

Student Strategic
Advisory Committee
2025/26

Student Perspectives on: Costs of Engagement

Initial findings and
considerations for practice

July 2026

Introduction

The Student Strategic Advisory Committee (SSAC) plays a key role in advising the QAA Board on the formulation and delivery of the QAA strategy to ensure that it considers the views of key stakeholder groups. It offers advice and guidance founded in its members' specific expertise, experience and perspective, as students, student representatives and students' union/student representative body staff members in UK higher and tertiary education. Each year, SSAC identifies a set of priorities that matter to students and undertakes project work under these priorities.

During the 2025/26 term, the committee agreed that one of these priorities would be the 'Costs of Engagement'. This priority can be summarised by the statement: *'if students can't be in the room', providers won't hear from them*. The main goal is to shine a light on the costs students can face when participating in activities that evaluate and enhance the quality of the student experience. These costs may include balancing engagement with academic study, employment, caring responsibilities and other extracurricular commitments, as well as financial implications and potential impact on time spent studying. In addition, if students are unable to engage in these activities, it can be costly for the provider in terms of being unable to gain student insight and voice which reflects the full diversity of their student body.

The committee was keen to explore the variety of challenges students face when engaging (or not) in quality and enhancement activities and to determine how this might reflect in the diversity of the students who can engage and therefore get their voices heard.

In this report, we present our initial findings along with recommendations for providers for successful engagement driven by student insight. The findings below were gathered through student and student representative feedback via a Padlet and draw upon our own experiences of engagement.

The areas of engagement we sought insight on were:

- Reward and recognition.
- Support required to enable engagement.
- Personal cost when engaging in quality activities.
- Financial cost when engaging in quality activities.
- Engagement with studies.
- Other barriers/challenges to engaging.

All voices presented here are authentic, and we have only amended quotes where spelling or grammatical corrections were needed to be made or if we have selected a specific part of the quote.

We hope you find this information useful.



Cinnomen McGuigan

Cinnomen McGuigan is a member of SSAC and the lead for this piece of work. She is a current Open University student, studying her fourth degree alongside being a full-time carer. She is also the current Student Officer at the Researching, Advancing, and Inspiring Student Engagement (RAISE) network. She is passionate about student engagement, inclusion, neurodivergence, and the emotional and financial impact on marginalised students of engaging in enhancement work.



Dr Anastasia Kennett

Dr Anastasia Kennett is a member of SSAC and the lead for this piece of work, she is a PhD student and an Associate Lecturer in the Institute of Education and Inclusion at the University of Worcester. Research interests include student inclusive voice within higher education partnerships, neurodiversity and mental health, inclusive curriculum design, and transformative education.

With thanks to Calum Campbell for his input into the scope and direction of this project.

Committee Chairs 2024-2026



Alex Stanley

Alex Stanley has been Vice President of Higher Education at the National Union of Students since July 2024. His main role is to represent students in Higher Education and to advocate and campaign for their best interests. Prior to NUS, he spent a year as the Education Officer at Exeter Students' Guild. He sits on QAA's Board and is Co-Chair of SSAC.



Jimena Alamo

Jimena Alamo was President of the Students' Union at the University of Bath from 2023 until 2025, during which she was recruited as the independent student board member for the QAA and co-chair of SSAC. Now, Jimena is a full-time master's student at University College London, again living the student experience closely and still looking for ways of improving mechanisms through which to empower students.

Commonly used terms

The following terms are used throughout this advice.

- **Student/s** - refers to all individuals studying towards a higher-level award regardless of demographic, mode of delivery, level of study, subject area, or geographic location.
- **Provider** - describes all types of organisations that provide higher level learning, including universities, colleges, institutes of learning, and employers. We also use 'institution' in some instances where 'provider' might not suit the context.
- **Student Representative Body** - a formal body or mechanism that represents and promotes the interests of students. This may be known as a students' union, a students' association, or guild, or by another bespoke name where these specific organisations do not exist.

Methodology

To gather student perspectives on the costs of student engagement, we disseminated a Padlet via our own contacts and networks and those of QAA. It ran between March and May 2026. We offered a voluntary prize draw to boost responses.

