

Valuing the Student Voice – Evidence from the UK

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Abstract

The role of students in institutional quality assurance and enhancement processes has a long tradition in UK higher education and elsewhere. In the UK students are invited to respond to institutional mechanisms for collecting their views about the learning experience, and to represent their peers on institutional education and quality governance committees. However, the increasing marketisation of higher education and continuing drives to greater public accountability have prompted renewed institutional efforts to ensure that student voices are listened to and acted upon. This paper draws on the findings of a study that is exploring institutions' deliberate attempts to involve students in their internal quality assurance and enhancement processes, both formal and informal. While the study focuses on one particular country – England, the findings from this research are likely to be of interest to other countries in Europe and beyond that are grappling with similar issues.

1. The context

The role of students in the process of shaping the student learning experience (through formal institutional processes for assuring and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching, and more informal mechanisms) has long been recognised in UK higher education and elsewhere. Further, the increasing marketisation of higher education and continuing drives to greater public accountability have arguably prompted renewed institutional efforts to ensure that student voices, as 'consumers' and 'stakeholders', are listened to, and their messages acted upon as appropriate.

This paper is concerned with students' participation in institutions' internal quality assurance and enhancement processes. It draws on the findings of a study that is being conducted for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which is exploring institutions' deliberate attempts to involve students in those processes. The processes and practices that are being explored relate to formal student representation and student feedback (through questionnaires, surveys and other mechanisms), as well as other informal processes which seek to inform and enhance the collective student learning experience. While this is a study that is focused on one particular country, there are messages from this research that will be of interest to other countries in Europe and beyond (and undoubtedly there is much practice from other countries that UK institutions could learn from).

2. The policy intentions

At the European level, student participation in the governance of higher education has been recognised as an important part of the Bologna Process. This was enshrined in the Prague communiqué of 2001, which supported the idea that 'students are full members of the higher education community' and affirmed that 'students should participate in and influence the organisation and content of education at universities and other higher education institutions'.

Also in the context of the Bologna Process, the Berlin communiqué of 2003 invited the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and others to produce a set of standards and guidelines for quality assurance. These standards and guidelines have since been produced, part of which focuses on internal quality assurance within higher education institutions. These indicate that institutions should have strategies,

policies and procedures for quality assurance that include a role for students and other stakeholders (ENQA, 2007). Further, the UK's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has recently published a statement on its approaches to student engagement (QAA, 2008), which includes four aims - one of which is that QAA will work with higher education institutions to develop the role of students in institutional quality management.

3. The research evidence in the UK

While the importance of involving students in shaping the learning experience through quality assurance and enhancement processes is recognised by both policy bodies and institutions, actual practice may tell a somewhat different story. In the UK, there have been a number of studies that have researched the role of students in these processes and which have highlighted issues concerning effectiveness.

A report exploring the ways in which institutions collected and used feedback from students (CHERI et al, 2003) noted a number of contextual features that were reducing the opportunities for informal interactions and communications between students and staff and hence increasing the need for a greater formalisation of opportunities for such interactions. Such features included: the steady decline of staff/student ratios in general; the increasing use of modular forms of course organisation; a more diverse student body among which traditional and homogeneous expectations and attitudes could not be assumed; and pressures on academic staff - to which could be added, the pressures on student themselves who increasingly have 'busy lives' and need to 'fit' higher education study in with other commitments, including work and family. However, it was also noted that, while institutions may be improving their practices of collecting and analysing student feedback, they were failing to provide time and opportunities for feedback (to students) on how, and in what ways the institution had acted upon feedback from students. This was further underlined by the 2005 QAA report on student representation and feedback arrangements that found significant limitations in institutional processes in relation to this 'feedback loop'.

Student representation systems (whereby students are elected by their peers – or volunteer – to take part in institutions' education and quality governance committees) in particular have been the focus of a number of studies. In Scotland in 2003 two mapping studies were undertaken – one in higher education and one in further education (the post-compulsory vocational education and training sector). The studies identified a hierarchy of student involvement in institutional procedures for assuring and enhancing the quality of the student learning experience, namely: opportunity to attend meetings; attendance at such meetings - opportunities taken-up; engagement at such meetings - where students were able to make an effective contribution. Issues arising from these mapping studies included how to secure: effective engagement at faculty level; effective engagement of postgraduate students (in particular, postgraduate research students); communications between student representatives; a focus on learning and teaching issues; engagement of non full-time students (particularly in further education colleges); and effective representation from engineering and construction students (in further education colleges).

In Wales a study (York Consulting, 2006) found that, although systems for student representation in most institutions were well developed at institution level, some weaknesses were evident at faculty, school or department level. There were significant variations across institutions in terms of coordinating systems; faculty, school or department buy-in was key to determining the effectiveness of student representation; gaining sufficient number of representatives was an issue for all institutions, as was ensuring diversity in student representation.

