university committee structures are seen as being “reasonably effective” at engaging students although this depends on the level of the institution, with the institutional

level being seen as the most effective, followed by the department level with the school/faculty level seen as the least effect level.

### 4.3.2 Students are less likely to agree that committees are effective at engaging student representatives

However, this overall view belies some significant differences between the views of those responding to the survey on behalf of the institution as opposed to those responding on behalf of the students' union, as Table 13a shows below.

At the departmental level there was broad agreement between the HEI and students' union respondents with 75.5% of those in HEIs agreeing that they perceived departmental committees to be effective at engaging student representatives compared to 77.4% of respondents from students' unions. However, although there was little difference overall, students' union respondents were slightly more positive with 17% agreeing that it was "very effective" compared to 13.2% of those responding from HEIs.

At the school/faculty level these views between the students' union and HEI begin to diverge further. Respondents from HEIs were still very positive with 73.5% agreeing that they perceived the committee structure to be effective, which were similar levels of agreement to the response at the departmental level. However only 57.7% of respondents from students' unions agreed, almost 20% below the students' union response about the effectiveness at departmental level, with 34.6% believing it to be "not very effective".

At the institution level respondents from HEIs were very positive with 91.1% agreeing that they perceived institution committees to be either "very" or "reasonably" effective. This was significantly above both their perceptions of effectiveness of the committee structure at both the school/faculty level (73.5%) and at the departmental level (75.5%). Responses from students' unions were still positive, with 67.9% agreeing that the institution level committee structure was effective, although this was over 23% below the response from HEIs. However, whilst this was above the students' union response about the effectiveness of the committee structure at the school/faculty level (57.7%) it was well below the response at the departmental level (77.4%).

**Table 13a: How effective would you consider your committee structure at engaging student representatives?**

	<b>Very effective</b>	<b>Reasonably effective</b>	<b>Not very effective</b>	<b>Do not know</b>
<b>Departmental level</b>				
HEI responses	13.2%	62.3%	15.1%	9.4%
Students' union responses	17%	60.4%	17%	5.7%

Total	15.1%	61.3%	16%	7.5%
Source: Online survey – HEIs, n=53; students’ unions, n=53				
<b>School/Faculty</b>				
HEI responses	7.5%	66%	17%	9.4%
Students’ union responses	9.6%	48.1%	34.6%	7.7%
Total	8.6%	57.1%	25.7%	8.6%
Source: Online survey – HEIs, n=53; students’ unions, n=52				
<b>Institution</b>				
HEI responses	28.6%	62.5%	7.1%	1.8%
Students’ union responses	17%	50.9%	28.3%	3.8%
Total	22.9%	56.9%	17.4%	2.8%
Source: Online survey – HEIs, n=56; students’ unions, n=53				

So whilst students’ union respondents were slightly more positive than institutional representatives about their perceptions of the effectiveness of departmental committees at engaging students they are significantly less likely to agree at the school/faculty level or at the institutional level.

#### 4.3.3 Sector level data masks significant between different types of institution

At the departmental level there were few differences between the responses from HEIs and students’ union as shown in Table 15a. However, the differences by type of institution were relatively large. The 15.1% of respondents who believe that the committee structure was “very effective” at engaging student representatives belies huge variation by type of institution, ranging from 7.1% of Peer Group D institutions and 8.7% of Peer Group A institutions compared to 37.5% of Peer Group F institutions and 60% of responses from Private providers.

These differences were also reflected by respondents who believed the departmental committee structure “not very effective”. The overall 16% response masked the 0% of responses from Peer Group F and 7.1% and 8.3% from Peer Groups E and B respectively compared to the 28.6% from Peer Group D and 31.3% from Peer Group C. There were also differences in the “Do not know” category with 14.3% and 12.5% responses from Peer Groups E and F compared to zero responses from Peer Groups B, D and Private Providers.

**Table 13b: How effective would you consider your departmental committee structure at engaging student representatives? – by HEFCE Peer Group**

	<b>Very effective</b>	<b>Reasonably effective</b>	<b>Not very effective</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>	<b>Do not know</b>	<b>n=</b>
Would you say that academic staff see the value of engaging students in representation activities						
HEFCE Peer Group A	8.7%	65.2%	17.4%	0%	8.7%	23

HEFCE Peer Group B	16.7%	75%	8.3%	0%	0%	12
HEFCE Peer Group C	12.5%	50%	31.3%	0%	6.3%	16
HEFCE Peer Group D	7.1%	64.3%	28.6%	0%	0%	14
HEFCE Peer Group E	10.7%	67.9%	7.1%	0%	14.3%	28
HEFCE Peer Group F	37.5%	50%	0%	0%	12.5%	8
Private Providers	60%	20%	20%	0%	0%	5
Source: Online survey – HEIs and Students' Unions n=106						

The data at school/faculty level again shows some significant differences between different types of institutions. Overall 8.6% of respondents to the survey replied that they believed school or faculty committees to be “very effective” at engaging student representatives. But looking at this by type of institution the responses ranged from 0% of respondents in Peer Group F institutions and 3.6% of respondents in Peer Group E institutions compared to 25% of respondents in private providers and 33.3% of respondents in Peer Group B institutions.

Of the 25.7% of respondents overall replying that they believed school and faculty committees to be “not very effective” this ranged from 0% of respondents from private providers, 14.3% from Peer Group E and 16.7% from Peer Group B compared to 35.7% from Peer Group D and 43.8% in Peer Group C institutions.

**Table 13c: How effective would you consider your school/faculty committee structure at engaging student representatives? – by HEFCE Peer Group**

	<b>Very effective</b>	<b>Reasonably effective</b>	<b>Not very effective</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>	<b>Do not know</b>	<b>n=</b>
Would you say that academic staff see the value of engaging students in representation activities						
HEFCE Peer Group A	4.3%	65.2%	26.1%	0%	4.3%	23
HEFCE Peer Group B	33.3%	41.7%	16.7%	0%	8.3%	12
HEFCE Peer Group C	6.3%	43.8%	43.8%	0%	6.3%	16
HEFCE Peer Group D	7.1%	57.1%	35.7%	0%	0%	14
HEFCE Peer Group E	3.6%	75%	14.3%	0%	7.1%	28
HEFCE Peer Group F	0%	37.5%	37.5%	0%	25%	8
Private Providers	25%	25%	0%	0%	50%	4
Source: Online survey – HEIs and Students' Unions n=105						

As at departmental and school/faculty level the overall results hide significant differences by type of institution when considering the effectiveness of institutional committee at engaging student representatives. The overall 22.9% of respondents that believed institutional committees to be “very effective” masked the 13% of respondents from Peer Group A institutions and 17.2% of Peer Group E respondents, compared to the 30.8% of Peer Group B respondents and 60% of respondents from private providers.

When looking at those who believed institutional committees to be “not very effective” at engaging student representatives, whilst it was 17.4% overall this ranged from 0% of respondents from private providers and 6.9% of respondents from Peer Group E respondents, increasing to 25% of Peer Group C respondents, 26.1% of respondents from Peer Group A and 30.8% of Peer Group B respondents.

**Table 13d: How effective would you consider your institutional committee structure at engaging student representatives? – by HEFCE Peer Group**

	<b>Very effective</b>	<b>Reasonably effective</b>	<b>Not very effective</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>	<b>Do not know</b>	<b>n=</b>
Would you say that academic staff see the value of engaging students in representation activities						
HEFCE Peer Group A	13%	52.2%	26.1%	0%	8.7%	23
HEFCE Peer Group B	30.8%	38.5%	30.8%	0%	0%	13
HEFCE Peer Group C	25%	43.8%	25%	0%	6.3%	16
HEFCE Peer Group D	28.6%	57.1%	14.3%	0%	0%	14
HEFCE Peer Group E	17.2%	75.9%	6.9%	0%	0%	29
HEFCE Peer Group F	22.2%	66.7%	11.1%	0%	0%	9
Private Providers	60%	40%	0%	0%	0%	5
Source: Online survey – HEIs and Students’ Unions n=109						

The theme of differences across different types of institution has emerged across all the responses and raises interesting questions that different types of institutions might want to consider further. In previous sections I have suggested that this could be due to the type of institutions that they are, whether research or teaching-focused, the size of the institution or indeed the subject mix but there is also a question about student demographics and mode of study, whether more mature, part-time, work-based or other types of study might impact on the perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation and whether institutions might

consider different approaches to student engagement for courses with high prevalence of these students.

#### 4.3.4 Committee effectiveness varies within institutions

Another theme that emerged from the research was about the consistency of committee effectiveness across the institution. Only 3.8% of respondents from students' union believed that the effectiveness of committees did not vary at all across departments/schools/faculties. Indeed only 10.7% of respondents from HEIs did not think that there were any differences across the institution.

However, whilst a clear majority of respondents from HEIs believed that the effectiveness of committees at engaging student representatives only varied "a little" between departments/schools/faculties with 55.4% agreeing with the statement, this dropped to 37.7% amongst students' union responses. This is reflected in those believing that the effectiveness differs "a lot" between departments/schools/faculties with 54.7% of responses from students' unions agreeing compared to 26.8% of those replying on behalf of HEIs.

**Table 14: How does the effectiveness at engaging student representatives in your committee structure vary between departments/schools/faculties?**

	<b>A lot</b>	<b>A little</b>	<b>Not at all</b>	<b>Do not know</b>
HEI responses	26.8%	55.4%	10.7%	7.1%
Students' union responses	54.7%	37.7%	3.8%	3.8%
Total	40.4%	46.8%	7.3%	6.5%
Source: Online survey – HEIs, n=56; students' unions, n=53				

#### 4.3.5 Committees more effective at considering quality of learning experiences than informing wider debates on quality

When considering the specific activities that programme committees do their varying responses to how effective they were perceived to be as shown in Table 15 below. 91% of respondents agreed that programme committees were "very" or "reasonably" effective at raising issues relating to the quality of the students' learning experiences. They were also seen as effective as a forum for students' views to be heard with 81.8% agreeing. However, this dropped to 62.4% when asked whether they were seen as effective at providing feedback to students on issues raised and actions taken and dropping to 54.5% on whether they informed debates on the quality of learning experiences more widely across the faculty/department.

**Table 15: How effective are programme committees at engaging students in specific activities**



	<b>Very effective</b>	<b>Reasonably effective</b>	<b>Not very effective</b>	<b>Do not know</b>	<b>n</b>
Raising issues relating to the quality of students' learning experiences	22.9%	67.9%	4.6%	4.6%	109
Providing a forum for students' views to be heard	22.7%	59.1%	13.6%	4.5%	110
Informing debates on the quality of learning experiences more widely across the faculty/department	10%	44.5%	38.2%	7.3%	110
Providing feedback to students on issues raised and actions taken previously	10.1%	52.3%	33%	4.6%	109

This data, and that in section 4.4 looking at the activities that student representatives undertake, will provide important insights when considered in the context of the broader paradigms within which students are seen. For example, 82% of respondents agreed that programme committees provided a forum for student views to be heard compared to 62% agreeing that they provided feedback to students. This might suggest that there has been a prioritisation of students giving their views – in a role more akin to consumers – rather than being more engaged on the issues raised and actions taken which would be more the case if they were seen as stakeholders or partners. Similarly, 91% of respondents agreed that programme committees were effective at “raising issues” of the quality of students’ learning experiences but only 55% agreed that this was used to inform wider debates on quality of learning experiences.

#### **4.3.6 Many institutions have not reviewed their committee effectiveness at engaging students**

In addition to asking institutions how effective respondents considered their institution’s committee structure at engaging student representatives and whether this varied across the institution the survey also explored whether the institution had recently reviewed the effectiveness of the committee structure at engaging students.

18 respondents did not reply to this question. Of the 101 respondents to this question, two replied that they did not know, with 41 respondents replying no and 58 replying yes. Of those that replied no, one respondent said “No, but that’s a jolly good idea” and another replying “not yet”. Another replied that this had not happened at an institution-wide level “only in proactive departments”. A couple of respondents replied that whilst they do not do this formally but that they do “have a practice of continuously reviewing and enhancing our

support mechanisms". However, there was one respondent that replied that "any previous suggestions to change committee structures are firmly rejected".

Of the 58 respondents that agreed that they have undertaken a review, 20 of them (34%) replied that this review is either ongoing or planned for the next academic year, with one respondent replying that they are about to undertake a review and that it will be led by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor. Responses to this question ranged from "*yes we review this annually*" to "*yes, but we haven't reviewed it for five years*".

Although it was notable that in the responses many of those that replied "yes" talked about considering the number of student representatives attending, or whether the SSLC is co-chaired by a student rather than a broader consideration of questions such as how the committee is structured, whether students feel their voices are listened to and the effectiveness of the committee itself. There was one respondent that commented "*Not specifically, though we regularly review the overall effectiveness of the committee structure, including student engagement*".

#### **4.3.5 Conclusion**

The research provided much evidence about the impact that university committee structures can have on the effectiveness of student representation. Firstly, the level of the committee has an impact on whether it is seen as effective at engaging students. Chapter 5 will explore this in more detail but this could be because the department level is seen as closer to the experience of students and so dealing with more relevant issues that student representatives find it easier to engage with and at the institutional level student representatives are more likely to be experienced representatives and so better able to navigate the committee structure.

It was, however, noticeable that the data suggested that students are less positive than institutional respondents about how effective committees are seen to be at engaging students. There are also significant differences across different types of institutions which could be due to the size or mission of the institution. There were important considerations about the type of activities that the committees undertake. These activities can be seen through the lens with which students are viewed, providing insights into whether students are seen as consumers, service-users, stakeholders, democratic participants or partners to suggest how students are being involved. Finally, it was worth highlighting that many institutions had not analysed whether their committee structure was good at engaging students and that this is something that they might undertake in the future.

#### **4.4 What is the main purpose of student involvement in university governance?**

The final research question explored the main purpose of student involvement in university governance by considering the activities that student representatives undertake and how this matches what the key stakeholders believe representatives should be doing. It will only be by developing a shared understanding of the purpose of student representation between the HEI and the students' union that it will be possible to measure the extent to which the student representatives are actually fulfilling this role and being able to develop criteria for considering the effectiveness of student representation. It will also be possible to reflect on how student representation fits into the wider discourse of whether students are consumers, service-users, stakeholders, democratic participants or partners based on the types of activities that they undertake.

##### **4.4.1 Student representatives focus mainly on feedback and quality assurance processes**

The survey asked what activities student representatives are currently doing and how regularly they were doing these. The final column shows the relationship between the different activities undertaken and the modes of interaction in the theoretical framework.

**Table 16: Activities student representatives undertake**

<b>Types of activities</b>	<b>Frequently</b>	<b>Occasionally</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Goal ID</b>
Collecting student opinion via surveys	19.8%	47.7%	27.9%	4.5%	1a
Providing feedback to students	47.7%	43.2%	9%	0%	5b
Running campaigns	6.4%	33.6%	50.9%	9.1%	4a
Engaged in research into the learning environment	3.6%	33.3%	50.5%	12.6%	5a
Engaged in quality assurance processes	40.5%	45.9%	11.7%	1.8%	2a

When looking at Table 16 the most common activity that student representatives undertake was “providing feedback to students” with 90.9% of respondents replying that student representatives did this either “frequently” or “occasionally”. The next highest response was being “engaged in quality assurance processes”, with 86.4% of respondents replied that that student representatives did this either “frequently” or “occasionally”. However, it was interesting to note that HEI respondents were more likely to think that this happened more regularly, with 56.9% replying that it happened “frequently” compared to 37.7% of students’ union respondents. The third highest response, although 20% below the top two responses, was that student representatives collected student opinion via surveys with 67.5% of respondents agreeing. There was another big drop to the last two responses with 40%

agreeing that student representatives run campaigns and 37% agreeing that student representatives engaged in research into the learning environment.

When considering the wider discourses of students as consumers, service-users, stakeholders, democratic participants and partners they each place the student in a different power relationship with the institution. It is therefore worth reflecting that the three top results of the activities that student representatives undertake could all be viewed as quite passive, they are providing feedback, engaged in assuring quality or collecting views. The more pro-active running of campaigns or researching the learning environment seem to happen a lot less frequently. This when seen alongside the types of activities that programme committees are seen as effective in delivering, as outlined in section 4.3.5, would suggest that student representatives are seen as part of the consumer or service-user narrative much more than as partners, stakeholders or democratic participants.

#### **4.4.2 What activities students' unions think representatives should be doing**

This issue of a mismatch in the type of activities that student representatives should be doing was raised in the interviews by someone working in student representation at the national level. One interviewee working in student representation at the national level raised the issue when commenting that there are *“different perspectives of what the rep system is for between an institution and SU”* with many institutions almost *“co-opting”* the students in their quality assurance system to support a *“performance culture”* whereas students' unions, whilst agreeing with this, might see an enhanced role for reps around driving education change.

In relation to this latter point about students' unions considering one of the key roles of student representation systems being to drive educational change it was perhaps surprising that 60% of respondents said that student representatives “never” or “rarely” ran campaigns, and only just over a third (33.6%) agreeing that they did this “occasionally”. Although interestingly there was a divergence of views amongst HEI and students' union responses. When looking at responses from HEIs 52.7% believed that student representatives ran campaigns “frequently” (12.3%) or “occasionally” (40.4%) compared to only 26.4% of students' union responses, none of whom replied that this happened “frequently”, which could reflect differing notions of “campaigning”.

This was a similar overall profile to respondents commenting on whether student representatives were “engaged in research into the learning environment” with 63.1% believing that this happened “never” or only “rarely” and a third replying that this happened “occasionally”.

## **4.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the data from the 119 survey responses from the students' union and institution at 89 HEIs with degree-awarding powers, drawing out the quantitative survey responses and analysing these data in different ways to explore any significant differences between groups of respondents.

The data from the study was used to interrogate the overall research question about the perceptions of what make effective student involvement in university governance, considering in detail the data relating to each of the subsidiary questions. The survey provided insight into how effective student governance and representation is seen to be at different levels within institution. The institutional level was seen as highly effective, although slightly less positive than a decade ago and with some significant difference across different types of institutions. The staff/student liaison committees were also seen as effective by both institutions and students' unions. There was, however, less agreement about the faculty/department level.

The question of the perceived role of staff and their impact on the effectiveness of student representation with an interesting mismatch in views between students' union and institutional respondents about the extent to which staff valued student representation, with students' unions a lot less likely to agree. This mismatch in views also fed through into questions about if staff had received training and whether they dealt with the power imbalance between staff and students.

The perceived effectiveness of university committee structures at engaging students also highlighted differences at different levels of committees across the institution as well as suggesting that there were also differences across the institution in different departments/faculties. There was also a recognition that many institutions had not reviewed their committee structures to consider how effectively they engaged students.

Finally, the survey looked at what activities student representatives currently undertake, suggesting that there was a mismatch between what activities the representatives did and what they students' union would want them to do. This feeds into questions about the purpose of student representation and whether staff are more likely to value the contribution of student representation based on the activities that they currently undertake as opposed to the activities that the students' union would want them to do.