We received a total of 89 comments from a range of different students studying at a wide variety of types of providers. Whilst we did not receive a high number of responses to our Padlet, the themes that emerged from the responses echoed those of our committee members and we believe it is worth reporting our initial findings.

Key Themes

Our agreed themes of focus were:

1. Student engagement with learning and teaching and the cost in terms of time spent away from learning when participating in student engagement activities.
2. The emotional and financial costs of participating in student engagement activities.
3. Reward and recognition for participation in student engagement activities.

Questions asked in the Padlet

About the respondents

1. Tell us about you.

Theme 1: Student engagement with learning and teaching and the cost in terms of time spent away from learning when participating in student engagement activities

2. How much support is needed to encourage you to engage with your studies?
3. How many hours do your engagement activities take out of your week? Do you believe this is sustainable as you progress with your studies?
4. How do you balance life and study? Tell us anything you have had to give up/sacrifice to ensure you can engage?

Theme 2: The emotional and financial costs of participating in student engagement activities.

5. Have you had to make additional sacrifices to enable you to engage in quality/enhancement/voluntary activities?
6. What kind of support or changes from your institution might help reduce any personal costs of student engagement?

Theme 3: Reward and recognition for participation in student engagement activities.

7. Is a physical “reward” (such as payment, credit, certificate, certified work experience) a consideration when you think about engaging in quality enhancement activities? What reward options do you consider when making the decision to engage?
8. For representative body staff – What rewards do you consider offering to students who are not in a position to accept monetary rewards?

Other challenges

9. Feel free to add anything you feel is missing from the challenge areas specified.

Key Findings

About the respondents

Q1) Tell us about you

Students who responded represented a broad range of higher education experiences, from a diverse cross-section of UK institutions. Respondents included full-time and part-time students, studying on campus and through distance learning. Participants were enrolled in undergraduate, post-graduate taught, post-graduate research, and degree apprenticeship programmes. Participants included mature students, parents, carers, students balancing employment alongside their studies, and international students.

We believe that this broad range of perspectives reflects the diversity of experiences of students from varied educational and personal backgrounds across the UK.

Theme 1: Student engagement with learning and teaching and the cost to time spent learning when participating in student engagement activities.

Q2) How much support is needed to encourage you to engage with your studies?

Participants consistently identified induction as a key factor in helping them to engage with their studies, stating that it was helpful in:

- supporting initial engagement with learning.
- communicating and managing expectations for learning (for example, what an institution expects of their students and what they can expect of their institution).
- helping students feel connected to their learning and welcome to their institution.

Whilst induction is undoubtedly useful, responses highlighted that the following were valued as effective in encouraging students to engage with their learning, rather than relying solely on induction:

- the provision of welcome packs and 'welcome back' events.
- regular check-ins.
- ongoing signposting to academic and wellbeing support services, particularly around key assessment periods.

Participants also highlighted the need for flexible approaches to support that recognise the diverse circumstances of students balancing work, caring responsibilities, health, and other commitments alongside their studies.

“The purpose of inductions should be to ensure students feel welcome / gain a sense of belonging, which will allow them to have a positive experience moving forward.”

“Welcome in and inductions are critical to managing expectations of us as students, if they get that wrong it can take us ages to get back on track, so please focus on integrating us better right from the off.”

“Regular check-ins throughout the semester would help students feel supported before they begin falling behind academically.”

“More flexibility with recorded sessions and clearer communication around deadlines would make engagement feel more manageable.”

Additional points made that were pertinent to this question and appeared across the Padlet included:

“I think support such as clearer communication about deadlines and expectations, as well as more consistent feedback on my progress would help reduce some of the pressure.”

“Understanding the wellbeing support that was available during my studies would've really helped me stay on track during tough periods. Also a chance to have a buddy or mentor in a year or two above would be really useful.”

Questions for Providers/Student Representative Bodies to consider:

- How do we ensure our induction processes effectively welcome students, manage expectations, and signpost how to access ongoing support throughout their student journey?
- How do we ensure that the information offered at induction is not a “one off” and core information related to learning is repeated throughout transition points in the student journey?
- When designing induction programmes, how do we build in flexibility to recognise the different circumstances and needs of our students?
- How regularly are inductions reviewed, who contributes to that review, and how are changes communicated to students and staff?

