



## QAA Briefing

### Student Engagement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement

July 2018

#### Background

Over the years, education providers across the UK have encouraged student participation in their quality assurance and enhancement practices. This QAA Briefing provides an insight into practices around student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement across the different nations of the UK and outlines the benefits it has brought to the higher education sector. Readers may find this information particularly useful as higher education providers seek to align with the full range of practices within the 2018 revision of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code), which includes student engagement as a core practice.

#### UK wide

Across the UK, student engagement plays a central role in quality assurance and enhancement practices. QAA itself has student members within its governance structures, with student representatives on its Board and Scottish and Welsh committees, in addition to a [Student Advisory Committee](#).

The revised Quality Code serves as the guidebook for quality assurance and enhancement across the UK - key elements of student engagement are listed as core and common practices. Under the core practices, it states:

'The provider actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience.'

While the following is a common practice in the Code:

'The provider engages students individually and collectively in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience.'

This demonstrates the importance of student engagement at a UK level. Subsequent parts of this briefing will go into more detail of how student engagement works in practice in different nations of the UK.

#### Scotland

##### Quality Enhancement Framework

In Scotland, student partnership has been embedded into policy and practice for 15 years, via the [Quality Enhancement Framework](#) (QEF). The QEF was designed to support higher education institutions in Scotland to manage the quality of the student learning experience and provide public confidence in the quality and standards of higher education. The framework has five elements: a comprehensive programme of institution-led reviews; external cyclical review of institutions; improved forms of public information on quality; a

national programme of Enhancement Themes; and a greater voice for student engagement in quality management. QAA Scotland works in partnership with the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Universities Scotland, Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland, the Higher Education Academy and the National Union of Students Scotland, to develop and support an enhancement-led approach to quality in the Scottish higher education sector.

### **Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland**

The student engagement aspect of the QEF called for a greater voice for students in national, institutional and departmental quality systems. [Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland \(sparqs\)](#) was founded in 2003 to support student engagement and illustrates the commitment to actively creating the environment to give students a stronger voice.

sparqs provides bespoke training and support to student associations and universities across Scotland. It receives funding from the Scottish Funding Council, which demonstrates the continuing commitment to student partnership in Scotland. sparqs has supported the development of Student Partnership Agreements between student associations and institutions. Following the series of college mergers across Scotland between 2011 and 2014, it has focused on supporting the setting up of new college student associations.

### **Student engagement in practice**

The Quality Enhancement Framework encourages a culture of student engagement within institutional policies and practices. In university committees throughout an institution - from University Courts and Senates to programme approval boards and learning and teaching committees - student representatives are encouraged to have membership (and indeed, in the case of University Courts/governing bodies, it is the law in Scotland to have student members, as specified in the [Higher Education Governance \(Scotland\) Act 2016](#)). Many institutions have developed formal Student Partnership Agreements, which were first outlined in the Scottish Government's paper, [Putting Learners at the Centre](#). The Agreements allow student associations and institutions to promote ways that students and staff can work to improve quality, by setting out mutual priorities.

Students are involved in the development and implementation of the work of the national Enhancement Theme. Since 2017, there has been equal membership of staff and students on the Theme Leadership Group - a move that is indicative of how student partnership continues to be deepened and extended in Scotland. QAA has also produced numerous resources to support the student experience, drawing on involvement, feedback and consultation with students.

In Scotland, institutions have also been encouraged to make students co-creators of their curriculum, with the previous ['Developing and Supporting the Curriculum'](#) Enhancement Theme providing a role in developing this practice in Scotland. Institutions have developed new student partnership arrangements, with student representatives involved in curriculum development processes, and through institution committee structures.

Since 2003, every Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) team includes at least one student reviewer as a full member. In institution-led reviews of subject areas within an institution, students are members of the review panel and should be engaged in the review preparation and follow up. ELIR reports also specifically consider student partnership and engagement as part of the review process, and QAA has produced a [Thematic Report on Student Engagement](#) which summarises how the Scottish sector has engaged with students over the 2013-16 period.

## England and Northern Ireland

### The Student Engagement Partnership

[The Student Engagement Partnership \(TSEP\)](#) was established in 2013 following the 2011 UK Government white paper 'Students at the Heart of the System', and it works to champion and develop student engagement practices in the English higher education sector. The National Union of Students and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) agreed to jointly fund TSEP for three years, with additional project-linked funding from QAA and the Association of Colleges (AoC). TSEP has collaborated on a number of projects with sector partners, such as: specialist resources for staff supporting students in college-based higher education with AoC; a digital benchmarking tool delivered with Jisc; and a guide to making student engagement a reality with Guild HE. TSEP has produced and collated a range of resources, including those on [student engagement in quality processes](#).

### Student engagement in practice

Student engagement in quality processes has been a focus in England and Northern Ireland for many years, and the TSEP is an example of how the sector can work in partnership in this area.