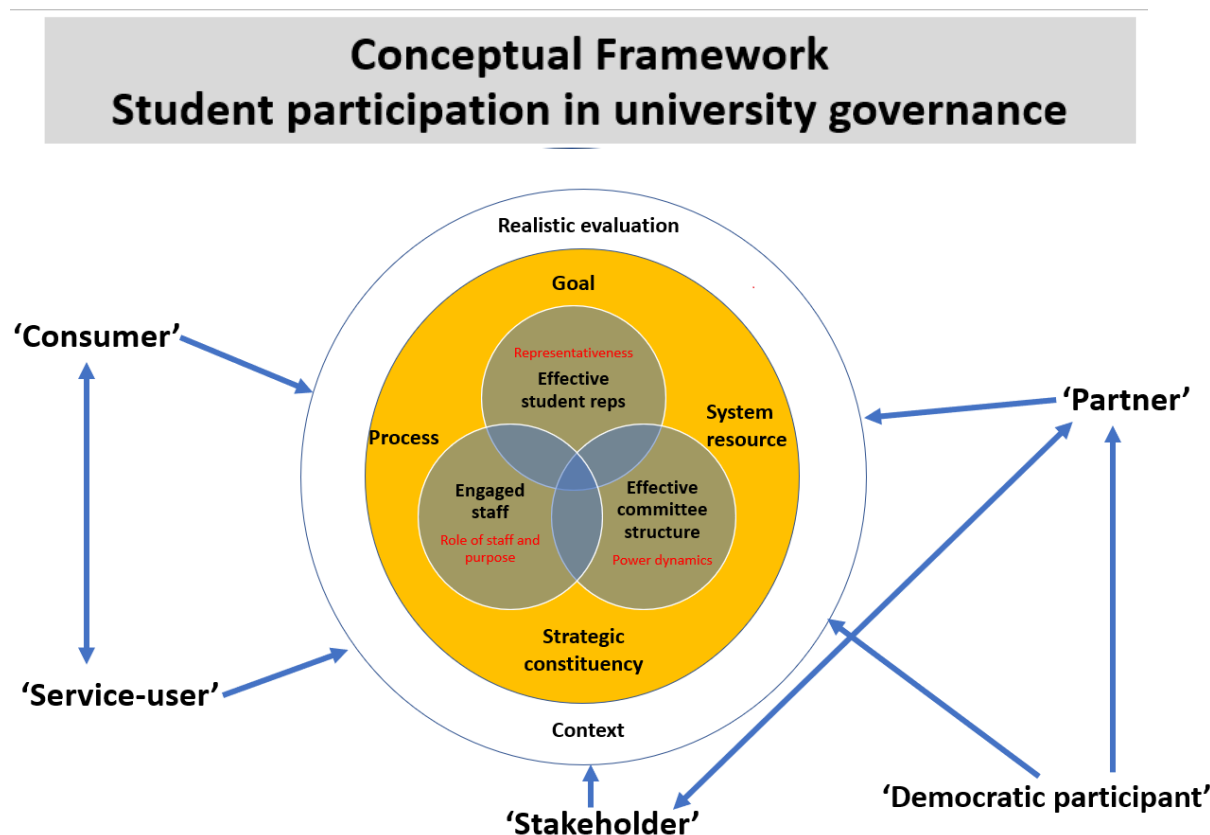
The next chapter will discuss these findings in more detail in relation to the literature and the theoretical framework, exploring how the survey results help to shed light on the research questions and consider what conclusions we are able to draw from the responses.

# Chapter 5: Discussion

## 5.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 presented the findings of the research and this chapter will discuss these findings in relation to the literature and the theoretical framework. This research has sought to answer a number of key questions that emerged from the literature review as outlined in the Method chapter (Chapter 3). These research questions draw on the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2 and shown in Figure 8 and which is reproduced below as Figure 10. There are a number of factors that feed into the overall consideration of the perceptions of what makes student involvement in university governance effective. The search for these factors was identified as one of the objectives of the research, will be examined by considering the perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation (section 5.2), the perceptions of the impact of university staff (5.3) and the committee structure (5.4). These views are then placed within the wider context of what the key theories that impact on how students are seen (which I will consider in section 5.5).

Figure 10 – Considering the effectiveness of student representation



In the rest of this chapter I discuss each of the research questions and how it relates to the existing literature.

## **5.2 Perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation**

### **5.2.1 Introduction**

The research question with the most important implications is the perceptions of “what makes student involvement in university governance effective?” we address this by extracting from the survey data the information about the different factors that help answer this. This question is closely related to the second research question which was considered in Chapter 4, of the perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation at different levels within institutions.

### **5.2.2 Institutional and operational representation more effective than intermediary levels**

When considering the perceptions of the effectiveness of student involvement in university governance one of the empirical objectives was to understand the perceptions of key stakeholders on effectiveness of students’ involvement and examine issues of differences within and between universities. The literature suggested that student representation works better at either the institutional level or the operational (school/department/programme) level compared to the intermediate (faculty) level (CHERI, 2009). This was largely supported by the research, with high levels of agreement about the perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation at the institutional level with over 91% agreeing that representation is either “very” and “reasonably” effective. At the staff/student liaison committee level there was 85.5% agreement overall and this compares to only 70% agreeing that student representation is perceived as being effective at the departmental/faculty level.

However, while these headlines would seem to confirm earlier research the headline figures do however mask some quite considerable differences to the earlier research. For example, at the institutional level there is overwhelming agreement overall there has however been a significant shift from those perceiving representation to be “very” effective towards “reasonably effective”. In this research those agreeing that representation was “very” effective was 20% amongst HEI responses and 15.5% from students’ union respondents, this represented a significant drop from 37% when compared to 2009 of both students’ union and HEI respondents. This would suggest that whilst representation at the institutional level may be seen as more effective than at the intermediary level of representation it is now seen as being less effective than it was and so institutions should consider the question of why this is the case.

Another interesting change in the data between 2009 and 2018 when looking at the departmental/faculty level representation is that, when looking at the “reasonably effective” responses there was a significant convergence in the responses from both HEIs and students’ unions. Both sets of respondents broadly agreed (59% amongst HEIs compared to 57% from students’ union respondents) which compares to the significant divergence a decade ago when 71% of HEIs perceived representation to be “reasonably effective” compared to 39% of students’ union respondents. This could be because institutional respondents perceive representation at this level was getting worse at the same time that students’ unions thought it was getting better. It was perhaps more likely that this greater agreement in the responses from both students’ union and institutional respondents in 2018 reflects greater agreement on the purpose of representation following the focus on this over the past decade.

The suggestion in the research that the institutional and operation levels of representation are perceived as working better than the intermediary level do still hold true. However, it is important when considering this general finding that there are many different elements within this that need to be considered including the differing views of the stakeholders.

### **5.2.3 Representativeness of representatives**

One of the key themes that emerged from the literature review relating to student involvement in university governance was the notion that student representatives are not representative of the wider student population (Fielding, 2001; Kane et al, 2008; Wintrup, 2012), with suggestions of a “small elite” (Menon, 2003) dominating student opinion. The conceptual framework in Figure 10 highlights the representativeness of students involved in university governance as central to considerations of what should be considered when thinking about the effectiveness of the student representatives.

The research considered this question of the perceptions of the representativeness of students involved in university governance at the three levels within an institution. At the institutional level there was broad agreement that involved students were seen as representative, with over 76% agreeing that they were either “very” or “reasonably” representative. The research highlighted some differences between the views of HEI and students’ union respondents (80% vs 72.4%). This overall figure does however mask the fact that only 5.2% of students’ union respondents believed that student representatives were “very representative”. There were similarly high levels of agreement about the representativeness of students involved on faculty/departmental committees, with 77.6% agreeing that they saw representatives as being “very” or “reasonably” effective. Indeed, at the level of faculty/department there was even more consistency amongst both HEI and students’ union responses, with 8.6% of both groups believing it to be “very representative”.



The perceptions of the representativeness of students involved on staff/student liaison committees was higher than at either faculty/departmental level or institution-wide level with 83.1% agreeing. Respondents were significantly more likely to respond that they saw student representatives on staff/student committee as being “very representative”, with 29.7% agreeing.

The data would suggest that the closer the level of representation is to the experience of the students the more representative they are seen to be. More respondents agreeing that representatives at the faculty/department level are representative than at the institutional level and that the staff/student liaison committee level is seen as the most representative – both overall and particularly in terms of those agreeing that involved students are “very representative”. There are likely to be a number of reasons for this including that the higher the level of committee the more students they are trying to represent. On a staff/student liaison committee there are likely to be several students representing the course, whereas on university committees it is likely to be a single student seeking to represent the views of the entire institution.

However, when comparing the data on the perceptions of representativeness of involved students with the perceptions of effectiveness it throws up some interesting disparities. Whilst student representation at the institution level may be seen as the least representative it is however seen as the most effective. This prompts a difficult question about what students most value – effective or representative advocates. So thinking back to the literature whilst students would prefer their advocates to be more representative of the wider student body they are more concerned about whether they are able to be effective in what they are doing.

#### **5.2.4 Consistency of representation varying between faculties or schools**

The question of the extent to which there was consistency of representation across institutions was raised in the literature review (Little et al, 2009; Carey, 2013) and this was echoed in the findings of the research. In response to the question about whether student representation was perceived as varying between departments/schools/faculties there was a strong belief that it either varied “a lot” or “a little” across the institution, with 87.2% of respondents agreeing. But there were significant differences between the responses from HEIs and students’ unions, whereas 26.8% of HEIs respondents believed that it varied “a lot” this increased to 54.7% amongst students’ unions.

