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STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION FOR CURRICULUM TRANSFORMATION

Practical Guidance for Universities Leading Curriculum Change



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Curriculum reform: a whole community approach

A QAA-funded Collaborative Enhancement Project



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I am also grateful to the QAA for funding and supporting this project and my role as an undergraduate project assistant intern. Their commitment has made it possible to develop this work as part of a wider effort to improve consultation, engagement, and collaborative practice within higher education.

This work reflects a collective effort to support more effective, inclusive, and practical approaches to institutional development, drawing on shared learning across teams and stakeholders.



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Executive Summary

Curriculum reform affects students, staff, employers, applicants, governance bodies, and institutional reputation. Our QAA-funded Collaborative Enhancement Project confirmed that effective stakeholder consultation supports better decision-making, helps identify risks early, strengthens proposals, and improves implementation outcomes.

This toolkit distils practical lessons from the University of Exeter curriculum transformation programme and translates them into a reusable model for the wider sector. It outlines who to engage, when to engage them, how to structure sessions, and how to turn feedback into decisions. This guidance has been written by Alina Hamova (Project Assistant Intern), drawing on insights from delivery and stakeholder engagement that were shared during interviews and project engagement activity.

It is designed for senior leaders, project teams, academic change programmes, and governance groups.

Lessons from Practice

At the University of Exeter, the project team gathered stakeholder input through segmented advisory groups including employers, schools and colleges, and higher education experts. This approach generated more targeted insight than a single mixed forum, as participants shared similar contexts and could engage in more focused and relevant discussion. It also strengthened internal approval processes by providing clearer, evidence-based input from distinct stakeholder perspectives.

The programme also highlighted that different stakeholder groups require different types and levels of engagement. External stakeholders were most effectively engaged during the discovery phase, where they could contribute insight on sector trends, future skills, and market relevance. In contrast, internal stakeholders (staff and students) benefited from more continuous engagement throughout the process, helping to test feasibility, refine proposals, and support implementation.

Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Executive Summary	2
1. Why Stakeholder Consultation Matters	4
2. Core Principles of Effective Consultation	4
2.1 Consult Early	4
2.2 Align Discovery Activity	4
2.3 Consult the Right People	4
2.4 Segment by Expertise	4
3. Recommended Stakeholder Groups	5
4. Recommended Consultation Model	6
Different Levels of Engagement	6
5. Suggested Consultation Timelines	7
Option A: 6-Month Fast Track	7
Option B: 12-Month Full Programme	7
6. How to Run Effective Sessions	8
7. Tailoring Questions by Audience	9
8. Pre-Meeting Best Practice	9
9. Capturing and Using Feedback	10
10. Common Risks and Mitigation	11
11. Success Factors	11
12. Quick Start Checklist	12
13. Practical Lessons from Delivery	12
What Worked Well	12
What Was Challenging	13

1. Why Stakeholder Consultation Matters

Curriculum reform decisions are complex and often high impact. External and internal perspectives can help universities challenge assumptions, identify risks, and improve the credibility of proposals before implementation begins.

Stakeholder input can support universities to:

- test proposals before decisions are finalised
- identify unintended consequences early
- understand different stakeholder needs
- improve curriculum design quality
- strengthen governance approvals
- build confidence in delivery
- increase ownership during implementation

2. Core Principles of Effective Consultation

Successful consultation programmes are typically built around the following principles:

2.1 Consult Early

The transformation programme at Exeter sought to engage stakeholders while proposals are still flexible enough to change. This helped stakeholders develop a sense of ownership and buy-in' with respect to the project. It also enabled project leaders to demonstrate that they were listening to the needs of the wider community.

2.2 Align Discovery Activity

Market research and internal engagement (in the form of discovery workstreams) were undertaken during the early discovery phase. This enabled external stakeholder discussions to be informed by real student, applicant, and institutional insight.

2.3 Consult the Right People

For external consultation, the team decided that the relevance of participants mattered more than the number involved, with the intention of generating more detailed, in-depth conversations.

2.4 Segment by Expertise

Initial plans for one large mixed stakeholder group often create generic discussion. In practice, at Exeter, separate groups were developed and aligned to stakeholder expertise, with the intention of generating more useful insight and stronger participation.

2.5 Ensure Consultation is Targeted and Efficiently Run

The team designed sessions that are tailored to each audience, using relevant language, examples, and questions. They planned for sessions to be structured and time-bound to maintain engagement and maximise the quality of feedback.

2.6 Use Feedback Transparently

It is important to explain what changed, what did not, and why. The team at Exeter shared regular updates during open conversational meetings, and via email, to explain to colleagues how feedback was taken on board. Updates were also shared with consultant stakeholders at each subsequent meeting.