- How do we identify and respond to how students' support needs change throughout the academic year, particularly at key pressure points?
- How do we know whether students are managing their workload, balancing competing commitments, and accessing support when they need it?

Q3) How many hours does your engagement activities take out of your week? Do you believe this is sustainable as you progress with your studies?

Participants reported a wide range of time commitments for engagement activities, from occasional involvement, to 2-4 hours, to 10-20 hours per week reported by some students. Those contributing at the highest levels stressed that this was only sustainable due to studying remotely.

Respondents expressed that when planning to attend face-to-face engagement activities they will factor in additional time to participate, along with monetary considerations and potentially time away from study and family. While most participants were willing to engage, they emphasised that advance notice and clear expectations are essential, particularly for in-person activities.

Participants valued opportunities to engage but emphasised the importance of flexible approaches to engagement including online, asynchronous and in-person options. They noted that well-planned activities, alongside recognition of the time and contribution that students provide, were particularly helpful.

Quotes from the Padlet:

“I spend at least 10-15 hours a week on engagement activities, definitely only sustainable as I study from home. I couldn't do a face to face qualification and still give input at this level.”

“Overall, I believe this level of involvement is generally sustainable, as long as it remains flexible and does not interfere with core academic responsibilities. However, during particularly demanding weeks, it can feel challenging to balance everything, so having the ability to adjust my level of participation is important for maintaining long-term sustainability alongside my studies.”

“It can be sustainable if expectations are realistic, activities are planned in advance, and there is flexibility around when and how students can take part, such as having open invite or drop-in sessions available.”

Questions for Providers/Student Representative Bodies to consider:

- How can we ensure that accessibility needs and reasonable adjustments are considered proactively, rather than relying on students to request or arrange support themselves?
- How do we recognise and support students who need additional time for preparation, reflection, or recovery alongside their studies and engagement activities?
- How do we set clear and realistic expectations around student engagement, recognising that students are balancing study, work and personal commitments?
- How do we ensure that opportunities for student engagement are accessible and flexible for all students to participate?

Q4) How do you balance life and study? Tell us anything you have had to give up/sacrifice to ensure you can engage?

Participants described a variety of ways to balance life and study, including using set routines, planning and prioritisation to manage competing demands and maintain progress with their studies.

However, several reported making significant sacrifices, including reducing time spent on hobbies, social activities and personal commitments, with some acknowledging an impact on their own mental well-being and overall self-care. In one case, a student changed from full-time to part-time employment to create greater capacity to engage with their studies.

Quotes from the Padlet:

“Looking ahead, planning ahead, and getting ahead when I have the time and energy to give me breathing room when things are busier or I'm more unwell.”

“At times, I have had to reduce my social activities and free time in order to focus more on studying, especially during busy or stressful periods.”

“Sometimes I have to sacrifice my health for a few days to get things done.”

“I balance study alongside full-time work and family commitments by planning my time carefully and being disciplined with deadlines. To stay engaged, I often give up personal time in the evenings and weekends, and sometimes have to sacrifice social activities, rest, time during sacred months such as Ramadhan and family time so I can focus on study and assignments.”

Questions for Providers/Student Representative Bodies to consider:

- How confident are we that our approaches to supporting students in managing their priorities reflect the different demands they are balancing alongside their studies?
- Are students clear about the expectations the institution has of them with regard to teaching and learning – how often is this reiterated?
- How do we identify students who are struggling with balancing learning and extra-curricular activities? What timely support, resources or interventions are available to help them re-engage more effectively?
- How do we ensure students are appropriately prepared, supported and recognised when taking part in engagement activities?
- How do we help students develop sustainable approaches to managing their workload, commitments and study time?

Theme 2: The emotional and financial costs of participating in student engagement activities.

Q5) Have you had to make additional sacrifices to enable you to engage in quality/enhancement/voluntary activities?

Personal and Educational Sacrifices

Participants told us that they have made significant personal and educational sacrifices to participate in quality enhancement and voluntary activities. Despite these sacrifices, many remained committed to improving the student experience, although some felt that their contributions were undervalued and insufficiently recognised by their institutions.