This perception that there was variation across the institution had increased significantly since 2009 (Little et al, 2009). These perceptions of the variation could be a result of the increase in size of many HEIs following the removal of the cap on student numbers or a

better connectedness between students in the digital age and so more students knowing about the experiences of other students. Carey (2013) suggested this may not always be seen negatively if resulting from tailored systems, but it was interesting that the departmental/faculty level received the lowest agreement as to whether representation at this level was seen as effective. It is not possible to directly link this lower score to the fact the departmental/faculty level is the level where there are most likely to difference across the institution. However, this question of consistency of representation across the institution is an area that might be worth exploring in more detail to see whether this is the case or if it is just a question of perception and whether it is seen in a negative light.

### **5.2.5 Conclusion**

The data supported the conclusion that student involvement in university governance was seen as reasonably effective by university quality managers and students' union course-rep co-ordinators. It did however identify some significant differences to previous research. This included a greater convergence of views between students' union and institutional respondents about the effectiveness of representation at the departmental/faculty level and respondents significantly less likely to think that institutional representation is "very" effective. The research highlighted some unexpected divergence between representativeness and effectiveness.

One of the key themes running through all the responses – and therefore impacting onto perceptions of effectiveness of student involvement - seems to be the issue of consistency. When considering the perceptions of effectiveness of student involvement in university governance consistency of approach between different parts of an institution and across institutions is key. The research identified some significant differences between the perceptions of effectiveness and representativeness at different levels within institutions with the institution level and staff/student liaison committees seen as more effective than at department/faculty level. There were differences across the university so that some representatives in some departments and faculties believe student representation to be as more (or less) effective in their part of the university as representatives in another part of the institution. Thirdly, the issue of effectiveness across different types of institutions emerged as one of the key findings impacting on whether student involvement in university governance is seen as effective.

Finally, there was a disconnect between the views of respondents from students' union and institutional representatives. This would suggest that there could still be a divergence in the views of the purpose of student involvement. It would be worth considering this in the context

of how students are seen and whether these differences are intrinsically based in the paradigm by which students are considered. I will revisit this question in section 5.6 below.

This does, however, prompt the “so what?” question. Whether student representation is seen as effective or not is interesting, but what are the potential implications of this? It is worth reiterating what was noted in Chapter 1, that universities have invested significant resource into student representation systems over the last decade but as funding and resources become ever more scarce and political interest moves away there might be harder questions about whether student representation should continue to be prioritised. The fact that the data demonstrates very high levels of agreement that student involvement in university governance is effective, suggests that, whatever the respondents measures of effectiveness, they had such measures, even if they were expressed differently, and so had goals for what the representation was supposed to achieve and that they are achieving it. This implies that the students see value in having representation and that having effective representation enhances their overall student experience – we may speculate why this may be – help with practical issues, avoiding a feeling of ‘powerlessness’ over the design of their courses are two examples which come to mind, but the study of the issues which lead to representation being seen as valuable and effective is actually a separate research question, and it is quite possible that the answers will vary from institution to institution, or between peer groups.

The data does, however, prompt some more searching questions about the value of continuing to invest in representation structures at some levels within the institution, particularly at the faculty level. Perceptions of the effectiveness at the faculty level results in lower levels of satisfaction and this is something that was echoed in the earlier literature (CHERI, 2009). Another question that arises relates to the differences between different types of institutions and why there are such big differences. Is this just explained by the size of the institution creating doubts about the ability of representatives to be truly representative or is there a wider issue? If these doubts are linked to the size of the institution what can be done? Based on my experience institutions have attempted to tackle this in different ways including moving to departmental rather than faculty structures that are closer to student experiences or by increasing the number of representatives to ensure more voices can be heard. It is also worth reflecting on the impact of different institutions having more or less diverse student bodies and so the concerns of some groups of students having people speaking on their behalf that was highlighted in the literature (Alcoff, 1991; Baker, 1999; McLeod, 2011; Dance, 2013) might also exacerbate these perceptions.

The conclusions are:

- Institutional and operational representation are seen as more effective than intermediary levels
- Whilst representation at the institutional level may be seen as more effective than at the intermediary level of representation it is now seen as being less effective than it was and so institutions should consider the question of why this is the case.
- There was a significant convergence in recent years in the responses from both HEIs and students' unions.
- Contrary to a common assumption in the literature, it is relatively unimportant whether the student representatives are representative of the wider student population: nonetheless a lack of representativeness can be compensated if the representatives are perceived as being effective
- The effectiveness of representation was seen as varying between parts of institution and between institutions. These inconsistencies should be addressed to ensure that representation is as effective as possible in all cases.

### **5.3 The impact of university staff on student engagement**

Within the overarching research question about the factors contributing to the perceptions of effective student representation there were several elements that helped build a picture of the overall effectiveness which were also explored through the research. The first of these themes was the extent to which university staff were engaged with student representation which was encapsulated in the research question "How are university staff perceived to impact on effectiveness of student representation?".

#### **5.3.1 Staff as gatekeepers and the impact of perceptions of them**

The theme of staff as gatekeepers (Carey, 2013) was highlighted in the literature review, as was the broader theme of engaging staff raised by Fielding (2003) and Lizzio and Wilson (2009). The research explored the extent to which staff were perceived as valuing student engagement, and whereas HEIs saw staff as highly valuing student engagement, with over 80% agreement for both academic and professional services staff, this was a lot less true of students' union responses with responses of around 50% for both categories of staff.

If students do not see staff valuing student representation they are much more likely to consider staff using their gatekeeper role in a more obstructive than supportive way. This gap between responses from students' unions and institutions also came through in relation to whether staff received training. So, in the context of staff being seen as gatekeepers this gap in perceptions between what students and institutions think about whether staff value student involvement in university governance is an important point.

It is, however, worth noting that the literature raises the issue of power imbalances in general terms but the research highlighted some significant differences in the responses in different types of institution. Whilst no students' unions respondents perceived that "all staff" valued student representation in large or medium sized research intensive institutions almost a third agreed in much smaller institutions. The considerations of power imbalances should consider factors such as the size of the institution or the extent to which there is a sense of academic community between staff and students.

### **5.3.2 Training as a way of countering perceptions of co-option**

One of the themes that came out of the earlier interviews was the importance that was placed on training for student representatives to do their role, however, when asked whether their staff received similar training most interviewees replied that they did not think that this was offered. The training feeds into the broader theme of the power differential and the extent to which students are inducted into fitting in to university processes or supported to engage in their own way (Freeman, 2013). The research explored the extent to which training for staff was widely delivered.

In the survey data more respondents from institutions replied that their institution did not provide training for staff (44.8%) than those that agreed that their institution did offer this (39.6%). Indeed, almost half of those that said training was offered (17.2%) responded that this only happened in some departments. It should be noted that staff might recognise the benefit of engaging students but they may not necessarily know how to do this effectively to get the most of interactions with student representatives. Indeed, there was a suggestion in some of the interviews that this would need to be constantly reflected on as the student body becomes more diverse, and therefore so their representatives will become more diverse, and so the ways in which these students are supported to engage and feedback their views might need to be reviewed.

This would suggest there would be an opportunity to enhance student representation by considering a more structured approach to training staff across the whole institution to get the most out of student representation. In the first instance this could be particularly focused at the committee chairs but could also encourage other members of the committee to reflect how their structures are best able to capture the views of an increasingly diverse student body, and could seek to counter views that students are simply being co-opted into university processes (Carey, 2013, Freeman, 2013).

### **5.3.3 Few measures to mitigate power imbalances**

The research also considered the question of power imbalances between staff and students. This issue was identified by a number of articles in the literature (Carey 2013; Verill, 2007; Seale, 2009; van der Velden, 2013), as well as being a regular theme in professional discussions over many years. The research showed that most institutions had not actively considered this issue of power imbalance or attempting to mitigate this, with only 38% of respondents agreeing that they had measures in place to address this. This question revealed a significant number of “do not know” responses (23%) and 39% of respondents that did not believe that their institution considered this. It could, however, be welcomed that increasing numbers of institutions are now beginning to address this issue of power imbalances, something which was not even mentioned in CHERI (2009) research.

There were several ways in which institutions mitigated against the perceived power imbalance including written guidance for students, support for the chair or having a student chair or co-chair for staff-student liaison committees. There were also more structural approaches including considering the agenda either in terms of when items are discussed or how the agenda is developed. Linking back to the previous section about training for staff, several institutions identified the provision of training including for new probationary academic staff as well as for chairs and secretaries of Staff/Student Liaison Committees.

This would suggest that whilst there is increasing recognition of the issues surrounding power imbalances and how these might be mitigated. There is however more research needed to consider how these imbalances may be addressed.

### **5.3.4 Conclusion**

When thinking about how university staff impact on the effectiveness of student involvement the literature identified this as an under-researched area so one of the key objectives of the research was to explore this in more detail. The study identified three key issues as part of staff involvement.

The key points are:

- **Staff as gatekeepers and the impact of perceptions of them**  
If students do not see staff valuing student representation they are much more likely to consider staff using their gatekeeper role in a more obstructive than supportive way.
- **Training as a way of countering perceptions of co-option**  
This gap between responses from students' unions and institutions also came through in relation to whether staff received training which could be seen as teaching

ways of mitigating any power imbalance. Examples of possible sources of power imbalance:

- Staff chairing of committees
- Staff are members of the institution for a longer period than the students and will thus, inevitably build up informal ‘influence networks’

- **Few measures to mitigate power imbalances**

The research showed that most institutions had not actively considered this issue of power imbalance or attempting to mitigate this.

- The study identified three key issues as part of staff involvement:
  - There is a significant mismatch in the perception of whether staff are seen as valuing student involvement in university governance depending on whether the respondents were from students’ unions or the university.
  - There is a perception gap that could be tackled with the views of students’ union respondents. This would suggest that there is a need for more conscious consideration of the support provided to staff when they are appointed onto these committees, with the study identifying that the availability of training to support staff on better engaging students was only available in a minority of institutions.
  - Not many institutions had given active consideration of the question, and the impact, of power differentials.

## **5.4 Effectiveness of university committee structures**

The final element impacting on the effectiveness of student involvement in university governance at the heart of the conceptual framework is effective committee structures. This theme was explored through the research question on the perceived impact of university committee structures on the effectiveness of student involvement in university governance.

### **5.4.1 Enhanced focus on university committees engaging students**

The literature suggested an increasing desire to strengthen the student voice and engage students in university governance (Shenstone, 2019; Persson, 2003; Karuuzum et al, 2005). The research suggested that committees at the university level were seen as effective at engaging students with over three-quarters of respondents agreeing, although only 15% of respondents agreed that the committee structure was “very effective”. This overall perception of the effectiveness also masked many differences in perceptions.

The university-wide committees were seen as the most effective at engaging students with almost 80% of respondents agreeing that committees at this level were effective at engaging students. Almost as effective were the committees at the departmental level with 76%

agreeing, with the lowest response coming at the school/faculty level, with 66% agreeing. This might in part reinforce the CHERI (2009) research and their view about the intermediary level between the institutional and operational, but it might also reflect my experience that there is often a much clearer relationship at either the departmental or institutional level to the direct student experience. However, it might also reflect that enhancing university governance has been a focus of both the literature (Gillies, 2011; Brown, 2011) and also the regulator, with the quality assurance agency focused on representation structures at the subject level (QAA & UKSCQA, 2018).

The research might suggest that whilst there has been enhanced focus on engaging students, as the literature highlights, this has not been considered equally at all levels across the institution.

#### **5.4.2 University committees vary at their effectiveness of engaging students**

The literature highlighted divergent views between staff and students about the role and effectiveness of university committees, with students suggesting that it is either not worth participating or that the university climate does not encourage participation (Planas et al, 2013).

This perception of the extent to which university committees encouraged or supported student representation was shown in the data, with almost 55% of students' union respondents responding that they believed the effectiveness of university committees varied "a lot" across the institution at engaging students compared to 26.8% of institutional respondents. This would suggest that there can be good engagement in some departments but it is not seen as being embedded in the culture of the institution across all departments.

This would suggest an area for further exploration to identify the extent to which this is an actual problem, with real differences across institutions, or whether it is more a question of perception amongst students' unions. But either way it was an issue that could cause concern and so would be worth investigating further.

#### **5.4.3 Reviewing the effectiveness of committee structures**

The literature highlighted the changing nature of both the student body, as well as the expectations of government and regulators that university governance structures are more engaging of students (Planas et al, 2013) and so there is an implicit expectation that institutions would be reviewing the effectiveness of their committee structures at engaging students. Indeed, my own research (Bols, 2017) raised a number of questions about the effectiveness of university committees, from the layout of the room and the agenda of the



meeting to the extent to which students were encouraged to participate in the meeting and whether the committee actually take decisions.

However, the research suggested that not many universities are currently reviewing the effectiveness of their committee structures at engaging students. 41 of the 101 respondents said they had not recently reviewed the effectiveness of their committee structure at engaging students, and a further 18 respondents did not answer the question – which might suggest that they had not reviewed it recently. However, of those that commented that they had reviewed their university committee structure 34% of respondents replied that they are either currently reviewing their committee structure or that they planned to do so this year.

The research highlights the need for institutions to consider reviewing the effectiveness of their university committee structure at engaging students. It would of course be important for institutions to agree a shared approach with their students' union for what this review might cover. For example, considering the themes coming out of the interviews it should probably be wider than just considering the number of student representatives that sit on the committee but also consider broader questions such as how students are engaged in the decision-making, whether there are any structural barriers to engagement or even whether a committee is the best way of making a particular decision or if there might be a more effective way of doing this. It would also be worth exploring the extent to which there are differences across different departments and faculties/schools across the institution

#### **5.4.4 Conclusion**

The literature review highlighted that whilst there is considerable research on university governance, and even on the principle of why students should be more engaged with governance, there was relatively little research on how this could be done. In particular there was little research considering the role of university committees in fostering more effective involvement of students. This lack of research of either why or how this could be done, might also be impacting on practice in relation to universities considering the effectiveness of their committee structures. The research outlined that relatively few institutions have considered reviewing their committee structures, particularly through the lens of engaging students, with only a third of respondents agreeing that they are currently planning on reviewing their structures.

They key conclusions were:

- Committees at the university level were seen as effective at engaging students
- Almost as effective were the committees at the departmental level
- Lowest assessment of effectiveness response coming at the school/faculty level.

- Not many universities are currently reviewing the effectiveness of their committee structures at engaging students.

## **5.5 How the purpose of student representation is impacted by the wider identities of students**

The final research question considered the purpose of student involvement in university governance by considering the activities that they undertake.

### **5.5.1 Developing a shared understanding of the purpose of representation requires a shared understanding of the modes by which the students interact with the institution**

The literature highlighted the need for a shared understanding of the purpose of student representation between the students' union and the institution (CHERI, 2009), and this need for a shared purpose was the underpinning expectation of the conceptual framework. This issue emerged most clearly from the divergence between what interviewees said they believed the purpose of representation to be compared the actual activities that student representatives undertook, as outlined in the data presented in section 4.4.

The data highlighted that the largest group of respondents, almost 91%, agreed that one of the activities that student representatives did was providing feedback to students.

Communications is likely to be key to any representative role but the prominence of the activity suggests a quite passive viewing of student involvement in university governance. The notion of student representatives providing feedback to the university and then back to students would fit with the perception of students being seen as consumers, where they give their views but for someone else with the power to act upon their concerns.

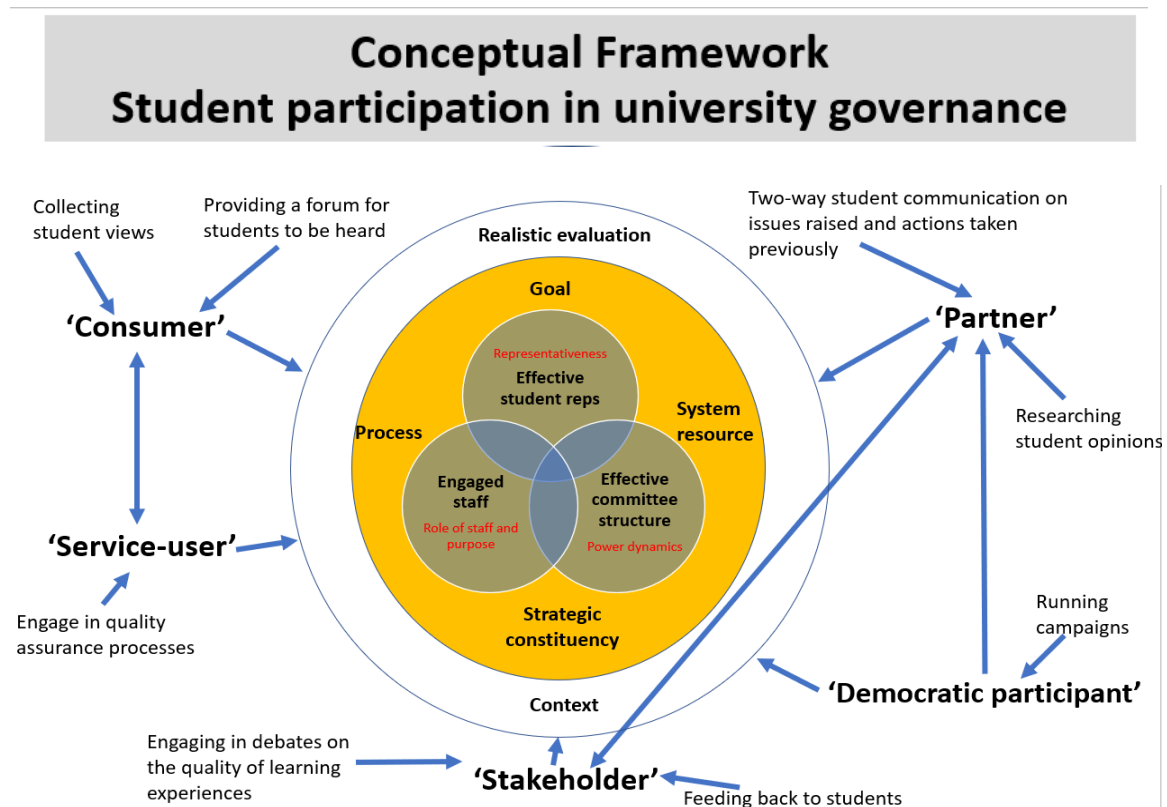
The second highest response was that student representatives were engaged in the quality assurance processes with 86% of respondents agreeing. Again, this would suggest a relatively passive view of student representatives but perhaps this time viewing them more service-users (Clarke et al. 2007; Pollitt 2007) giving their feedback on specific activities. Students' unions agreed that this was an important role, but that there was sometimes a perception that this resulted in student representatives becoming co-opted by the institution (Carey, 2013) and therefore moving away from their representative role.

For students' unions there was a greater emphasis on the importance of student representatives driving educational change (Harvey, 2006; McCulloch, 2009) which would suggest that students are more likely to see themselves as stakeholders or partners in their educational experience. However, when considering the activities that student

representatives currently undertake “running campaigns” came quite low down the list with 60% of respondents saying that this happened “rarely” or “never”.

