What Students Think of Their Higher Education

Analysis of student submissions to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in 2012-13
## Contents

About this report .......................... 1

Executive summary ....................... 2

Academic support and the quality of the learning experience ............... 2

Assessment and feedback ................ 2

Information technology and other resources .......................... 2

Communication and published information ..................... 3

Student representation and participation in quality assurance .......... 3

Comparison with the 2013 report .......... 3

Methodology of the student submissions .................................. 4

Authorship and structure of the first group of submissions ............... 4

Sources of information .................... 4

Thematic element .......................... 4

Conclusions and recommendations .......... 4

Authorship and structure of the second group of submissions ........... 5

Sources of information .................... 5

Thematic element .......................... 5

Conclusions and recommendations .......... 5

Methodology of this report ................ 6

Bachelor's study or above at degree-awarding bodies .................... 7

Academic support and the quality of the learning experience .......... 7

Contact with teaching staff ................ 8

Contact with personal tutors ................ 8

Placements .................................. 9

Support for postgraduate students ........... 10

Support for international students ........... 10

Support for disabled students ............... 10

Assessment and feedback ................ 10

Design and approval of assessments .................. 10

Use of external examiners .................... 11

Quality of feedback on assessment ............... 11

Identifying academic misconduct .............. 12

Information technology and other resources .................. 12

Information technology hardware ............. 12

Wi-Fi ...................................... 12

Virtual learning environments .................. 12

Study space .................................. 13

Learning resources .......................... 13

Libraries .................................. 13
About this report

This report analyses the views of students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland about the quality of their higher education learning experiences, as expressed in the student submissions to QAA review.

Reviewing, and reporting on, the quality of the student experience is central to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA's) mission to safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education wherever it is delivered around the world. QAA does this through formal review processes that take account of evidence provided by each higher education provider (the self-evaluation document) and by the provider's student body (the student submission). The present analytical report looks at student submissions relating to the UK (except Scotland) in the academic year 2012-13.

The student submission forms part of the evidence base used by review teams to inform their judgements. It may suggest lines of enquiry, in conjunction with other evidence sources; however student submissions vary considerably in length and detail, dependent upon a range of factors such as the support provided by the student body within the institution, and institution's engagement with student representatives. In general, part-time and postgraduate students are less likely to contribute to a student submission than their full-time undergraduate peers, and further education colleges tend not to have well developed support in place to help students make a submission.

The 39 submissions are grouped into two main categories: submissions from students studying at 24 universities and other degree-awarding bodies, typically at bachelor’s level or above; and submissions from students enrolled on higher education programmes at further education colleges, or working towards foundation degrees. Full lists of institutions reviewed in each category (24 and 15 respectively) can be found in appendices 2 and 3.

The report opens with an executive summary. This is followed by a brief account of the methodology used by students in compiling their submissions and a short explanation of the methodology used in the present report. Under the two main categories, the report presents thematically grouped findings from the student submissions, summarising the main points identified and supporting them with quotations from the submissions themselves. The concluding section summarises the main themes emerging from the analysis.

1 See Appendix 3.
2 The degree-awarding bodies were reviewed under Institutional Review (England and Northern Ireland) and Institutional Review (Wales). The foundation degrees were reviewed under Review of Foundation Degrees in Wales; the higher education provided by further education colleges was reviewed under Review of College Higher Education. The abbreviations for these methods are IRENI, IR (Wales), RFDW and RCHE. The judgements of QAA review teams are informed by the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code), see www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code. This sets out what students are entitled to expect from their higher education provider (and what providers expect of themselves). Chapter B5: Student Engagement is particularly relevant in providing a context for the present publication; see www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=174.
Executive summary

A number of key themes emerged from the analysis of the 39 student submissions. Students are especially concerned about:

- academic support and the quality of the learning experience
- assessment and feedback
- information technology and other resources
- communication and published information
- student representation and participation in quality assurance

Academic support and the quality of the learning experience

Students expressed the view that their ability to learn was closely connected to the level of contact with teaching staff. Students were acutely aware when different patterns of contact existed between disciplines, and there was much dissatisfaction with the disparate use of independent study weeks and the subsequent reduction in contact. Disparities were regarded as inequitable and elicited comparisons about the value for money offered by different programmes.

Student evaluation of academic support was not restricted to their experiences in lectures, laboratories and seminars, but encompassed the ease with which they could contact and communicate with teaching staff; the usefulness of the feedback they received on their assessments; how efficiently their programmes were timetabled and managed; the availability of learning resources; and the support they received while on placement.

Personal tutors were seen as an essential element of academic support, and a clear definition of this role, the allocation of adequate resource (time) to it, and appointment of staff with an interest in providing pastoral support were regarded as desirable.

Support provided by administrative staff, technicians and other support services was felt to contribute significantly to a positive learning experience. Similarly, the provision of placement opportunities, and support while on placement, were highly valued.

Assessment and feedback

The quality of feedback on assessment was considered to be inconsistent and deadlines for the return of assessed work were often not met. Feedback was often insubstantial and received too late to be used as a constructive learning tool. Clear assessment criteria and honest, constructive one-to-one feedback exemplified good practice.

Information technology and other resources

There was much appreciation for the increased provision of PCs, workstations and Wi-Fi networks. However, student satisfaction decreased significantly if there was no corresponding improvement in the speed of internet connection. This was particularly so when an increasing number of students were using their own laptops. Providers may not appreciate the importance students place on the availability of efficient IT facilities.

The investment in learning spaces and resources was valued. Providers had sought to meet the demand for resources by increasing the use of ebooks, digitising core texts and by extending library opening hours.
Communication and published information

Timetabling was regarded by students as having a huge impact on the quality of learning. Timetables needed to be more student-centred, with fewer gaps between lectures and seminars, a more logical approach to the location of lectures and more efficient notification of cancellations or alterations.

There was an expectation that comprehensive information about term dates, reading lists, fee payment, timetables, assessment and periods of placement should be available soon after an offer had been accepted.