2.7 Link Consultation to Decisions

The insights from this consultation activity fed directly into working groups, boards, and governance routes.

3. Recommended Stakeholder Groups

Once consultation objectives became clear, the University identified which stakeholder groups are most relevant to the decisions being considered. Although conversations were wide-ranging, the transformation team recognised that internal stakeholders often test feasibility and delivery, while external stakeholders help test relevance, competitiveness, and future demand.

Internal Stakeholders

Group	Typical Value
Current Students	Student experience, flexibility, belonging
Students' Union	Representative student voice, engagement reach, challenge and assurance
Academic Staff	Feasibility, quality, workload
Professional Services	Operations, systems, support
Senior Leaders	Strategy, priorities, sponsorship
Governance Bodies	Oversight and approval

External Stakeholders

Group	Typical Value
Employers	Graduate skills, future workforce needs
Alumni	Career relevance, employability reflections
Schools / Colleges	Transition to university, applicant expectations

Higher Education / Sector Bodies	Trends, policy, comparator practice
Parents / Supporters	Decision factors for applicants

After stakeholder groups have been identified, the Curriculum for Change team at Exeter explored the most effective consultation structure for engaging them.

4. Recommended Consultation Model

The preferred approach was to segment stakeholders into consultation groups. The Curriculum for Change programme team considered separate forums for:

- Employers / Alumni
- Schools / Colleges
- Higher Education / Sector Experts
- Students
- Staff

Where external groups are used, sessions are often more productive when informed by evidence gathered during the discovery phase, such as market research or internal engagement findings. This gives participants clearer context and enables more informed feedback. At Exeter, the successive meetings with each consultation group ensured that feedback could be taken on board and updates reported back at a later meeting.

Different Levels of Engagement

Different stakeholder groups require different types and levels of engagement.

External stakeholders are typically most valuable during the discovery phase, where they can provide insight on future skills, sector trends, and market relevance. Internal stakeholders (staff and students) were engaged throughout the process in a more continuous dialogue. Their input was critical for testing feasibility, refining proposals, and supporting implementation.

The experience at Exeter therefore suggests that institutions may therefore need to use a combination of engagement approaches, such as:

- Structured consultation sessions
- Department or team meetings
- Student forums or representative groups
- Drop-in sessions
- Regular updates via email or internal communications

This approach helps ensure discussions remain more relevant and focused, as stakeholders are engaging within groups aligned to their expertise and experience. It also increases confidence to contribute, since participants are not navigating overly broad or mixed

audiences. The level of detail can be better tailored to each group, allowing questioning to be more targeted and meaningful. This may enhance engagement, and ensure the feedback generated is clearer, more structured, and more directly actionable for decision-making.

As mentioned above, consultation activity at Exeter was sequenced carefully across the programme timeline. This work is addressed in more detail below.

5. Suggested Consultation Timelines

The most appropriate timeline will depend on urgency, governance cycles, and scale of reform. Two common models are outlined below. The approach that Exeter took was closer to Option B. Market research and internal discovery work was undertaken early, which could then feed into external stakeholder consultation sessions. A different theme was addressed in each consultation meeting, with external stakeholder groups meeting month or so for three months. The external consultation then fed back into internal collaborative planning and design, and eventually delivery activity.

Option A: 6-Month Fast Track

Month	Phase	Key Activities	Outputs
1	Mobilise & Plan	Confirm objectives, governance, stakeholder map, invite participants	Approved consultation plan
2	Consultation Round 1: Discovery & Evidence	Market research, internal engagement	Evidence base and emerging themes
3	Refine Proposals	Analyse feedback, redesign options	Updated proposals
4	Consultation Round 2	Test concrete proposals with key groups	Proposal validation report
5	Finalise Recommendations	Workstreams complete final design	Governance papers
6	Approvals & Launch	Committees approve changes, communicate outcomes	Final approved model

Option B: 12-Month Full Programme

Timing	Phase	Key Activities	Outputs
Months 1-2	Mobilise & Plan	Strategy, governance, stakeholder design, communications plan	Full programme roadmap
Months 3-4	Consultation Round 1	Run market research, Discovery sessions, insight	Discovery evidence report

		gathering from internal engagement	
Months 5-6	Design Development	Build new curriculum model, assess feasibility	Draft model
Months 7-8	Consultation Round 2	Test detailed proposals	Refined design
Months 9-10	Refinement & Governance Prep	Final changes, papers, implementation planning	Approval-ready package
Months 11-12	Consultation Round 3 Final Validation + Approval	Final stakeholder assurance, approvals, launch comms	Approved reform programme

This table outlines how each consultation model differs across key characteristics, helping institutions assess which approach best fits their context and requirements.