In relation to questionnaire-based feedback from students, findings from the research mentioned above (CHERI et al, 2003) made it clear that a great deal of effort is being expended to obtain feedback from students, but cautioned that some institutions might need to consider whether more data are being collected than are needed. This went on to say that 'feedback from students is as important as feedback from students. Institutions need to ensure that students are told of the results of feedback and of any actions taken in response to it'. Similar messages emerge from Harvey's research into student feedback (see for example Harvey, 2003). He acknowledges that most higher education institutions around the world collect some type of feedback from students about their experience of higher education; however, while the collection of this feedback may be almost universal, 'it is less clear that it is used to its full potential' (ibid). He concludes that if feedback from students is to be collected, only that information that is to be used should be collected. Further, having collected information, action needs to be taken and that students are made aware that actions are taken (or not). He goes on to say that

This requires clear lines of communication, so that the impact of student views is fed back to students. In short, there needs to be a line of accountability back to the students to close the circle. It is not sufficient that students find out indirectly, if at all, that they have had a role in institutional policy.

However, a 2005 review of the research evidence about the use of formal instruments to measure students' views (Richardson, 2005) concluded that

Many students and teachers believe that student feedback is useful and informative, but many teachers and institutions do not take student feedback sufficiently seriously. The main issues are: the interpretation of feedback; institutional reward structures; the publication of feedback; and a sense of ownership of feedback on the part of both teachers and students.

Notwithstanding the issues identified by these studies, recent research (CHERI and Hobsons Research, 2008) found that higher education institutions are responding vigorously to a particular form of feedback from final year student, namely the National Student Survey (NSS). The NSS forms part of the revised Quality Assurance Framework for higher education in the UK (except Scotland), which emerged following the demise of external subject-based review of the quality of teaching provision. The aim of the NSS is to gather feedback on the quality of students' courses in order to contribute to public accountability as well as to help inform the choices of future applicants to higher education. Currently, the NSS is conducted in all higher education institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland; Scotland has its own Quality Enhancement Framework. Results from the research mentioned above show that increasing importance is being attached to the results of the NSS, and there is widespread evidence of institutional actions and initiatives arising from the results – not least because of the way in which the results are presented by the media: as league tables.

4. Addressing the issues

Given the issues that have been raised by the studies mentioned above and many others, what can be done to improve the effectiveness of students' roles in the processes of shaping the learning experience and, in particular, their participation in institutions' internal quality assurance and enhancement processes? In the UK, there are two initiatives that are currently on-going.

The first is a more general approach that is being taken by the UK government, as part of its commitment to a new style of politics and citizen engagement. This approach is seeking

to 'amplify the student voice' through the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills' student listening programme, which was launched in October 2007. A strand of the listening programme was the establishment of five student juries to capture the views of higher education students and feed them into the policy-making process. A number of general findings emerged from these juries, including a need for greater transparency about the feedback process from students to higher education institutions so that students are aware of its impact and institutions are more accountable.

The second is a study into student engagement, which is being undertaken by the Open University's Centre for Higher Education Research and Information for HEFCE, which aims to determine the present extent and nature of higher education student engagement in England. It aims to inform both HEFCE's policy development and meet its strategic objective of working with students and other stakeholders to ensure a high quality learning experience that meets the needs of students, and institutional practices. In addressing this objective, the Council is working with other UK stakeholders, such as the QAA, the Higher Education Academy, Universities UK, and the National Union of Students. These organisations have formed a 'cross sector student engagement group' that aims to share information on strategies to promote and facilitate student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement and matters relating to teaching, learning and student achievement.

The study currently being conducted is concerned with deliberate attempts to involve students in the process of shaping the learning experience, i.e. those institutional and student union processes and practices relating to formal student representation and student feedback, and other informal processes which seek to inform and enhance the collective student learning experience. The study is *not* concerned with specific teaching, learning and assessment activities that are designed to enhance an individual student's engagement with their own learning, nor with the National Student Survey.

Methodologically, the research is being carried out through

- i) desk research to seek evidence from recent empirical research on student engagement in the UK and elsewhere, and to ascertain the extent of existing activities undertaken by the key stakeholders (ie members of the cross sector group) to improve the effectiveness of student engagement;
- ii) interviews with the key stakeholders;
- iii) an online survey of institutions' practices and processes;
- iv) fieldwork in a selected groups of institutions (universities and further education colleges that have higher education provision) and student unions.

The study will report in December 2008.

The conference paper will report on the findings and issues that are emerging from the research; linkages will be made to the findings of the 2003 study mentioned above and those of other studies. Implications for institutions and student unions will be discussed as well as those for UK policy bodies who aspire to ensure a high quality learning experiences for students. The findings and issues to emerge from this study will be of interest to other countries and their associated policy bodies that are grappling with similar problems to those being experienced in the UK.

Questions for discussion

- Are the UK-specific issues reported above similar to those experienced elsewhere in Europe?
- What measures can be introduced to make the involvement of students in the process of shaping the student learning experience and, in particular, their participation in institutions' internal quality assurance and enhancement processes more effective?

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