Public information should be more transparent in relation to the choice of modules actually available, the opportunities for placement and the likely student experience at different campuses. It should provide details of all the costs students are likely to incur, including projects, field trips, placements, text books, travel between campuses and the printing of learning materials.

Student representation and participation in quality assurance

Strong partnerships had developed which supported student representation and engagement in quality assurance processes. The quality of the student experience had improved as a result.

Inferences drawn from this report should reflect that submissions did not represent the entire student body, but mainly that of full-time undergraduate students. Under-represented groups included postgraduate and research students; part-time students; mature students; distance learners and students studying at partner institutions. These groups were often also under-represented in quality assurance processes; they received less comprehensive induction programmes than other students; they were under-resourced in terms of dedicated study spaces; and wider support services were often not available when they attended campus.

Comparison with the 2013 report

Academic support and levels of contact with teaching staff continue to be essential to learning success. Concerns relating to personal tutors continued to focus upon the varying levels of support they provided.

Compared with the findings in the 2013 report, there seemed to be even greater awareness of differences in the levels of contact with staff and the provision of resources between disciplines, both of which students used when determining value for money.

There were more references to, and awareness of, the academic qualifications of staff, particularly how many held teaching qualifications.

Concerns about feedback on assessment continued to focus upon insufficient developmental feedback and the time taken to provide it.

Inadequate or unreliable information technology resources continued to impact negatively upon learning opportunities and caused huge dissatisfaction, which was reflected in national student surveys.

There was significantly more discussion about student representation in quality assurance processes and the positive impact it had had on the student experience. There was greater discussion regarding under-represented student groups.

A new and significant theme was the need for student-centred timetabling and early receipt of programme information.

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Methodology of the student submissions

Authorship and structure of the first group of submissions

Where authorship of the student submissions was stated, there were several authors. The submissions generally followed the same structure as the provider’s self-evaluation document (SED), using three to six subheadings as a structural framework. Student submissions ranged from seven to 79 pages in length.

Sources of information

Most student submissions acknowledged that it had been difficult to contact, engage, or obtain contributions from a number of student groups. The under-represented groups were: postgraduate and research students; part-time students; mature students; distance learners; students with disabilities; students studying through partnership arrangements; and, in some cases, international students.

Some student representative bodies had conducted surveys and convened focus groups to gather primary data for the submission. Others, comprising a small number of officers, did not have the capacity to examine a wide range of sources and relied mainly on National Student Survey (NSS) data or information from the provider.

Secondary data sources included:

- minutes of staff-student liaison committee (SSLC) meetings
- annual monitoring reports and action plans
- minutes of academic boards, academic standards committees, learning and teaching committees and periodic reviews
- student surveys - the NSS, Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), Domestic Student Barometer (DSB), and International Student Barometer (ISB).

Thematic element

Seven submissions focused on the first year student experience and 13 on student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement. Discussion of the thematic element was, with few exceptions, integrated into the main document structure, rather than presented as a discrete section. There was no mention of a thematic element in four submissions, nor was it possible to discern what the thematic focus might have been.

Conclusions and recommendations

Nine submissions made explicit recommendations, the number of which ranged between one and 125. Eleven submissions discussed broad areas for development or improvement, and there was a more general discussion of future challenges in four submissions.

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4 Appendix 2.

5 www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review.
Authorship and structure of the second group of submissions

Where authorship of the student submissions was stated there were several authors. All submissions were structured according to the main headings of the provider’s SED and focused on three, four or five headings to a greater or lesser degree. They ranged between three and 28 pages in length.

Sources of information
A number of student representative bodies had conducted surveys or convened focus groups to gather primary data for the submission. The main sources of secondary data were minutes of staff-student liaison committees and data from the National Student Survey (NSS).

Thematic element
Two submissions cited the first year student experience as the thematic focus. There was no mention of a thematic element in the remaining submissions, nor was it possible to deduce what it had been.

Conclusions and recommendations
Three submissions made explicit recommendations, the number of which ranged between three and 10. Two submissions discussed action points.

6 Appendix 3.
Methodology of this report

This report has been structured according to the emergent themes arising from an analysis of the student submissions. Its two main limitations are the small sample size (39 submissions) and the inconsistencies in the approach taken by the authors of the submissions.\(^7\)

A number of submissions focused on the effectiveness of the student representative body rather than upon that of the provider. Others simply described the quality procedures used by the provider.

It was not always clear whether discussion related to undergraduate or postgraduate students groups, or both. Such ambiguity may reflect the quality of the briefing and support provided to the student representative bodies, or the limited resources available to them. Some student representative bodies had many representatives and full-time officers, while others had few representatives, appointed for limited periods of six to 12 months. Consequently, the time and resources available to them varied considerably. Any resultant ambiguous information has not been included in this report.

Many submissions included quotations from individual students on selected issues; the number on each issue varied. When available, and where appropriate, direct quotations from students and from the submissions have been included in this report to evidence the student voice. All such entries have been anonymised.

The use of statistics was inconsistent. It was often unclear whether, for example, a statistic referred to the percentage of the total student population or to the percentage of respondents to a particular survey question. It was not always clear to which source of information statistics were referring. Any such ambiguous information has not been included in this report.

\(^7\) Appendices 2 and 3
Bachelor’s study or above at degree-awarding bodies

Academic support and the quality of the learning experience

Student representative bodies acknowledged the commitment by providers to ensure that full-time academic staff held a teaching qualification or HEA fellowship, new staff undertook a postgraduate certificate in education practice, and that PhD students who delivered lectures received training. Some providers had set targets for academic staff to hold a doctorate.

There were high rates of satisfaction in relation to teaching staff who explained things well, but the quality of teaching was often seen as inconsistent. There had been an increase in National Student Survey (NSS) satisfaction scores for teaching and learning, and there was recognition that there will inevitably be some variability in the quality of teaching.

The support provided by administrative staff, technicians, and other support services contributed significantly to a positive learning experience and was highly valued.

‘Great support from the student support services and from the module coordinators on [the virtual learning environment].’