Format	Option A	Option B
Duration	6 months	12 months
Pace	Fast	Measured
Depth of Consultation	Moderate	High
Best For	Urgent reform	Large transformation
Consultation Rounds	2	3
Governance Complexity	Lower	Higher

6. Running Effective Sessions

Ideal Length: 60-90 minutes was found to be ideal. Longer sessions impact attendance and did not necessarily result in higher quality feedback.

Ideal Size: A size of 6-12 participants was found to work best – it acknowledges the possibility that participants may have to drop out, enables every voice to be heard in the meeting.

Format: The following format was used at the University of Exeter during the stakeholder consultation sessions:

1. Welcome and Purpose (5 mins)
2. Brief Context Overview (10 mins)
3. Topic Discussion 1 (25 mins)
4. Topic Discussion 2 (25 mins)
5. Priorities / Final Reflections (15 mins)
6. Next Steps (5 mins)

7. Tailoring Questions by Audience

Below are a series of potential questions to ask during consultation about Curriculum Transformation. Although we found they generated many useful insights, providers are encouraged to tailor them to the objectives of their specific transformation programme.

Employers

- What skills will graduates need in 5-10 years?
- How can curriculum better prepare students for work?
- What forms of experiential learning matter most?

Students

- What would improve flexibility and choice?
- What barriers reduce belonging or success?
- What would make programmes more attractive?

Schools / Colleges

- What concerns do applicants raise most often?
- What helps transition into university study?
- What information do future students need?

Sector Experts

- What trends are shaping curriculum reform?
- What risks should institutions avoid?
- What models are emerging elsewhere?

8. Pre-Meeting Best Practice

At Exeter, those involved in the consultation session found that long briefing papers did not result in improved conversations during consultation sessions. Instead, the team offered shorter notes to frame the key objectives of the conversations. You could try:

- A 2-page summary note
- A short slide deck

- A 5-10 minute recorded overview
- Sharing clear questions in advance

Where proposals are complex, it helps to include a short, recorded briefing or concise explainer pack before the first session. Exeter made this discovery during the first round of external stakeholder consultation: it allows meeting time to focus on discussion rather than lengthy presentations.

9. Capturing and Using Feedback

During Sessions:

During sessions, the team at Exeter used structured notetaking to ensure key points were consistently captured across discussions. Where meetings were held online, this was supported by recordings to allow for accurate review where appropriate. Following each session, notes were then collated and organised into themes by topic, helping to structure the feedback in a way that could be easily analysed and used in decision-making.

After Sessions

After each session, the feedback was summarised into a structured output that captured the key messages from stakeholders, alongside any suggested actions arising from the discussion. The team also identified risks that had been raised, as well as any conflicting views between participants, ensuring that areas of disagreement were not lost. Finally, the material was distilled into clear recommendations to support decision-making and next steps.

Decision Route

Consultation findings should feed upwards into decision-making at Board level. At Exeter, this took the following form:



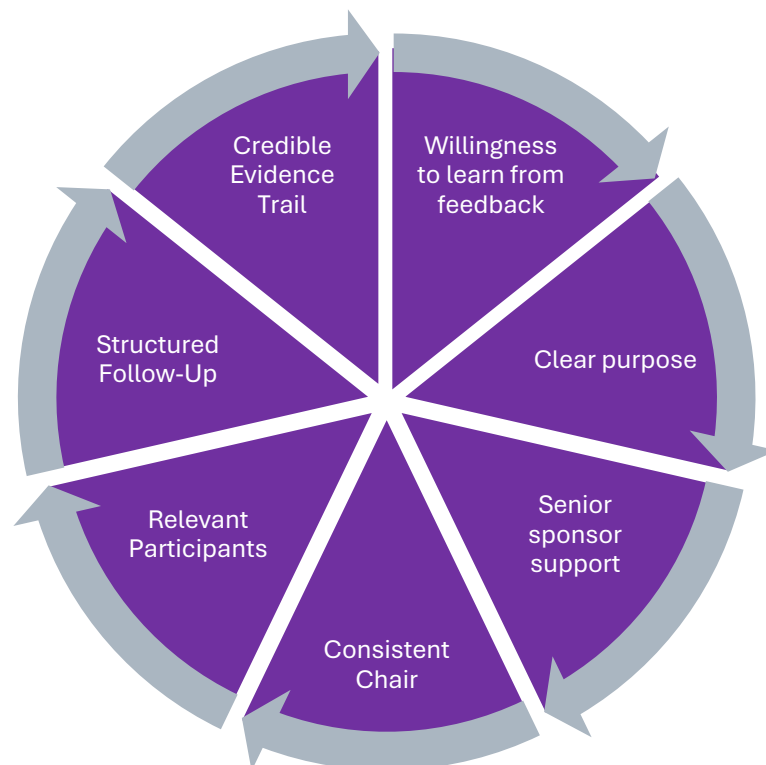
10. Common Risks and Mitigation

Before the external consultation took place, the following mitigating actions were proposed, to reduce the risk of ineffective feedback.