This raises an important question about whether there is a divergence between what students’ union believe the purpose of student representation to be and what the student representatives themselves consider their role to be. This is particularly important when considering the conceptual framework and the extent to which student involvement in university governance meets the expectations of both the individuals as well as the university. This shared understanding of the purpose of the representation systems helps develop shared agreement on the ways of measuring the effectiveness and recognition of the value of the systems. These differing views of key stakeholders is reflected in the different responses from students’ union representatives compared to HEI respondents in the data analysis.

**Figure 11: Evaluating the effectiveness of student participation in university governance through the different lenses and concepts**



The literature highlighted a number of theories impacting on identities of students and how they are seen, including whether they are viewed as consumers, service-users, stakeholders, partners or democratic participants. In each of these different contexts the role of student representatives would be slightly different, as highlighted in Figure 11 above

where I have mapped the different activities that student representatives might be expected to do against the different identities. So, for example, for those that primarily see students as consumers this is likely to suggest that role of student representatives is primarily about gathering student views and feeding these in. For those who see students as service-users, there would be a similar feedback element but also feeding more closely into quality assurance processes. If you see students as democratic participants then perhaps a focus on campaigning might be seen as a higher priority whereas if students are seen as stakeholders or partners they are more likely to be actively involved in not just highlighting the problem but also helping to develop the solution as well.

The impact of the lenses through which students' identities are seen will play a key role in what stakeholders consider the purpose of student representation to be and the activities that they expect representatives to undertake and activities that they most value. The data would therefore suggest that student representatives are still seen in a significantly more passive role, providing feedback and collecting student opinion but the divergence between HEI and students' union responses suggests that this may be changing – at least from the student perspective.

### **5.5.2 Measurement by those involved of the impact and effectiveness of student representation**

Although not one of the 'research questions' as such, the final area that the survey explored was the extent to which institutions and students' unions measured the impact and effectiveness of student representation. As part of this evaluation it was important to consider the extent to which these judgements on effectiveness incorporate how the students are engaged.

The majority of institutions do attempt to measure the impact of student representation, although several respondents highlighted this was an area for further work. When looking at the ways in which respondents track impact there were a number of measures that were recorded:

- election participation
- positions filled
- number of representatives trained
- attendance at meetings
- whether students know who their representative is
- retention rates of reps
- number of academic staff and professional services staff who have received training

When mapped against Ashraf and Kadir's (2012) evaluation model this type of evaluation of impact would seem to be more assessing process-measures rather than evaluating the impact of the engagement, which again suggests a more passive view of students in a more service-user type role.

There were also a number of respondents that replied that they survey students on their perceptions of the effectiveness of representation or a "Rate your Rep" Survey. Some institutions either surveyed or interviewed their student representatives as a way of assessing their own views of their effectiveness and impact, which would be a more similar approach to this research considering the views of stakeholders. This might suggest that these institutions are taking a more proactive view of student representation and considering whether students value their representatives.

There were also more intensive approaches cited, which suggested more developed approaches that could be more closely aligned to the goal approach of the Ashraf and Kadir's (2012) model, which included tracking issues raised in meetings or minutes and following these through the system to see whether the issues have been addressed. This kind of "deep-dive" approach for a couple of issues a year might be a helpful way of providing wider assurance for an institution and assessing the extent to which student representatives are able to make a difference and therefore seen as experts or even partners in their learning. Institutions also referred to tracking comments in the National Student Survey and whether these issues had previously been raised by student representatives was a lighter-touch way of ensuring that student representatives are raising the right issues.

Measuring the effectiveness and impact of student representation was seen as challenging in many institutions, with few institutions able to measure the actual impact and engagement of student representatives. This emphasises the need to develop a framework to consider the effectiveness of student representation as outlined in section 6.1.5 in the next chapter.

### **5.5.3 Summary**

When reflecting on the activities that student representatives do undertake, as opposed to what they should undertake, there is still a sense that student representatives are taking more service-user or consumer-oriented activities. The literature review highlighted the key theories impacting on student representation, and if institutions and students' union do have an agreed view of their role then they should further reflect on the activities that student representatives are expected to undertake and how these processes are evaluated.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

This chapter considered the data presented in Chapter 4 in the context of the literature to identify the extent to which the research reiterates the existing views, identifies any disagreement or suggests new areas to consider further. Section 5.2 considered the perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation at different levels within the institution. The research reinforced the literature that the institutional and the operation level were seen as more effective than the intermediary level (CHERI, 2009) but went on to highlight the key importance of differences between institutions, as well as within institutions as integral when considering the effectiveness of student involvement. This section also considered questions of the perceptions of the representativeness of student advocates and suggested some interesting differences to the literature. Whereas the literature highlighted the small elite of student representatives that were not representative of the wider student body (Fielding, 2001; Menon, 2003; Kane et al, 2008; Wintrup, 2012), this was perhaps seen as less important than whether these representatives were effective or not.

Section 5.3 considered the power imbalance between staff and students (Fielding, 2003; Lizzio and Wilson (2009) and the role of staff as gatekeepers (Carey, 2013). The research identified imbalances in the perceptions and suggested that many institutions had not actively considered these issues in detail. It did however highlight that HEIs were a lot more likely to think that staff valued the role of student representatives and so by addressing this gap in perceptions with the views of students could help to tackle this. Section 5.4 considered the effectiveness of university structures but did more to highlight that while the research considers why student representation in university governance is important, it looks a lot less at how this should be done in practice and the research highlighted the need for institutions to reflect on the effectiveness of their committee structures with particular focus on student representation.

Section 5.5 looked at the type of activities that student representatives currently undertake suggesting that if these activities are seen through the prism of the key theories of students as consumer, service-users, stakeholders, partners or democratic participants then student representation is currently seen as a relatively passive activity. If HEIs and students' unions really do consider their students as stakeholders or partners they need to examine carefully the ways in which they engage with them and whether the activities that they expect them to undertake reflect the way in which they see students.

# Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter draws together some conclusions from the study and outlines the key contributions to knowledge, including:

- identifying the factors allowing effective student involvement in university governance
- that student involvement in university governance is perceived to be effective but that institutional and operational representation are seen as more effective than intermediary levels (such as at faculty level)
- development of a new theoretical framework for considering effective student involvement in university governance which can include analysing the perceptions of key stakeholders
- found that the three key factors of effective student involvement in university governance are:
  - the effectiveness of the student representatives,
  - how engaged staff are
  - the effectiveness of the university committee structures.

Conclusions situated within a wider set of paradigms that emerge from the literature:

- The effectiveness of student involvement in university governance should be considered by looking at this through the prism of the paradigm through which students are seen and how this impacts the activities that they undertake.
- Considers contributions made by the work described in the previous chapter
- Makes suggestions for possible ways in which student representative systems could be enhanced
- Outlines some of the possible limitations with research and some possible areas for future research.

## **6.1 What are the factors of effective student involvement in university governance**

Four key elements that emerged from the literature and these formed the basis of the research questions:

- The first key area was the importance of current perceptions of key stakeholders when considering questions of effective student involvement in university governance at different levels within institutions (departmental/school/faculty/institution).
- The second key area is the perceived impact of university staff and their role as gatekeepers of university decision-making.

- Thirdly the research considered the perceived impact of the university committee structure itself.
- The final question considered the purpose of student involvement in university governance and how this is reflected on the activities that student representatives undertake.

### **6.1.1 Why the perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation matter**

The second research question explored the current perceptions of student representation at different levels within institutions. The critical school highlighted the importance of understanding the experiences of individuals to consider and reveal power structures. As outlined in the evaluation model (Ashraf and Kadir, 2012) the perceptions of key stakeholders are an important element of any consideration of effectiveness. Whilst those involved in any process will bring a series of different expectations to their notion of effectiveness it can however highlight areas of positive practices and where there are mismatches in these expectations. It is also likely that where participants do not recognise the value or effectiveness of something they are less likely to appreciate it or put their effort and resource into it – and so further impacting on the effectiveness. These factors, as well as the high degree of alignment in many of the responses from students’ unions and HEI respondents, might also be seen to provide reassurance about not just how effective student representation is perceived to be, but also wider assurance and insights into how effective student involvement in university governance actually is.

The literature outlined in section 2.2.1 emphasised the importance that is placed on student engagement in university governance and this study demonstrated that those involved in student representation believe it to be effective at all levels – and very effective at the institutional and operational levels. The research did, however, emphasise that respondents were much less likely to perceive student representation to be “very effective” compared to research in 2009. The research also highlighted that perceptions of representation at the departmental/faculty level was still significantly below the institutional and that students perceive representation to be less effective than institutional respondents. This reinforced a point in the literature review about the importance of considering the levels of student governance within an institution, and that student involvement at each of these levels is likely to be different and face specific challenges.

- The literature highlighted not just the importance of student engagement but also the significant investment – resource, human and policy - in this area over recent years and so the way in which it is perceived is important if this is to continue in the future.



At a time of ever scarcer financial resources student representation will need to be seen to be effective and “value for money” if universities are to continue to invest in it.

- This study built on the current literature that student involvement varies at different levels within institutions and that there is significant variability in student engagement within and across institutions.
- The study went further than previous research at identifying the importance of the type of institution as a key factor in considerations of effectiveness of student involvement in university governance and how this can be impacted by the size and mission.

The literature in section 2.4.1 also highlighted the issue of the extent to which student representatives are actually representative of the wider student body. There were questions raised about who speaks on behalf of whom (Fielding, 2001; Gale, 2010; McLeod, 2011).

- The research suggested that even where there were lower levels of agreement about the representativeness of student advocates this did not seem to impact of the overall perceptions of the effectiveness of student representation. It would however be important to consider this issue in more detail in the future as questions of identity and advocacy become ever more important.