Factors that contributed to increased satisfaction with the quality of teaching included: small class sizes; varied delivery techniques; the availability of lecture slides online before lectures (or soon after); a range of high quality and enthusiastic lecturers who made their current research relevant to the content of programmes; lecturers from industry and relevant fields of practice; and the innovative use of video, podcasting and social media.

‘Staff are always enthusiastic and calibre of teaching is excellent.’

‘Teaching staff are well informed on their subjects. They have a key interest in subjects - makes learning easier.’

‘We really benefit from specialist tutors who bring knowledge from the industry into teaching.’

‘The teachers are really, really enthusiastic which is good and I felt that I could speak to them, some of them I felt comfortable approaching. You can tell that they’re passionate about what they’re teaching.’

‘Dedication of the staff are incredible especially the voice teachers. The imagination and planning is great.’

‘Very creative course, interesting lectures, teachers are amazing and always helping with full understanding or advice for projects, in my opinion teachers are really involved with teaching and they could be inspirational for some of us.’

There were a number of references to teaching awards, such as Star Awards, You’re Brilliant and Excellence Awards, being used by students as indicators of high standards of teaching, in championing best practice and innovative teaching and learning.

Teaching could be further improved by: showcasing best practice; better use of PowerPoint (not reading slides directly from the screen); more seminars and tutorials; recorded lectures available online; more opportunities for interaction with lecturers via the virtual learning environment (VLE), podcasts or online sessions (particularly for international and distance learners); and regular updating of course materials.

‘Staff are always enthusiastic and calibre of teaching is excellent.’
There was considerable dissatisfaction when teaching staff failed to make their research relevant to students’ specific programmes of learning.

‘Staff are not interested in teaching… they are more concerned with their research and see teaching as a side interest.’

‘[The University recruits the] … ‘best academics’ - but what are they best at? [They are] highly talented, but their particular talents lie in different areas, and the emphasis is upon research ability. [There is no] requirement for teaching qualifications - means that there is variability in the quality of their skills and in levels of knowledge – such as equality, diversity and disability issues – all highly relevant to teaching.’

Contact with teaching staff

Students linked their ability to learn with the amount of contact they had with teaching staff, and they were acutely aware when different patterns of contact existed in other disciplines. The varied use of independent study or reading weeks compounded student dissatisfaction regarding the support they received. Students believed such differences to be inequitable and a pertinent factor in determining value for money.

‘Medicine is taught 9-5 most days, and this is well worth the money.’

‘Eight hours’ worth of teaching is not enough as much material is skimmed over and not covered fully. You have to go away and re-teach it yourself.’

‘Hardly any contact time with teachers, sometimes wonder what we are paying for.’

‘Teacher has little time to give additional advice.’

‘Personal time with our tutors and collaboration is low this year:

‘Week 1 and 12 are redundant weeks anyway, and with the introduction of reading week, contact is reduced to solely 8 out of 12 weeks. This is unacceptable.’

‘There are different study weeks for each subject so it’s not an effective use of time.’

Contact with personal tutors

A positive and supportive relationship with a personal tutor was essential to successful learning. There had been no significant improvement in satisfaction rates for a number of years and inconsistencies in students’ experiences continued to be problematic.

‘If you don’t have a good tutor you are at a significant disadvantage compared to people who do.’

‘There is not enough contact time and personal tutors do not really spend time [with], or know their students. My personal tutor was quite unhelpful, when I had problems about deciding what modules to choose and whether to do [a] masters.’

‘It’s easier to email if you have a query as often they [personal tutors] won’t make themselves available to meet face-to-face.’

‘Only met personal tutor once in an academic year, I feel that is not enough.’

‘I don’t think my personal tutor knows who I am and he certainly doesn’t know much about my progress.’

‘A much closer relationship could be encouraged and established [with tutors].’

While most providers offered a broad range of support through student services departments, in some it was the role of personal tutors to provide advice and support in all matters relating to academic, personal and career development. The ambiguous use of titles such as personal tutor and academic tutor often led to confusion about the support they provided.
Students expressed the view that length of experience did not necessarily make individual staff good candidates for the role of personal tutor. Training for the role and regular monitoring of tutorial systems was required. Students were particularly dissatisfied when personal tutors were changed frequently and when they were not connected to a student’s programme of study.

‘The personal tutor organisation has been really poor. After four years at [...] I am now on my seventh personal tutor, who doesn’t know anything about me and I don’t feel very supported in my final (and very stressful!) year. I’m not very happy at the idea of this person writing a reference for me for a future job as they will only have the basic information that is on my student record.’

‘Multiple times my personal tutor has changed without any notification. At the moment I believe I am allocated to someone who doesn’t even work in the subject I am learning, which I think is ridiculous.’

‘I’m a law student yet have a personal tutor from the School of Marketing. My tutor has openly told me that he won’t be able to help me with course related issues, and this adds to the pressure of having to arrange meetings with individual lecturers should any issues arise. It would be much easier for me to have a personal tutor from law.’

Suggested improvements were to ensure greater and easier access to personal tutors through scheduled tutorials, drop-in sessions, surgeries, bookable appointments and, importantly, that personal tutors should respond to emails.

‘Office hours need to be longer as often they clash with lectures.’

‘It’s easier to email if you have a query as often they [personal tutors] won’t make themselves available to meet face-to-face.’

‘My personal tutor hasn’t been much help to me throughout my studies, he is also very hard to get hold of which is a nuisance!’

Several providers had reviewed their personal tutor systems and some had introduced policies or codes of conduct which stipulated a minimum number of contacts with tutees and a maximum period between each contact.

‘It’s been nice to have the same personal tutor over the three years who has been good at giving advice and support.’

‘My personal tutor has been invaluable, helping with academic and personal issues.’

‘The tutoring system was considered excellent by everyone.’

Placements

Work-based and placement opportunities were highly valued and while most students were well supported, some required better preparation prior to, and greater support while on, placement. There was some concern about the lack of transparency of information available, particularly about the hidden costs of placements such as travel and additional accommodation.