Risk	Mitigation
Inconsistent attendance across rounds	Confirm dates early, schedule full series upfront, share recap notes
Overloaded meetings	Use pre-reads / videos
Feedback ignored	Publish responses and actions to Programme Board
Wrong participants	Target participant selection carefully
Generic discussion	Use tailored agendas

11. Common Success Factors in Curriculum Consultation

All seven providers in our QAA Funded Curriculum Enhancement Project made consultation a vital part of their transformation programme. Our programmes shared the following practical features associated with successful consultation.



12. Quick Start Checklist

Before Launch	During Delivery	After Delivery
☐ Define topics for consultation ☐ Identify Stakeholders ☐ Select Chairs and Facilitators ☐ Confirm Timeline ☐ Prepare Briefing Materials	☐ Keep sessions focused ☐ Encourage balanced participation ☐ Capture clear notes ☐ Share next steps	☐ Analyse themes ☐ Share outcomes with sponsors and governance groups ☐ Decide iterations to design and/or delivery ☐ Communicate outcomes to stakeholders ☐ Thank participants

This checklist, aimed at helping providers prepare for consultation, is drawn from insights across all seven institutions involved in our QAA Collaborative Enhancement project.

13. Final Reflections: Practical Lessons from Delivery

To conclude this guide, we are sharing some honest reflections on what worked – and was challenging – during the process of consultation and engagement.

What Worked Well

- Tailored stakeholder groups: Enabled more natural and focused discussion, as participants shared similar contexts and levels of expertise. This reduced the need for explanation during sessions and allowed conversations to move more quickly to meaningful insight and challenge.
- Consistent chairing: Created continuity across consultation rounds, allowing themes to be tracked over time and discussions to build progressively. It also strengthened facilitation, as the chair developed a deeper understanding of the topics and group dynamics.

- Linking consultation to real decisions: Increased engagement and quality of input, as participants could see a clear connection between their contributions and potential outcomes. This helped move discussions from general opinion to more practical and solution-focused feedback.
- Parallel student input validating external views: Strengthened the credibility of findings by identifying alignment (or divergence) between internal and external perspectives. This provided greater confidence when shaping final proposals.
- Using existing research or internal insight to frame stakeholder discussions: Gave participants a clearer starting point and reduced ambiguity. This improved the quality of feedback, as stakeholders were responding to evidence rather than abstract concepts.

What Was Challenging

- Busy external participants: Competing priorities limited availability, making it difficult to maintain consistent attendance across multiple rounds. This disrupted continuity and reduced the opportunity to build deeper engagement over time.
- Information overload: Large volumes of pre-reading material were not always reviewed in advance, resulting in time being spent explaining context during sessions. This reduced the time available for discussion and limited the depth of feedback.
- Attendance variation: Changes in participant attendance across rounds affected the consistency of input and made it harder to track evolving views. This sometimes required repetition of key points, impacting efficiency.
- Balancing depth with short meeting times: While shorter sessions supported attendance, they constrained the ability to explore complex or technical topics in detail. This required careful prioritisation of discussion areas.
- Lack of prior evidence or context in some discussions: Where participants did not have sufficient background information, feedback tended to be more general and less actionable. This highlighted the importance of framing discussions with clear evidence.
- The quality of consultation outcomes is driven by how well engagement is structured, contextualised, and sustained over time.

Perhaps the most important lesson of all is that trust and dialogue are essential features of curriculum transformation programmes. This guide has sought to share practical

suggestions that might help other providers to generate ongoing engagement and trustful conversations across multiple stakeholder communities. The suggestions and examples given throughout are not intended to eliminate resistance or dissent, but to enable constructive ways of surfacing different views so that they can be integrated into conversations about large-scale curriculum change.



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AI Declaration: The author used ChatGPT, an AI tool, to improve spelling, grammar and readability of a draft during the preparation of this toolkit. After using this tool, the author carefully reviewed and edited the text and take(s) full responsibility for the final content. The content and insights are the author's own work.