Personal sacrifices included:

- falling behind or deferring their studies.
- giving up family time.
- reducing social activities.
- cutting back on hobbies.
- taking annual leave to be able to participate, reducing time to rest or be with family.

Quotes from the Padlet:

This [sacrifices] has mainly included reducing my leisure time and limiting social activities...At times I have also had to carefully prioritise my commitments, choosing not to take part in certain optional activities when deadlines or coursework demands were high.

“I have deferred studies to be involved, I have had to find childminders/responsible adults to help with the at home burden to allow me to go off and engage the way that I do. It is worth it, but it feels massively undervalued by the institution if I am honest.”

“Sometimes sacrificing a focus on study that can lead down the road to slipping behind. Energy/health sacrifice with every single attendance.”

“It has been worthwhile because it gave me a chance to contribute to improving the student experience and make sure the views of degree apprentices are represented.”

“Student engagement would feel far more accessible and less emotionally draining if universities offered more flexibility, better mental health support, financial assistance for unpaid opportunities, and genuinely listened to students balancing work, commuting, cultural pressures, or personal responsibilities alongside their studies.”

“It is normally worth it but it’s maddening when it doesn’t feel like I added much, or that much was actually gained by the meeting happening at all”

Questions for Providers/Student Representative Bodies to consider:

- How do we ensure students can participate in engagement activities without their studies, wellbeing or personal circumstances being negatively affected?
- To what extent do we think about the timing of quality assurance and enhancement activities to enable as many students as possible to take part?
- How do we monitor and evaluate why students withdraw from engagement activities, and how do we use this information to remove barriers to participation?
- How do we identify and respond to the wider factors that may prevent students from engaging, including financial, caring, work and wellbeing commitments?

Financial Sacrifices

Financial sacrifice came up frequently in the comments to question 5 and participants described incurring a range of financial costs to participate in quality enhancement and voluntary activities.

These included:

- paying for childcare.
- paying for caring support.
- reducing paid employment, therefore losing income through reduced working hours or unpaid volunteering.
- recognition of severe financial pressures faced by other student representatives.

For some, these sacrifices ultimately limited or prevented continued engagement, while others accepted the cost because they valued the opportunity to improve the student experience and recognised the opportunity to build useful transferable skills. Overall, these responses highlight the importance of recognising and reducing the financial barriers that can prevent students from participating in engagement activities.

Quotes from the Padlet:

“The main challenge that I faced in engaging in voluntary activities was more financial because I did not get paid... I had to always ask parents to chip in monthly to help me cover some bills, but I know not everyone can do it so I had to eventually leave it and dedicate my time to a paying job.”

Yes [I did make sacrifices] because I did not get paid, I often had to do it for the exp [experience] and sacrifice my study time for it

“When I became part of the student leadership team...I got the chance to speak to volunteer representatives and from our discussions, I realized the hidden costs that the students were facing. Some were going to food banks for their day-to-day survival and were still willing to join quality related discussions using their limited internet bandwidth to remain engaged.”

Questions for Providers/Student Representative Bodies to consider:

- How do we minimise the financial barriers associated with student engagement and ensure that opportunities are accessible to all students?
- What training do we offer sabbatical officers and staff to support representatives who are willing to engage despite ongoing financial crisis?
- What financial support can we offer to students who want to engage with quality assurance and enhancement activities but cannot due to the costs?
- Are we confident that the students who are engaging with quality assurance and enhancement activities are not just those who can afford to do so? How can we monitor and evaluate this?

Q6) What kind of support or changes from your institution might help reduce any personal costs of student engagement?

Participants highlighted the need for institutions to be clear about the level of commitment required alongside the benefits, to enable students to make informed decisions about whether they can engage effectively in quality assurance and enhancement activities.

There was a plea to providers to consider and recognise the realities of balancing study with work and financial necessity, family, and caring responsibilities, along with the provision of timely access to wellbeing support and reasonable adjustments to those who make a commitment to engage in these activities.

Flexibility was identified as essential to enable effective engagement, with students valuing a range of engagement options, including online, in-person, hybrid and asynchronous opportunities. Alongside this, advance notice of activities and timely access to papers and resources were seen as essential to meaningful engagement.