‘Placements were fantastic, and I learnt such a lot.’

‘I have thoroughly enjoyed my placement, and it provided me with invaluable contacts in the industry.’

‘Was not adequately informed of the extra expenditures ie travel costs during placement and paying for extra accommodation when placement extended beyond the usual term.’

‘Students should also be forewarned before entering the course that you might be expected to commute considerable distances to placements, as this was not clear when I started.’
Support for postgraduate students
Postgraduate students were generally satisfied with the support they received, the learning resources, study spaces and the research skills training available. Good supervision was the most important aspect of the postgraduate experience, and there was variation in the quality of support provided. There had been improvements in supervision and excellent support from supervisors who were readily available to give guidance.

‘My supervisor is very supportive and provides adequate support each time I need it.’
‘The research and general environment is stimulating.’
‘There is a lot of variation in student’s (sic) experience of supervision - I realise it is a constant issue in RD studies and very difficult to standardise, but a good start might be to take the monitoring process more seriously and have a mechanism for intervention where students never see their supervisors/feel there isn’t anyone they can talk to for guidance about their work.’
‘I have two supervisors - one of them is almost not available while the other one, who came in later, is very supportive.’
‘More help with funding information.’
‘More resources in the library and more free access to databases. If they accept our initial research proposal, they should also provide us with the sufficient resources.’
‘Spaces for part time students - hot desks at least. The library is not too conducive to work - other postgrads have offices, a couple of hot desks would not be an unreasonable offer.’
‘Integration within my department has been minimal, no real attempt has been made to introduce research students to department staff or get them involved in research projects/activities outside our own PhDs.’
‘I think the research experience you have depends a lot on where you are based, if overseas. I was abroad for two years, and as such felt removed from the research support available. My supervisors were all back in UK and the research support provided by the overseas site was limited.’

Support for international students
International students received a range of help with settling into a new culture, environment, and language. Courses in English language, study skills and IT; advice on finance, accommodation and Tier 4 visa renewal; and dedicated help desks were among the support offered.

Support for disabled students
References to disabled students indicated that the provision was satisfactory, as was the support available for learning difficulties or differences such as dyslexia.

Analysis and feedback

Design and approval of assessments
A number of providers had undertaken reviews of assessment. Student representatives had contributed to assessment design and review through involvement in academic committees. There were some issues when assignments were clustered together which increased the burden of assessment, and when there was lack of clarity about submission dates. Suggested improvements were to provide sample questions and answers on the VLE, enable online submission and to return summative exam scripts to students as a means of formative feedback.
Use of external examiners
Some students met with external examiners while others had limited or inconsistent contact with them. External examiner reports were considered at staff–student liaison committees (SSLCs) and were then made available to the wider student population via VLEs. This practice was inconsistent or did not occur at all in some providers.

Quality of feedback on assessment
The student submissions indicated that pockets of good practice existed, but that the quality of feedback was inconsistent. Students often felt that it was insubstantial and received too late to be used as a constructive tool. Some providers stipulated minimum return times between three to six weeks, but these deadlines were not always met.

Good practice included: assignment briefs that clearly stated the assessment criteria and the expected format for submission; small group teaching that allowed focused feedback from teachers and peers; one-to-one feedback; detailed, typed feedback sheets with honest, constructive feedback about how to improve; the use of alternative forms of feedback; and the dissemination of good practice and regular training for academic staff.

‘I also found the tutor feedback enormously helpful, prompt and was aware support was there if needed.’

‘Feedback was always really useful and thorough, but not timely...especially since feedback earlier on would have helped improve our performance in the following term.’

‘The feedback received was by and large unhelpful particularly where these were critical comments. Marking and the wide variation among markers is the least systematic and harmonized aspect of the MSc.’

‘Feedback has been consistently late, and some feedback has showed absolutely no constructiveness at all, with perhaps a three word comment at the bottom. This in no way gives us any chance to improve on our work.’

‘I would expect one-to-one essay feedback sessions instead of just a few lines and some ticks in boxes. Ideally the same feedback would be available after exams. Good feedback is crucial to improvement and I feel that throughout my degree I have not improved my essay writing style purely because I do not know what I need [to] change.

‘The comments at the bottom of essays should explain the strengths and weaknesses and how they can improve. Or give ideas about ways they could have expanded/improved their arguments.’

‘Marks and feedback on assessments were frequently late, and most of the time this was without notification or explanation. This is particularly unacceptable when feedback on a previous assignment would be useful for a current or future one.’

‘Often feedback is given too late and we are already too far into other projects for it to help.’

‘Assignment feedback and results takes too long to come back to students.’

‘Assessment feedback is slow, is brief and lacks detail in order for the student to improve.’

‘Some feedback hasn’t arrived on time. Sometimes I don’t understand comments and some tutors don’t explain everything clearly.’

There was some dissatisfaction with the lack of clarity on grading and marking of assessments and the calculation of the overall module grade. Where handwritten feedback still occurred there were issues with legibility. There were a number of references to the need for feedback on examinations. Students were largely unaware they had the right to request to see their marked examination papers.
'I’ve always received useful feedback, but [had] difficulty in linking the (often positive) feedback to the (average) grade given.'
'I feel if I was able to find where I went wrong in exams then I could have achieved more.'
'Feedback often doesn’t help me to understand where I have gone wrong in coursework. Exam feedback would have also been very helpful.'

**Identifying academic misconduct**

Plagiarism continued to be an issue and there had been a number of initiatives to alert students how to avoid it. When it was discovered it was important that disciplinary procedures were applied consistently. The use of systems such as Grademark and Turnitin were now more common. There was some indication of the over-representation of international students in cases of academic misconduct, which can reflect cultural differences in prior educational experiences.

**Information technology and other resources**

**Information technology hardware**

While the increased provision of personal computers, workstations and laptops was appreciated there was significant dissatisfaction when there was no corresponding improvement in the speed of internet connection.

‘Computers were too slow and also not enough of them available.’