[Quality Review Visits](#) have recently formed part of the quality assurance procedures in England and Northern Ireland. When undertaking a Quality Review Visit of an institution, a provider's students have been able to input into the process by nominating a Lead Student Representative, who is involved throughout the visit. Students have also been able to provide a submission to describe their academic experience and their experience of quality assurance at the provider. Further to this, students have been able to assist the provider in drawing up and implementing the action plan following the Visit, where there has been an unsatisfactory judgment.

When larger-scale reviews of quality in England and Northern Ireland take place, QAA and the review panels will continue to pay close attention to student engagement within an institution. As student engagement also had prominence in the previous iteration of the Quality Code, reviews up to 2018 have considered student engagement and whether or not expectations have been met. QAA has previously highlighted good practice in this area, which has been identified in the review process, such as the case studies from [Walsall College \(pdf 335 KB\)](#) and [Bath Spa University \(pdf 334 KB\)](#), which have developed their own student engagement strategies.

Since being named as the designated quality body by the Office for Students (OfS) in England, QAA has been developing an updated review method in consultation with the sector. QAA continues to recruit student reviewers who will participate and engage in future work, and remains committed to the principle of student engagement, as called for in the revised Quality Code. Northern Ireland's quality review arrangements are also under review and may not align with England as they have done in the past.

QAA has funded a number of activities related to student engagement (in addition to the TSEP). These have included: research into student perceptions of issues affecting students led by researchers at King's College; research into student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement by the University of Bath; and a broader piece of research looking at the overall student experience.

Several student-related Quality Enhancement Network (QEN) events organised by QAA have been delivered. The events have focused on student engagement in postgraduate taught provision, collaborative provision and postgraduate research provision.

QAA also run a successful and well-attended annual conference at the beginning of each academic year - Quality Matters - aimed at and attracting recently-elected student

representatives and quality managers across the UK since 2007. Since 2014, QAA has also offered a complimentary conference towards the end of each academic year - Evolving Student Engagement - celebrating good practice and achievements in student engagement.

## **Wales**

### **Wise Wales**

Established in 2009, [Wise Wales](#) was originally known as the Wales Initiative for Student Engagement (WISE). It is a collaboration of sector organisations working to create a culture of meaningful partnership between educators, students' unions and students across Wales. Partner organisations include the NUS, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), QAA, Universities Wales, Colleges Wales and the Welsh Government. Wise Wales promotes the empowerment of students across Wales in engaging with the structures and processes which enable them to actively shape and enhance the quality of their academic experiences in partnership with their institutions. It works with every HE institution and students' association in Wales, to support them in their priorities surrounding student partnership and engagement throughout the year.

Some of Wise Wales' work has included the development of Partnership Statements (similar to the Student Partnership Agreements developed in Scotland), and has offered tailored support to all institutions and students' unions to create, develop and review an institution's partnership statements. Wise Wales has also organised Course Rep Conferences to support the development of student representatives, and has shared resources across Wales which showcase how institutions can enhance student engagement and partnership. It has also produced [guidance on developing Annual Quality Reports](#) for Students' Associations, which can summarise the recurring issues impacting upon the student and create a dialogue between the students' union and the institution around the issues that impact on the student experience, both positive and negative.

### **Student engagement in practice**

Wales, like all other nations in the UK, also adheres to the Quality Code, including student engagement. This is put into practice via the new review method in Wales - [the Quality Enhancement Review \(QER\)](#). One of the main objectives of the QER is for it to provide a review structured around the strategic priorities of the provider and the nature of its student body, placing a stronger focus on the student-provider partnership. The new review method places greater emphasis on enhancement and the impact of initiatives in practice for students.

The QER process also has a Lead Student Representative, who will oversee the production of a student submission if they wish to submit one, or students' contribution to the review. Students are also encouraged to provide student-led case studies, or a series of commentaries or vignettes as part of the institution's self-evaluative analysis.

### **QAA's view**

As this document has shown, across the UK the embedded culture of student engagement and partnership has allowed for the development and implementation of student-facing policies and practices, which have helped to improve the overall student experience. Approaches to student engagement continue to develop in innovative ways, demonstrating the higher education sector's commitment to improving the student experience in partnership with students.

Engaging students in quality assurance and enhancement practices recognises the essential nature of higher education, in which students not only receive a service from institutions but are a fundamental part of determining its effectiveness. Engaging with and responding to the student voice allows providers to improve their learning and teaching offer. Student views

provide valuable information for staff and the more education providers that listen to those views and communicate with students on actions taken, the more likely it is that the overall student experience will improve. This can have long-term benefits for an institution. It is recognised that prospective students often take account of how institutions have performed in measures such as the National Student Survey.

This paper has shown that positive approaches to student engagement is characteristic of practice across the UK. Active student engagement in review methods has become a key feature of the quality systems operating across all UK nations. The [Quality Code](#) has given great prominence to the importance of student engagement, and the new iteration of the Quality Code will continue to do this, as it defines student engagement as a core practice of UK higher education.

QAA encourages institutions to work in partnership with their student representatives to enhance policy and practice, and to involve students in their quality assurance and enhancement practices, to help the continuing improvement of higher education and the overall student experience.