Participants also emphasised the importance of building supportive networks with other student representatives and receiving formal recognition for their contribution, helping them feel valued and connected rather than isolated.

Quotes from the padlet:

“Better integration means a solid support network is working together, and ensures you feel valued and not just a token add-on.”

“Flexibility is important to ensure all students can access activities. Engagement activities which run hybrid / online allow more students to join.”

“No short notice meetings... Ensuring that accessibility changes such as accessible papers and slides in advance are in place to minimise the energy expenditure on the day.”

“Formal acknowledgement- titles, pay, recognition on HEAR, references, LinkedIn badges etc. ways we can evidence our engagement to future employers.”

Questions for Providers/Student Representative Bodies to consider:

- How do we ensure students feel informed, prepared and supported to engage?
- How do we ensure students have flexible and accessible ways to participate in engagement activities?
- How do we ensure engagement opportunities are planned and communicated with sufficient notice for students to meaningfully participate?
- How do we ensure students receive accessible papers, resources and meeting materials in sufficient time to prepare and participate meaningfully?
- How far in advance are meeting dates, times and engagement opportunities communicated to students - how do we evaluate if this is sufficient?

Theme 3: Reward and recognition for participation in student engagement activities.

Q7) Is a physical “reward” (such as payment, credit, certificate, certified work experience) a consideration when you think about engaging in quality enhancement activities? What reward options do you consider when making the decision to engage?

Participants highlighted the importance of meaningful recognition for the time, effort and expertise they contribute through engagement activities.

While payment, vouchers and professional recognition were valued by many, others explained that direct financial rewards could affect benefit entitlements. Alternatives such as certificates, digital badges, academic credit, and references were suggested by some as more appropriate and valuable for supporting future employability.

Respondents also expressed concern that relying solely on monetary rewards could unintentionally exclude some marginalised students, creating barriers to engagement and limiting the diversity of student voices represented.

Quotes from the padlet:

“I definitely avoid anything that offers to ‘pay’ us...Every pound I ‘earn’ in this way is taken off my monthly benefits...look for alternative options like institutional merchandise or vouchers, or certificates.”

“Some marginalised voices are never captured due to the focus groups or quality reviews are paid in cash or BACS and that means some of us then can't engage.”

“The biggest reward I've gotten in all honesty is the reference I needed to apply for paid work, which has had a far bigger impact on my life than any one-off voucher or payment.”

“In the current climate especially, it is more important than ever to recognise the cost of time.”

Questions for Providers/Student Representative Bodies to consider:

- How do we know the recognition and reward we offer is meaningful, equitable and valued by students?
- What thought have we given to offering more than one type of reward and recognition for different levels of engagement
- How do we recognise and value the personal time, expertise and commitment that students contribute through engagement activities?
- How do we understand the impact that reward mechanisms, including payment, may have on students' ability to participate in engagement activities?
- How do we ensure our approach to recognition and reward enables participation from students with diverse circumstances, including those who may be affected by benefit entitlement, caring responsibilities or other financial barriers?
- How do we demonstrate that we value students' time, expertise and contribution to quality enhancement and engagement?
- When did we last speak with our engaged students about recognition and reward?

Q8) For representative body staff – What rewards do you consider offering to students who are not in a position to accept monetary rewards?

Student Representative Body staff who answered this question raised similar points to those who answered the previous question. Participants identified a similar range or meaningful alternatives to monetary rewards, all of which were viewed as valuable additions to CVs and professional portfolios, but did not mention academic credit.

- certified work experience.
- digital badges, certificates.
- references.
- LinkedIn endorsements.
- networking or professional development opportunities.

Respondents to this question also highlighted a persistent gap between students who can accept payment and those who cannot. This is due to the impact on some benefits, meaning that cash-only reward models can unintentionally exclude some voices from engagement activities.

Although a small number of respondents identified vouchers as a potentially more accessible form of recognition, no single reward option emerged as suitable for all students. This reinforces the importance of offering flexible and inclusive approaches to recognition and reward. It also highlights the need to ensure students are fully informed about any reward or recognition arrangements before agreeing to participate in engagement activities. This enables them to seek advice where needed and make

informed decisions, helping to avoid unintended impacts on their financial circumstances or eligibility for financial support.