**Wi-Fi**

Some providers had extended wireless networks across campuses and others were actively upgrading their networks. In some, there was still a need for increased wireless network capacity, particularly in libraries and other common study spaces, and more charging points were required to accommodate the increasing number of students using their own laptops.

**Virtual learning environments**

Virtual learning environments (VLEs) were a primary source of information for students. They were used extensively as a repository for learning materials (including in some cases lecture capture, audio and visual media files); as discussion boards; for communication between academics and students; and, in some instances, as an assessment tool.

They were valued in creating a sense of community, particularly among distance learners. They were also the means through which student representation and engagement in quality assurance information was managed.

‘I just want to thank [...] staff and tutors for their Webboard support. It seems to require a lot of work, but I am tremendously thankful for the support. Doing this program [at a] distance is difficult so the Webboard was very helpful.’

‘The [VLE] was a very useful resource. It gave me comfort to realise that I was not alone in my ‘troubles’. The interaction with other students gave me motivation and solutions to many of my questions.’

‘The information available on Blackboard has been extremely helpful in aiding learning.’

‘Blackboard is very well organised, and having access to lecture recordings is really appreciated. The folders with the learning material and the [...] booklets are very useful.’

‘The most useful core modules provided specifically written notes or extremely clear lecture slides that worked in the same way.’

Negative comments related to ineffective use of the VLE by staff; individual staff using alternative software unsupported by the provider; inconsistency in the layout and format of
material which made navigation overly complex and confusing; and difficulties in accessing the VLE for staff and students at partner organisations.

‘Overall most instructors used [the VLE] well but [others] made completing course readings very difficult as we had to search out our own articles which take too much time when we were given the course outlines so late.’

Although providers gave guidance on the use of VLEs, such as all teaching resources to be made available to students in advance of lectures or seminars, it was not always followed.

‘The information wasn’t always put up on the Blackboard, sometimes it was quite haphazard.’
‘Certain lecturers not uploading study material onto Blackboard. It is an extremely useful communication/learning tool if used appropriately (or at all).’
‘We just like to have our notes and the lecture slides too.’

Study space
Students were satisfied with teaching and learning spaces although there could be difficulties in booking or accessing them for group work. They appreciated improvement programmes such as the refit of teaching rooms, lecture theatres, and computer and digital spaces.

‘Better group work accommodation. More and better computing facilities [needed].’

Learning resources
There had been much investment in audio, visual, and digital resources. However, a rise in student numbers had continued to put pressure on resources. Providers had sought innovative ways of addressing the problem and many libraries had increased the use of ebooks and the digitising of core texts.

‘I think the study materials are of incredibly high quality, explaining complex concepts and techniques very well and simply.’

Libraries
Students rated library resources as good. A rise in student numbers had resulted in over-crowding in libraries, and providers had extended opening hours, in many cases to 24/7.

‘There is a clear need for additional workplaces on campus with many students complaining of overcrowding in the library and the need for additional computer stations.’

‘Nothing major...but, space for individual study at school (library is quite packed most of the time and we often study at cafeteria).’

‘Online, digitised text access is sometimes unavailable which means more people try to get access from the books in the library which is already very difficult.’

‘Ebooks are widely used for additional readings, but there’s very few core textbooks digitised for online use.’

Communication and published information
There was some use of innovative forms of communication such as digital signage, and in communicating the outcomes of surveys through ‘You said, we did’ campaigns. Student portals and, in some cases, social media, were used effectively to communicate updates, announcements and alerts.

Many submissions stated that the public information available on websites and in literature was accurate and appropriate. Nonetheless, information could be more honest and transparent in relation to the modules actually on offer; the complexities of timetabling;
at which campus teaching would take place; the availability of placement opportunities; and the availability of accommodation. Public information should reflect the reality of the student experience at each campus site, as there were likely to be significant differences. Disparities between campuses were an important factor in determining value for money. Some providers had responded and transparency had improved.

Pre-arrival information
Students expected to receive comprehensive information about timetables, term dates, reading lists, fee payment dates, assessment dates and periods of placement soon after an offer was accepted. This was of particular value to international students, part-time and mature students.

‘One recurring problem for students is that they do not receive timetables for their year in enough time. This is a particular problem for international students who require holiday dates and assessment dates to enable them to book flights home. It is also an issue for students who wish to work part-time during their course (likely to be a more frequent occurrence with the rise in fees) who would benefit from knowing their timetable in advance to enable them to arrange working hours.’

Timetabling
The practical logistics of timetabling and location of learning activities had a huge impact on the quality of students’ learning experiences. Single lectures scheduled over five consecutive days, or lectures located in different campuses on the same day, increased costs of travel and care commitments, and reduced the opportunity for part-time employment. There were demands for timetabling to be made more student-centred with fewer gaps between lectures and seminars, a more logical approach to teaching locations and more efficient notification of cancellations or alterations.

‘I felt that much of the sessions timetabled were actually much shorter than the timetable said, meaning there was (sic.) large gaps between sessions.’

‘[A student union newspaper] ran a story illustrating the impact of poor timetabling using the case study of a student with three children and a part-time job. The student had created her own timetable by speaking to as many tutors as possible, and getting assistance from administrative staff; her online ‘personalised’ timetable remained blank.’

Hidden costs
There was great concern about hidden costs, which one submission defined as:

‘...a barrier to learning as there is a financial disincentive to accessing resources that would help students with their studies. This might mean that a student has to undertake additional part time work...meaning they have less time to study.’

Public information should provide details of all likely costs relating to: art projects, field trips, placements, equipment, and uniforms, so that students can plan their finances accordingly.

‘They told us what costs we would incur, right down to how much a stethoscope will cost.’

‘They were great and told us everything we could possibly need to know; exam dates, timetables, assessment deadlines. They even told us how much the uniform would cost and where we can purchase it from.’

‘I knew in advance exactly how much I would need to spend, and I thank the department for their honesty.’

‘Previous warning on the extra costs of the course would have been helpful.’

