

## **QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project**

### **Final Evaluation Report**

#### **Student Engagement Guidelines:**

#### **Learning from innovative practices introduced in response to COVID-19**

##### **A collaboration of 10 UK modern universities**

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##### **Project overview**

Student engagement is widely recognised as one of the key factors impacting student experience. The Covid-19 pandemic drove significant developments globally across higher education during its peak (March 2020 to November 2021) and many institutions observed clear changes in student engagement behaviour as well as student experience more generally. This period significantly impacted the experiences of learning, teaching and assessment for students as well as university staff. Institutions varied in their responses to the pandemic, with a rapid pivot online typically followed by a phased return to campus. This study aimed to investigate how this period of disruption has influenced student experience and expectations of their teaching and learning.

Data was collected through a student survey and focus groups conducted at each of the 10 participating universities, with ethics approved by Coventry University. As a result of the survey, we gathered significant quantitative data on students' perspectives on engagement. Participating students ranked the importance of 31 engagement criteria from 'not at all' to 'extremely' important, indicating their priorities for what they view as student engagement. Additional questions around engagement patterns provided insights into the behaviours and student attributes that shaped these perspectives.

In addition, focus groups provided qualitative insights that complement the survey results, allowing students to express their views and opinions on studying before, during and after the pandemic. This revealed compelling findings that elaborate the changes students have undergone during this period, and the reflections they have drawn from these.

Results primarily centre around themes including timetabling and commuting students, the need for physical and virtual communities, the importance of recordings for flexible learning, digital literacy and inequalities, and the need to do more to mobilise student voices. