Evolving Student Engagement Conference 2021

Key Messages for QAA Members

What is the QAA Evolving Student Engagement Conference?

Evolving Student Engagement is our annual student-focused conference for QAA Members, primarily aimed at staff working in students’ unions and providers but also useful for any staff working in student engagement as well as students themselves.

In June 2021 we ran the conference over two days focusing on two main themes:

- **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion & Mental Health and Wellbeing**
- **Student Engagement in Teaching, Learning and Assessment**

What did we learn from our event?

Student agency has led to a sea change within the sector...without that student activism we would not be seeing the level of engagement we see today.

Dr Zainab Khan from London Metropolitan University provided the opening **keynote** discussing the power of student agency on influencing the inclusion agenda in higher education.

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*Dr Zainab Khan, London Metropolitan University*
At London Metropolitan University, the Vice-Chancellor’s five-year strategy is positioned around the inclusion agenda and student agency is helping the University’s transformation through:

- student/staff co-design of the teaching and learning strategy
- Student Curriculum Partners scheme
- Critical Conversations Café – students and staff sharing lived experiences at University.

As the University continues to build on these opportunities, the ambition is not just to create a more inclusive experience of higher education but to empower students to convert their agency into action for social justice when they embark upon their careers.

"We cannot leave those who are facing oppression and disadvantage to be the ones calling for change or predominantly carrying out the work, we have to take personal and collective responsibility to support others to create a more equitable sector."

Dr Zainab Khan, London Metropolitan University

The sector has experienced a challenging period in delivering higher education during the pandemic, a period that has exerted further pressure on the mental health and wellbeing of students and staff and highlighted matters of equality and inclusion.

In the conference’s first panel session, our members illustrated how students have been engaged in tackling these challenges and preparing for the future:

- Linked to QAA Scotland’s [Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme](#), Glasgow Caledonian University is leading a project to support the mental wellbeing of BAME and LGBTQ+ student communities. The University encourages the use of inclusive language and avoiding gender stereotypes, covering LGBTQ+ topics sensitively and accurately, seeking guidance from LGBTQ+ organisations, and monitoring the access, satisfaction, retention and attainment of LGBTQ+ students.

- The design of the curriculum has a significant impact on the way students from different backgrounds and ethnicities respond to their courses and to academic staff. For example BAME students often feel that the curriculum does not adequately reflect issues of diversity, equality and discrimination, citing feelings of discomfort, isolation and a sense of not belonging. Kingston University’s Inclusive Curriculum Consultants scheme allows staff to partner with student consultants to develop their curriculum to ensure inclusivity.

- A sense of belonging is important for students’ wellbeing and contributes to their academic success. Cardiff Metropolitan University’s Doctoral Academy supports their community of doctoral researchers through their academic and wider student experience.

Students value opportunities to take active roles tackling issues of diversity and inclusion. Examples shared at the conference demonstrated students and staff working in partnership, students being empowered to make change, and higher education providers championing a holistic approach including the academic and wider student experience, importantly engaging all staff, students and the whole university or college community.
Our panel emphasised that key to supporting students are:

- communication
- offering an inclusive learning environment
- enhancing the student experience.

Engaging in inclusive communication means understanding and acknowledging the experiences of students and actively listening to their voices.

“It has never been more important in higher education to understand the students that are in the room with us, to consciously note them, understand them and have a dialogue with them about their experience.

Professor Helena Gillespie, Academic Director of Inclusive Education, University of East Anglia

Contract cheating poses a threat to academic integrity worldwide and serves to exploit vulnerable students. In our second panel session, colleagues from the higher education sector in Australia joined those from the UK to share the challenge of promoting academic integrity.

While the introduction of legislation to outlaw essay mills is an important step, it is not the only solution to addressing these challenges and it is important that it is introduced in a way that does not inadvertently criminalise students.

The higher education sector must understand the reasons that students might be tempted to use essay mills and aim to tackle the issue proactively by ensuring support is available where it is most needed. Research tells us that some students such as international students whose first language is not English are more likely to be targeted and it’s important that providers communicate sensitively with these students in developing messaging and actions around academic integrity.

Students have a valuable contribution to make in building a culture of academic integrity; the sector should aim to work in partnership with all students and co-create solutions to address the challenges posed by contract cheating.

Quality assurance in my mind goes hand in hand with student welfare.

Zoe Ranganathan, National President, NUS Australia
Dan Derricott from University College London provided our second keynote presentation, reflecting on a decade of working with students, learning from the pandemic and reigniting a culture of meaningful student engagement.

“\nIt’s all about people…if you don’t focus on the fact this is about people, students and staff, then it won’t work.

Dan Derricott, University College London
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Dan emphasised that students have a great deal to contribute but to get them ‘in the room’ there needs to be a strategic approach to embedding engagement throughout their student journey and demonstrating the value of getting involved. Effective partnership also requires staff engagement and support for staff to meaningfully engage their students. A widely owned and shared understanding of why student engagement is part of the student experience is essential.

Moving beyond the pandemic and the disrupted academic experience, there’s an opportunity for students to be at the heart of learning, refreshing curricula, teaching and assessment and rebuilding the wider elements of the student experience around community, identity and belonging.

“There’s a really interesting and exciting opportunity in the next few years to reignite what’s special about the way that we work with students in the UK. Think big, develop a long-term plan, one step at a time.

Dan Derricott, University College London
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How have students been engaged in evaluating and enhancing teaching, learning and assessment?

Student engagement is fundamental to UK higher education. It is broad reaching and enables both students and providers to develop practice and opportunities that suit their needs. Examples provided during the Conference included:

- North West Regional College shared their experience of embracing change, building a students’ union and empowering students to have an active voice within the College.
- At Birmingham City University, student representatives have been engaged more actively in the review of their programmes, gathering student evidence, reviewing course data and producing student submissions. The Quality Enhancement and Inclusion Service works in partnership with the students’ union to train and support student reps to show review panels what it’s like to be a student from their school.
A sense of belonging is considered one of the most important needs of students in their learning. The pandemic has deepened feelings of ‘unbelonging’ among many higher education students as it has exacerbated existing inequalities.

Vikki Hill, University of the Arts London

- Belonging through Assessment: Pipelines of Compassion is a QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project led by University of the Arts London. The project aims to enhance assessment policies and practice promoting a sense of belonging and social justice. It is hoped that this will support work around attainment/awarding gaps, particularly in the creative arts.

- Making the Language of Assessment Inclusive is a QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project led by the University of the West of England. While exploring students’ experiences of assessment and understanding of the language used, the project has offered students the opportunity as co-researchers to ‘think differently and challenge themselves’. The project is considering Sherry Arnstein’s ladder of participation to offer students a range of opportunities to engage, aiming for ‘active participation’, students working with delegated authority and opportunities for students to take control.

Want to find out more?

The full Evolving Student Engagement Conference resources and recordings are available to all students and staff at QAA Members on our Membership Resources site. You can also read a series of blog posts by Conference session presenters on the QAA website. Make sure you’re first to hear about QAA events and activities by signing up to receive our weekly Member Update and Student Engagement Newsletter.