‘Was not adequately informed of the extra expenditures ie travel costs during placement and paying for extra accommodation when placement extended beyond the usual term.’
‘Having to find hundreds of pounds to pay for a compulsory field trip is not easy, but it would have been much easier if we’d have been (sic) expecting the costs. This trip was a complete shock for me, yet I had to find the money, as non-attendance meant an instant fail of the module.’

‘There is no loan or bursary available to pay for the field trip costs on my course. They take up a substantial amount of my maintenance loan and coupled with accommodation I would have no money to live on. My parents have to pay a lot of the time.’

‘The cost of fieldwork which is always compulsory, for the last two years I’ve had to use a thousand pounds out of loan money to pay each year.’

‘Placements were not given in consideration of where I lived and the cost of travelling.’

The cost of printing was an unexpected financial burden for students. The provision of lecture and seminar notes, reading materials and other printed material was inconsistent. Some programmes provided free printer credits and all lecture materials while others did not. Such practice was inequitable and was a pertinent factor in determining value for money.

‘PowerPoint [slides] should be out on Blackboard sooner to enable us all to have the resources for the lectures.’

‘The course is very expensive, including printing costs, equipment and research with students being expected to travel to London, go to exhibition[s] etc.’

‘Reduced printing costs for students on print based courses.’

‘Printing costs are higher than at other universities.’

While students expected to purchase text books, they had not anticipated the number of purchases required. Recommendations to reduce costs included the greater use of ebooks, the provision of lecture notes, and recommended reading to be available online.

**Student representation and participation in quality assurance**

Student engagement took place through module and programme evaluations, and representation on staff–student liaison committees (SSLCs), academic boards and committees, learning and teaching committees, and in periodic review and through student-led teaching awards. Students participated in national surveys such as the NSS; ISB; PTES and PRES; student opinion surveys (SOS); and student engagement surveys (SES).

There were many opportunities to influence the design of programmes, assessment, and the quality of the learning. Student engagement had an impact: processes changed reasonably quickly, and the quality of learning improved as a result. These outcomes could, however, be better communicated through wider use of focus groups and awareness campaigns such as ‘You said, we did’, ‘Keep, Stop, Start’ and ‘Big Conversations’.

‘...it’s been quite surprising...you actually see these are all the things we’ve [asked for] and someone’s actually done something about it. It was nice!’

‘...if anyone’s got any issues we always just take it to the meetings. We always get feedback...We can always bring up various things...if we feel like we need to improve our course we just say something and they always work off it.’

Student participation in quality assurance was problematic where the culture of engagement was inconsistent; in partnership arrangements; where there were few student representatives; and where providers did not support the training of student representatives.

‘If anyone’s got any issues we always just take it to the meetings. We always get feedback.’
There was significant under-representation of particular groups: postgraduate and research students; part-time students; mature students; distance learners; and students studying at partner organisations. Better use of VLEs could help develop a presence for such groups.

‘We had little response from mature students (approximately eight per cent of all survey participants), this percentage represents only four per cent of the total mature student population.’

It might be the case that research students in postgraduate institutions do not wish to be involved in quality assurance processes. They are experienced learners and are likely to express their concerns, or raise complaints, at programme level.

Additional themes

Registration and induction processes
Admissions policies were clear and consistently applied, and students were happy with most elements of the application and registration process.

Students starting in the autumn term invariably received more detailed and better supported induction processes than students at other points in the year, and this was particularly the case for postgraduate students. Some providers had made recorded induction sessions available on VLEs.

‘Before starting it would be good to have more information about reading lists and the academic structure.’

‘My materials arrived three weeks late which was not good enough.’

‘It would have been helpful to have been sent the link to the website with orientation material earlier. Overall, very satisfied with the whole induction process.’

‘The pre-registration information was good although would have been better if posted earlier.’

‘Finding the welcome letter and pre-registration materials on the website was not easy. I would improve accessibility.’

Organisation and management of teaching and learning
Improvements in the organisation and administration of programmes were required. The choice of modules available and academic progression and retention, particularly of international students and those who arrived through clearing, was a cause for concern.

‘When I visited the University on an open day before I decided to attend, the prospective undergraduates were told about various modules that were available to students...A lot of emphasis was placed on [a] particular module, and yet in my whole time at University, it has never been a module option.’

‘The course is not what I wanted or expected when I signed up for Biology...In four years, there have been only three modules specifically relevant to what I am interested in and I don’t think this particular course title should be offered any more as it is misleading.’

‘[I] don’t feel the course was accurately detailed in the University guide. Sharing classes with the speech and language course can often be overwhelming and the lecturer sometimes does not take the different levels of both courses into consideration.’

‘My materials arrived three weeks late which was not good enough.’
Careers guidance
There was much praise regarding the provision of career information, advice, and guidance, although not all students were aware of the services offered.

‘I attended the Academic Careers Forum and found it really interesting and useful. It would have been nice throughout the year to hear more about faculty-members’ career paths and backgrounds.’

‘Career advice should be given at different stages of the course.’

‘Need more help with regards to info/help getting into skilled professions (eg specific scientific careers/allied health professionals), as well as PhDs!’

‘There could be more advice on choosing modules particularly showing how they are related to different jobs and career[s].’

‘One-to-one careers advice was not very useful. Not enough time to really explore one's situation. The careers website is very good though.’

‘More career guidance. I enrolled in the course specifically to increase my career options and I feel like there could be a lot more done with networking and career advice.’

‘Career sessions targeted at individuals with little or no work experience/who have not published papers yet. I came straight from my BSc and felt a bit intimidated by some of the career sessions.’

Student Charter
Students were aware that a Student Charter existed which set out the responsibilities and expectations of both students and the institution. Students referred to it when evaluating their experience.

Complaints and appeals
Many students were unaware of the procedures relating to complaints and appeals and there was a need for greater clarity and transparency in relation to the procedures for mitigating and extenuating circumstances.
Foundation degrees and college-based higher education

Academic support and the quality of the learning experience

Most students believed staff to be appropriately qualified and were aware of staff attaining teaching and learning fellowships.