Speaking to your students about the type of recognition they would prefer or that would ultimately benefit them most is recommended by the students who led this project.

Quotes from the Padlet:

Other non-monetary incentives such as priority access to events, networking opportunities, or exclusive learning opportunities may also help recognise and reward student involvement effectively

“They are missing a valuable sector of their student community by not offering alternatives to cash... They are only hearing from those who can ‘afford’ to speak to them.”

“This can also then support earning badges/certificates as well as prompt volunteers to bring talking points to career advisors who can help them use their volunteering experience for employability.”

“Meaningful alternatives could include certificates, recognized work experience, references, professional development opportunities, or formal recognition that be used in CVs and portfolios. Practical support can also help, such as flexible timings, online participation, childcare support where possible, or covering travel and other reasonable expenses.’

Even when students are unable to accept monetary rewards, I think institutions should still ensure their time and contributions are meaningfully recognised.

Questions for Providers/Student Representative Bodies to consider:

- How do we identify whether financial circumstances, including the impact of payment on benefit entitlement, are preventing students from participating in engagement opportunities?
- What steps do we take to ensure students with different circumstances can participate in opportunities that may usually be ‘paid’?

- How do we ensure that our approaches to rewarding engagement do not unintentionally exclude valuable student voices from quality enhancement activities?
- How do we design approaches to recognition and reward that are equitable for students with different financial circumstances, including those who may be unable to accept direct payment?
- How can we ensure that the benefits of engaging in quality and enhancement activities have benefits to our students beyond their time in our institution?
- How do we know that our approach to reward and recognition reflects what students need and find beneficial?

Other challenges

Q9) Other challenges – feel free to add anything you feel is missing from the challenge areas specified.

Participants highlighted the importance of focusing their time and energy on engagement opportunities where they feel valued, understand the benefits of engaging and where they can see the impact of their contributions. It was also identified that understanding how their involvement has influenced change helps engagement activities feel meaningful and worthwhile.

Respondents emphasised the need for institutions to recognise the hidden costs of participation, including the impact on time, energy, and wellbeing. The points made earlier about flexibility being essential to sustaining engagement alongside academic workload (acknowledging that some subjects have more flexibility than others), employment, caring responsibilities and personal commitments were reiterated in the commentary in this section.

Respondents also noted that valuable contributions may not always be the most visible, and that engagement approaches should recognise different ways in which students participate.

Quotes from the Padlet:

“The biggest thing by far is having access to (sometimes quite expensive) adaptations that allow me to attend with my disability.”

Key to successful engagement activities is to ensure there [is] clear communication surrounding what the student can gain

Another important factor is making sure students can clearly see the impact of their involvement.

“One area that deserves more attention is the hidden cost of time and energy.”

“Students who are quieter, less confident, commuting, from underrepresented backgrounds, or struggling personally may still care deeply about their university experience but not always feel able to participate visibly.”

“When students understand how their feedback has influenced change, engagement feels more meaningful and worthwhile.”

Questions for Providers/Student Representative Bodies to consider:

- How do we demonstrate that we value students who are balancing competing demands, including employment, caring responsibilities, financial pressures and limited time?
- When did we last review our approach to student engagement in terms of student engagement with learning and how we work with students in quality assurance and enhancement?
- How do we articulate the benefits and realities of engaging with activities related to quality and standards and extracurricular activities
- How do providers clearly articulate both the benefits and practical realities of engaging in activities related to quality and standards, as well as wider extracurricular opportunities?
- Is our approach to student engagement clearly embedded within our arrangements for quality, enhancement and the maintenance of academic standards?
- Have we developed, in partnership with the Student Representative Body and student representatives, a planned programme of engagement activities that can be communicated to students in advance, enabling them to understand the opportunities available and plan their participation?

Next steps

The findings from this project highlight that many students contribute to quality enhancement activities while already balancing significant academic, personal, financial and professional commitments. These competing demands can affect their capacity to engage not only with their studies but also with activities related to quality assurance and enhancement.

In addition, feedback from students, sabbatical officers and committee members who participated in this project indicates that existing approaches to reward and recognition do not always reflect the diverse circumstances of today's student population. As a result, some approaches may inadvertently create barriers to participation or discourage engagement for certain students.