As outlined above the research demonstrated that student involvement in university governance is perceived to be effective overall but that these perceptions highlight a number of key areas of divergence, including between students’ union and institutional respondents and between different types of institutions. When considering questions of effectiveness, the perceptions of those involved are an important element to consider and raise important areas for consideration both as a way of identifying where there are actual differences but also where these are just a question of a mismatch in perception – but still in need of addressing.

### **6.1.2 The role of staff in student representation**

The second key area feeding into whether student involvement in university governance is perceived to be effective is the role of staff. The research suggested high levels of agreement that staff believed that student representation is effective – but these were again much higher in responses from institutional representatives than students’ union respondents, suggesting that students were not as sure that staff valued student involvement in university governance.

- The literature review, section 2.4.3, highlighted the role of staff in enabling student involvement in university governance with staff being seen as

“gatekeepers” (Carey, 2013) to university decision-making. This has been an under-researched issue in the literature and this study provides significant new data to consider the way in which staff are seen as supporting and valuing student involvement in university governance.

- The mismatch in views between students’ unions and institutional respondents highlights an area that should be of key concern that staff either do not, or are not seen as, valuing the engagement of students, and emphasises the importance of considering perceptions.
- The study also identified the area of whether, and how, staff are supported to involve students in university governance, and noted that training is still not widespread or consistent across the sector.

### **6.1.3 Proactive consideration needed for how university committees impact on engagement**

The third aspect of effective student representation was the way in which university committees engaged students. The literature mainly focuses on why students should be engaged in university governance with much less written about how.

The literature review, section 2.4.2, brought out the theme of power differentials between staff and students. The question of the perception of power imbalances between staff and students have also been discussed in the literature but this is the first study to gather data on this issue and explore the perceptions of this and whether these imbalances are being addressed.

The study suggested that this is an area that not many universities have actively considered, with only about a third of respondents agreeing that they had reviewed their committee structures and considered how they engage students, including:

- How university committees are structured
- What is discussed when
- Who submits papers
- Who is encouraged or feels empowered to speak in meetings
- How the chair interacts with the students

All of these issues and many more can all have an impact on power imbalances between staff and students and therefore how students see university committees and whether they are effective at hearing the student point of view. An issue like power imbalances can be a difficult idea to measure in a tangible way but by considering the perceptions of stakeholders it provides an important insight into how these imbalances make participants feel and whether they consider there to be an imbalance in power. This study should provide much to

consider for those involved in the practice of supporting student involvement in university governance.

The literature review suggested that there is a gap in whether universities have considered how effective their committees are at engaging students. University committees will be discussing a wide range of topics, but many of these will have a direct impact on the student experience, and student representatives can make an important contribution if they are facilitated, and empowered, to do so. There is little more disheartening for student representatives than feeling as though you have wasted your time by attending a meeting or that you were either not heard or not listened to. This study highlighted the key point that if universities want to gain the valuable insights that many students will have, then they need to give more proactive consideration for how this achieved. The study highlights that at present few universities have reviewed their university committee structures through the lens of how they engage students.

#### **6.1.4 The purpose of student involvement in university governance is impacted by lens through which students are seen**

The quote at the very start of this thesis from the UK Higher Education Quality Code highlighted the importance of engaging students in the quality of their educational experience. The literature suggested that many within universities would agree with this purpose and so emphasise the importance of involving students in quality assurance processes or gathering their feedback. However, the literature suggested that students and students' unions wanted to go further than just being "engaged" in the quality of their experience but rather driving educational change.

This study considered the activities that students involved in university governance actually undertake and looked at this through the lens through which students are seen – whether as consumers, service-users, stakeholders, democratic participants or partners.

- The study identified the need to look at all modes of interaction with the institution. These can all impact on how students are considered by the university and how they consider themselves.
- The study identified the activities that student representatives undertake with "feedback to students" and "engagement in quality assurance systems" as the activities that student representatives are most likely to undertake.
- When considering whether student representation is perceived to be effective it is important to have an agreed purpose of what they are trying to achieve.

- If student representatives have one set of expectations about what it is they are trying to achieve and institutions a different view then this will only result in one group or other having more or less positive views about the effectiveness.
- If institutions have a particular vision for the role of students then it is important that they reflect on how this translates into the type of activities that student representatives are expected to do.

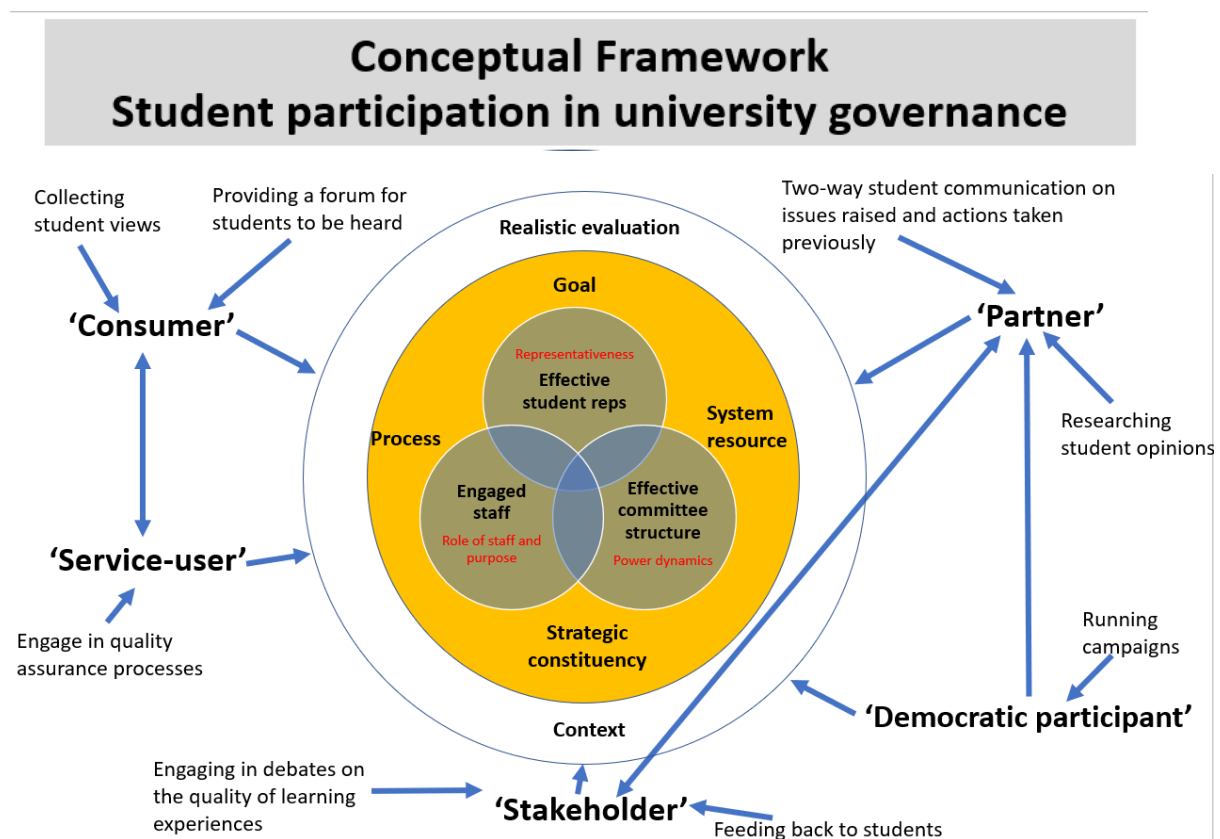
### **6.1.5 The framework for effective student involvement in university governance**

When thinking about the overarching research question about the perceptions of what makes student involvement in university governance effective it is worth revisiting the Figure 9 (and reproduced as Figure 11 in Chapter 5 and Figure 12 below). The model provides a helpful framework within which to consider effective student involvement in university governance by placing the central elements of effective student representatives, including the perceptions of effectiveness and representativeness, alongside engaged staff and effective committee structures at the heart of the framework. The framework emphasises the importance of all three elements and shows the inter-locking relationships between them. It highlights the need to consider all three aspects to form a more rounded conclusion of the how effective student involvement in governance is seen to be, and therefore provides a new way of understanding this question. The framework then considers how these central features can be evaluated by considering the goals, resources, perceptions and processes and setting that within a realistic evaluation model, with this research considering the effectiveness of student involvement in university governance by drawing on the perceptions of key stakeholders. Whilst considering the perceptions of the effectiveness these perceptions can help provide useful insights into wider questions of the effectiveness of the system. In particular where there are similar responses from both the two key stakeholder groups, students' union and HEI respondents, or where are issues, such as power imbalances, that can be impacted by how it makes participants feel.

The new framework then considers the impact of key paradigms on student involvement in university governance and the impact that these can have when considering whether student representation is perceived to be effective. There has been much written in the literature about how students are situated in higher education, whether as consumers, partners, stakeholders, service-users or democratic participants and by recognising Pawson and Tilley's (1997) emphasis of the importance of context. This research highlights the importance of considering the paradigms impacting on higher education when seeking to understand the perceptions of how effective student involvement in university governance is.

However, the impact that the way in which students are seen might have on how students are involved in university governance is relatively under-researched. This study suggests that the way in which students are seen will have an impact on a wider range of aspects on student involvement in university governance including how they are engaged, the weight given to their views, the type of activities that they are expected to undertake, the way in which effectiveness is considered and impact evaluated. As Figure 12, below, outlines it is important to develop a shared understanding of where students are situated before it is possible to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of student involvement in university governance.

**Figure 12: Evaluating the effectiveness of student participation in university governance through the different lenses and concepts**



The study identified four key features of effective student involvement in university governance and they all combine to play an important part in wider considerations of effectiveness. These elements of the different factors to consider when reflecting on student representation, the ways in which it could be evaluated and the impact of wider

conceptualisations on this was brought together in the conceptual framework that will be key in being able to demonstrate on the ongoing importance of student representation.