There was some concern where teaching was dependant on a key member of staff, and in some providers the absence of qualified lecturers was also a concern. Students were acutely aware and dissatisfied when they were taught by unqualified laboratory support staff.

‘There have been instances where we haven’t had a lecturer and they have said we will have one next week for you and next week would come and...no tutor would turn up and we would sit around and no one would come to teach us and it just put a down on things.’

Many students were confident they received a high standard of education and that the support they received addressed their individual needs. Teaching staff were highly skilled, were from a range of backgrounds, and had significant experience in their subjects. They maintained positive links with industry, often engaging specialist guest speakers and arranging visits to industry. Teaching was informed by current theories, techniques and technology and reflected current practice in industry.

‘All of them are professionals who have worked in the sector...[their] experience and extensive knowledge is invaluable in the field that I’m working in, with young people. The way that we are taught, it works for us as mature students and vocational students.’

‘All the tutors are really helpful and there is a lot of information that can be found on the VLE which is really good.’

Improvements in communication and sharing good practice, particularly where programmes were delivered through a number of partnership arrangements, were needed.

Contact with teaching staff

The amount of contact time with staff was good and many staff were available via email or telephone. Small class sizes helped build effective relationships with staff, and the broad range of advice and guidance received had been good. When student groups were merged during lectures, students perceived it to be a reduction in contact time.

Contact with personal tutors

Tutorial systems were effective. Students usually retained the same personal tutor throughout their period of study. Tutors provided guidance on good academic practice, mitigating circumstances and other regulations, and personal support. Some tutorial systems stipulated at least one meeting with a personal tutor per term. The quality of pastoral care received was dependent on the personal tutor and could vary widely.

Placements

Students appreciated the efforts made to provide quality work placements. They were satisfied with the information and support available while on placement and appreciated the varied means of assessment for work-based learning.

There was some concern where students had to find and negotiate their own work placements, particularly when a placement was a requirement of the programme. Students felt that colleges should be responsible for arranging placements.
‘I have been very satisfied with the quality of the work placements and links with employers, as well as opportunities given to students.’
‘I’m very satisfied, I’ve been able to gain more knowledge and reflect on best practice.’

Assessment and feedback
Students were satisfied with the variety of assessment methods used. They had little opportunity to be involved in the design, approval or monitoring of assessment, other than through end-of-module surveys, which were deemed to be applied inconsistently. There were only three references to external examiner reports. One indicated that the reports were available via the VLE. The other two expressed a concern that many students were unaware of the very existence of such reports.

Quality of feedback on assessment
Feedback on assessed work was constructive and helped students to improve the quality of their work.

‘Feedback has allowed me to focus on my weak areas and given me a direction in which to improve.’

Targets for the return of assessed work were between three and four weeks, and many students were content with the timeliness of feedback they received, although there were inconsistencies in practice.

Information technology and other resources
Dedicated study spaces for higher education programmes were highly valued, and students were satisfied with the quality and availability of resources. Online resources were essential for part-time and distance learners.

‘Resources are second to none here...It’s just been refurbished. It’s got plenty of facilities in terms of ship simulators. The learning facilities are good as well...It’s a brilliant way to really learn!’

Virtual learning environments
VLEs provided access to module handbooks, course materials, ebooks and eTracker, though initial access to VLEs could be problematic. Information should be clearly and consistently presented.

‘Moodle changed and I found that it was harder to navigate around it. It was more confusing. Otherwise it has been good.’

‘All the tutors are really helpful and there is a lot of information that can be found on the VLE which is really good.’

Libraries
Libraries and library support staff were the most valuable resource. While many libraries had increased book allowances and had provided greater access to online libraries, an increase in the number of ebooks available was still required.

‘The library is very good. It meets a lot of my needs and its services help me with my studies.’
Communication and published information

Programmes were well organised, structured, and tailored to students’ needs. VLEs were used effectively to communicate changes to programmes and wider institutional issues. However, improvements were required in communicating information relating to timetabling and institutional mergers, particularly in the context of partnership arrangements.

The public information available was clear and comprehensive. Students expected to receive information relating to start dates, assessments and timetabling as soon as possible after registration.

Student representation and participation in quality assurance

Student representation systems were robust, and their impact was communicated through campaigns such as ‘You said, we did’. However, many students were unaware of the outcomes of quality assurance processes.

‘...if anyone’s got any issues we always just take it to the meetings. We always get feedback...We can always bring up various things...if we feel like we need to improve our course, we just say something and they always work off it.’
Conclusions

Academic support and the quality of the learning experience

It is clear that a wide range of issues influenced the quality of the learning experience for students studying at bachelor’s level or above at university or at another degree-awarding body. Perception of academic support was not restricted to students’ experiences in lectures, laboratories, and seminars. It included the ease with which they could contact and communicate with teaching staff, the usefulness of the feedback they received on their assessments, how efficiently their programmes were timetabled and managed, the availability of learning resources, and the support they received while on placement.

Students were aware of the academic qualification and experience of teaching staff, and satisfaction with the teaching was high. However, there was considerable dissatisfaction when teaching staff failed to make their research relevant to the programme of learning.

Ability to learn was closely connected to the level of contact with teaching staff. Students were acutely aware when different patterns of contact existed between disciplines. There was much dissatisfaction with the disparate use of independent study weeks and the subsequent reduction in levels of contact. Such differences were considered to be inequitable and drew comparisons about the value for money offered by different programmes.

Personal tutors were an essential element of academic support, but there had been no significant improvement in satisfaction rates for some time. It was considered desirable for providers to define the role clearly, allocate adequate resource (time) to it, and appoint staff with an interest in providing pastoral support.

Support provided by administrative staff, technicians and other support services contributed significantly to a positive learning experience. Similarly, the provision of placement opportunities, and support while on placement, were highly valued.

Foundation degree or further education college students were satisfied with their contact with teaching staff and appreciative of the substantial support provided by personal tutors. These students also valued placement opportunities highly, but there was concern when they had to find and negotiate their own work placements. They felt that colleges should be responsible for arranging placements.