Recommendations for improving how providers and Student Representative Bodies engage with their students

1. Many students continue to contribute because they are committed to improving the experience of future cohorts, and this commitment should be met with approaches that recognise, value and sustain their contribution.
2. Providers and Student Representative Bodies are encouraged to recognise the hidden emotional, practical and financial costs of engagement that students currently face and ensure that opportunities are designed with flexibility, accessibility and wellbeing in mind.
3. Students who responded to our questions and those on the QAA Student Strategic Advisory Committee highlighted the importance of clear communication, realistic expectations, effective induction and ongoing support throughout their engagement journey.
4. The findings also demonstrate that in the current landscape, engagement opportunities need to be designed to fit around diverse student circumstances, including work, caring responsibilities, disability, financial pressures and academic commitments, with flexible options for participation and appropriate adjustments available from the outset.
5. Providers and student representative bodies are asked to consider a range of recognition and reward approaches to ensure participation is equitable and does not unintentionally exclude students who are unable to accept monetary rewards.
6. Institutions should also ensure that students can see and understand the impact of their contributions, as demonstrating how their participation has influenced change helps engagement feel meaningful and worthwhile.
7. Greater attention is needed to ensure the voices of carers, disabled students, parents, working students and those affected by financial constraints are represented within engagement activities, as these students bring valuable perspectives that are essential to improving the student experience.

Top tips for effective engagement in the current sector landscape are:

Manage expectations

- Set clear expectations from the outset by providing effective induction programmes that explain students' roles, responsibilities, time commitments and how their contributions will be used.
- Provide appropriate training and preparation so students feel confident and equipped to participate effectively.
- Communicate consistently throughout the student journey to ensure students know where to access support and guidance when they need it.

Recognise and reward contributions fairly

- Demonstrate that student contributions are valued by recognising the time, expertise and insight students bring to quality enhancement activities.
- Offer a range of recognition and reward options that reflect different student circumstances, including certificates, digital badges, references, accredited experience, professional development opportunities and appropriate financial recognition.
- Avoid creating barriers through reward mechanisms by ensuring students who cannot accept monetary rewards, including those affected by benefit entitlement, are not excluded from meaningful engagement opportunities.
- Ensure diverse voices are represented by considering how reward approaches can include students who may otherwise be unable to participate.

Build flexibility into engagement opportunities

- Provide a range of ways for students to contribute, including online, face-to-face, hybrid, synchronous and asynchronous options.
- Consider different student circumstances by designing engagement opportunities that work around employment, caring responsibilities, disability, commuting and academic commitments.
- Explore alternative methods of gathering feedback beyond traditional meetings, such as forums, online discussion, surveys or written contributions, to enable wider participation.

Plan effectively and communicate early

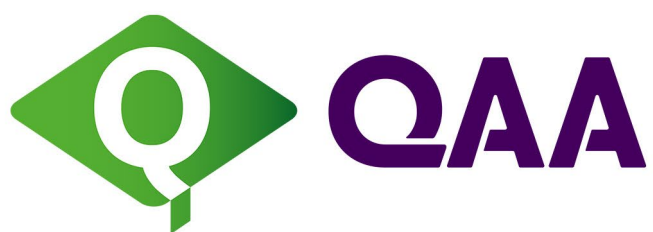
- Provide meeting dates, schedules and expectations in advance to allow students to balance engagement alongside their other commitments.
- Share papers, resources and supporting materials early so students have sufficient time to review information and contribute meaningfully.
- Arrange reasonable adjustments and accessibility requirements in advance rather than placing responsibility solely on students to request support.

Provide ongoing support

- Signpost academic, study skills and wellbeing support throughout the year, not only during induction or periods of difficulty.
- Create regular opportunities for check-ins and feedback to identify challenges early and ensure students feel supported.
- Recognise the emotional and practice impact of engagement by considering students' workload, wellbeing and personal circumstances.

Show students the impact of their contributions

- Close the feedback loop by communicating what has changed because of student involvement.
- Demonstrate how student contributions influence decision-making, quality enhancement and the wider student experience.
- Celebrate the impact of student involvement to reinforce that their time and expertise are valued.



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