Finally, whilst this study primarily considered student representation as a key element of student involvement in university governance it does prompt a couple of key points about wider aspects of university governance:

- the views of student representation actually seem more positive than some of the hearsay about academics' ability to influence university governance. There is a perception that what the academics can do seems to be tightly constrained by the university management.
- the universities' fear of litigation is giving the students a powerful lever for the increasing demands to support students as opposed to the limited contact between staff and students which occurred in the past.

## **6.2 Suggestions for improving practice**

In this section, I suggest based on this research possible ways in which student involvement in university governance could be further enhanced.

### **1. Institutions and students' unions should jointly research the effectiveness of student representation at their institution**

The research showed that there were significant differences in the perceptions across different types of institutions and also within institutions. It would therefore be important for universities and students' unions to consider whether the research resonates with their own students and undertake their joint research to identify the key issues affecting their institution.

### **2. There should be a national survey tracking effectiveness of student representation at the national level**

The research provides an overview of the current situation relating to student representation and also a longitudinal comparison with the CHERI research from 2009. However, in order to ensure more effective tracking of national policy interventions it might be worth considering running this survey on a regular basis. This survey could perhaps be run every three years to reflect the average length of students staying in higher education.

### **3. There should be a nationally agreed set of behaviours for student representatives**

This theme emerged from the interviews that it might be useful to develop a shared set of behaviours for student representatives. This would enable student representatives to reflect on their own practice, support students' unions and institutions to structure training around the behaviours.

**4. Institutions and students' unions could develop a shared understanding of the purpose of student representation structures.**

In many of the responses to the survey questions there was a mismatch in views between the students' union and institutional respondents. It will only be by having a shared understanding of the purpose of student representation structures that it will be possible to develop a shared understanding of the effectiveness of the system.

**5. Institutions could provide training for university staff to support them to get the most out of student representation**

There are a sizeable number of institutions where training for staff on student representation is either not provided at all or is not provided across the whole institution. This would suggest that there is an opportunity to enhance student representation through a more systematic approach to training staff.

**6. Universities could review the effectiveness of their committee structure at engaging students**

There were increasing numbers of institutions that were reflecting on their committee structure and how it engaged students and this is something that could be done by all institutions.

**7. There could be national guidance on measuring the impact of student representation**

There was little agreement amongst the survey responses about how institutions or students' unions measure the impact of student representation. It might therefore be helpful to develop an impact framework at the national level.

### **6.3 Limitations of the research**

The research method repeated the approach of a previous piece of research and so it was important to replicate the elements of that research as closely as possible in order to be able to make comparisons between the data. However, it could also be noted that being able to obtain stable data across time, and across different questionnaires, between this research and the CHERI data rather supports the 'objective' model of the data and the research method.

If the research was being repeated it could be made more robust by a higher response rate. The survey had a good response rate, but even a 46% response rate will have its limitations.

For example, if the research was being repeated it could be made more robust by a higher response rate or more responses from both the students' union and HEI at the same institution which would enable a comparison between the views of respondents within the same setting.

A future piece of research might consider surveying more people from each institution, so rather than just a students' union manager and university manager responding to the survey it could be expanded to include responses from academics in different departments and student representatives in different departments and this could potentially form a more in-depth institutional case study.

It is worth noting that the answers to questions about the 'representativeness of the representatives' were also self-reported. Future research could therefore consider how good/relevant they thought the representation process was. Whilst the survey was user-tested, it is never possible to create a set of questions that are understood in the same way by all participants, they will always bring their own experiences to bear on how they answer. Future research would therefore be strengthened by more use of interviews to be able to explore issues in more depth with individuals, and this could also tease out whether there were any assumptions being relied on by respondents.

The research provides a good overview of the issues, and presents a robust set of data, but as suggested in this section it would be possible to research this in more depth and an individual university might wish to consider undertaking their own research in order to explore the issues in more detail in their institution before making major changes within their university.

## **6.4 Further research**

Research rarely conclusively answers all the questions under examination, and despite the solid answers that we have obtained there are still more questions and additional areas for possible study. The research method is designed to answer a certain set of questions and so it is not always possible to use the data to respond to particular themes as they emerge, and also a piece of research will always have resource limitations.

There were a number of times during this research that it would have been possible to follow a different theme or where a different method would have enabled me to answer a different question. Themes which could be explored in more detail in future research and include:



- The extent to which the size of an institution, and therefore the size of the student body, impacts on student representation
- Has representation become less effective or less representative over time?
- More analysis of views of staff in different departments to be able to correlate these views with those of central and students' union staff.
- Look at other nations within the UK.
- Explore the views of student representatives themselves.

It will always be possible to consider further areas for future research and I have highlighted five areas that might be worth further consideration.

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# Annex 1: Survey Questions

## Survey of those responsible for student representation systems within students' unions and higher education institutions in England

### Introduction

Student representation has developed over many decades in UK higher education and is a core part of the wider student engagement agenda to gather student views, input and feedback.

This online survey seeks your views on student representation policies and practices in higher education in the UK. By student representation we mean the structures that engage students at a course, school, faculty and institutional level to feed in collective student views to decision-making.

The survey intends to explore how effective student representation is, how well academic staff are engaged in the process and how university committees engage student representatives.

The survey seeks the views of both university staff responsible for representation systems and also students' unions.

Several of the questions replicate those used in the 2009 [CHERI Report on Student Representation](#) and so will enable some comparison and analysis of any changes since then.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** This questionnaire seeks to elicit a single institutional response and can only be completed online. This should take approximately 10 minutes.

The research is a part of my Doctor in Education at UCL's Institute of Education, however it will also form the basis of articles, blogs and presentations to the sector. All information will be carefully anonymised to prevent identification of individuals or institutions, and you are able to revoke your permission to use data at any point.

Many thanks,

Alex Bols  
Deputy Chief Executive  
GuildHE



## Survey

1. Which institution/students' union are you from?
2. Do you work for the:
  - a. University/higher education provider
  - b. Students' union/student representative
3. Is your higher education provider primarily based in
  - a. England
  - b. Scotland
  - c. Wales
  - d. Northern Ireland
4. What is your job title?
5. 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
Student feedback questionnaires					
Student representation on committees					
Staff-student liaison committees (or similar) (e.g. student forums)					

6. Do you have other student engagement activities? If yes, please list up to three such mechanisms
7. 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 representation on institution-wide committees					
Student representation on faculty/departmental committees					

Staff-student liaison committees (or similar)					
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8. 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 representative	Do not know
Student representation on institution-wide committees					
Student representation on faculty/departmental committees					
Staff-student liaison committees (or similar)					

9. 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

10. 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						
Faculty/departmental						
Programme level						

11. Thinking about just the programme committees in your institutions how do you rate the effectiveness of the committee:

	Very effective	Reasonably effective	Not very effective	Do not know
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 across the faculty/department				
Providing feedback to students on issues raised and actions taken previously				

12. Who, within your institution, is primarily responsible for providing training for student representatives?

- a. Institution (e.g. student services)
- b. Students' Union
- c. Joint institution/students' union
- d. Not applicable/no training provided

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

14. What type of activities do course representative undertake?

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Collecting student opinion via surveys				
Providing feedback to students				
Running campaigns				
Engaged in research into the learning environment				
Engaged in quality assurance processes				

### Staff engagement with student representation

15. Would you say that academic staff see the value of engaging students in representation activities?

- a. All staff
- b. Most staff
- c. Some staff
- d. No staff
- e. Do not know

16. Would you say that professional services staff see the value of engaging students in representation activities?

- a. All staff
- b. Most staff
- c. Some staff
- d. No staff
- e. Do not know

17. Does your institution provide training for academic staff on engaging students effectively?

	Yes	No	Some departments	Don't know
Is this just for the chair of the meeting?				
Is the chair encouraged to reflect on how effectively the meeting engages the views of students?				
Is there training for a wider group of staff beyond the meeting chair?				
Does the training encourage staff to reflect on any power imbalances between staff and students?				

18. Has your institution considered how it might mitigate any power imbalances between staff and students? If yes, how?

**University committee structure effectiveness**

19. How effective would you consider your committee structure (at department/school/faculty level) at engaging student representatives?

- a. Very effective
- b. Reasonably effective
- c. Not very effective
- d. Do not know

20. How much does this vary between departments/schools/faculties?

- a. A lot
- b. A little
- c. Not at all
- d. Do not know

21. Have you undertaken a review to consider the effectiveness of the committee structure at engaging students?

22. Have you developed any new approaches that you have tried/are planning to engage students in committee structures?

Would you be willing to be interviewed if I undertake further research not part of this study?

If yes, what is your name:

If you are prepared to be contacted what is your email:

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR TAKING THE TIME TO COMPLETE THIS SURVEY.  
YOUR INPUT IS MUCH APPRECIATED.

## Annex 2: Glossary

ARC	Academic Registrars Council
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
CHERI	Centre for Higher Education Research and Information
DAP	Degree Awarding Powers
DVC	Deputy Vice Chancellor
EdD	Doctor in Education
FEC	Further Education College
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
NUS	National Union of Students
OfS	Office for Students
PGCert	Postgraduate Certificate
PGR	Postgraduate Research
PTES	Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey
PRES	Postgraduate Research Experience Survey
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
REACT	Realising Engagement through Active Culture Transformation
TDAP	Taught Degree Awarding Powers
TRAC	Transparent Approach to Costing
TSEP	The Student Engagement Partnership
UCL	University College London
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
UKES	UK Engagement Survey
UKSCQA	UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment in Higher Education