Assessment and feedback

For students studying at bachelor’s level or above at university or another degree-awarding body the quality of feedback on assessment was inconsistent, even within schools and faculties. Deadlines for the return of assessed work were often not met. Feedback was often insubstantial and received too late to be used as a constructive learning tool. Good practice was exemplified by the provision of clear assessment criteria and honest, constructive one-to-one feedback.

Plagiarism continued to be an issue, and there had been a number of initiatives to alert students how to avoid it, including the use of systems such as Grademark and Turnitin. There was a need for greater clarity and transparency in relation to the procedures for appeals, mitigating and extenuating circumstances.

By comparison, foundation degree and college-based students were content with the timeliness of feedback, considered it to be constructive, and used it to improve the quality of their work.
Information technology and other resources

Students studying at bachelor’s level or above at university or another degree-awarding body appreciated the increased provision of personal computers, workstations and Wi-Fi networks. However, student satisfaction decreased significantly when there was no corresponding improvement in the speed of internet connection. This was particularly unsatisfactory where an increasing number of students were using their own laptops.

Delays in, or restricted access to, IT facilities caused satisfaction rates to plummet. Providers may not appreciate the importance students place on the availability of efficient IT facilities.

Submissions in both categories revealed that VLEs were the primary source of information for students. They were also the means of disseminating information about student representation and engagement in quality assurance.

There had been investment in the refit of teaching rooms; lecture theatres; computer and digital spaces; and audio, visual and digital resources. Library resources were good. Where growth in student numbers had put pressure on library resources, providers had sought to address the problem by increasing the use of ebooks, digitising core texts, and extending opening hours.

College–based students placed a high value on the provision of dedicated study spaces for higher education programmes, and they were satisfied with the quality and availability of resources. Libraries and library support staff were the most valuable resource available to these students.

Communication and published information

Students studying at bachelor’s level or above at university or another degree-awarding body intimated that the logistics of timetabling had a huge impact on the quality of their learning experiences. Timetables needed to be more student–centred, with fewer gaps between lectures and seminars, a more logical approach to the location of lectures and more efficient notification of cancellations or alterations.

There was an expectation that comprehensive information about timetables, term dates, reading lists, fee payment dates, assessment dates and periods of placement should be available soon after an offer was accepted.

While public information was considered to be accurate and appropriate, it should be made more transparent, particularly in relation to the choice of modules available, placement opportunities and, in particular, the likely student experience at different campuses.

Such differences were inequitable and drew comparisons about the value for money offered by different programmes. If the number of multi-campus providers continues to increase, there is likely to be greater focus on disparities between student experiences in national student surveys.

The greatest demand was for transparency in relation to costs. Public information should provide details of all the costs students are likely to incur including projects, field trips, placements, text books and the printing of learning materials.

There were few references to money by foundation degree and college–based students. Such references were in relation to timetabling fitting around employment commitments.
Student representation and participation in quality assurance

Students studying at bachelor’s level or above at university or another degree-awarding body generally believed that strong partnerships had been established which supported student representation and engaged students in quality assurance processes. Student engagement had impact and learning had improved as a result.

Inferences drawn from this report should reflect that submissions did not represent the entire student body, but were weighted towards the views of full-time undergraduate students. Under-represented groups included postgraduate and research students, part-time students, mature students, distance learners and students studying through partnership arrangements. These groups were often also under-represented in quality assurances processes; they received less comprehensive induction programmes than other students; they were under-resourced in terms of dedicated study spaces; and wider support services were often not available when they attended campus.

College-based students believed that student representation systems at college level were robust and made an impact. However, there was little awareness of student representation at their degree-awarding body, and the number of students who actually contributed to the submissions was low.
Appendix 1: Bachelor’s study or above at degree-awarding bodies

The first main section of our report (pages 9 to 21) features the views of students studying at these 24 degree-awarding bodies. The institutions were reviewed under Institutional Review (England and Northern Ireland) or under Institutional Review (Wales).

Anglia Ruskin University
Bournemouth University
BPP University
Glyndŵr University
Institute of Contemporary Music Performance
Keele University
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
Richmond University
Royal Academy of Music
Royal Central School of Speech and Drama
Southampton Solent University
University of Bath
University of Brighton
University of Buckingham
University of Cambridge
University of Lincoln
University of Reading
University of Roehampton
University of Salford
University of Sheffield
University of Sussex
University of Warwick
Appendix 2: Foundation degrees and college-based higher education

These 15 providers feature in the second main section of our report (pages 18 to 20). They underwent either a Review of Foundation Degrees in Wales or a Review of College Higher Education, as indicated below.

Providers of foundation degrees in Wales
Aberystwyth University
Bangor University
Cardiff Metropolitan University
Glyndŵr University
University of Glamorgan (now University of South Wales)
University of Wales Newport
University of Wales Trinity St David

Providers of college-based higher education
Blackpool and the Fylde College
Burton and South Derbyshire College
City and Islington College
Gloucestershire College
Isle of Wight College
Mid-Kent College
Shrewsbury College of Arts and Technology
South Gloucestershire and Stroud College
Appendix 3: QAA and its work

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is the independent body entrusted with monitoring, and advising on, standards and quality in UK higher education. It is funded by subscriptions from universities, colleges and private providers of higher education and through contracts with the UK higher education funding councils. Its mission is to safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education wherever it is delivered around the world. QAA visits providers to review how well they are fulfilling their responsibilities for academic quality and standards. The review methods are based upon the principle of peer review, respecting the autonomous and independent nature of universities in the UK. QAA also provides guidance to higher education providers on maintaining academic standards and improving quality.

Changes to the higher education sector in the UK, in the wake of the government White Paper Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, June 2011), have prompted a focus on the engagement of students in their learning experience, as partners in the quality of this experience and its outcomes. Consequently, QAA is committed to promoting student engagement by appointing student reviewers as full members of its review teams and by inviting a student submission from the student representative body at every provider it reviews.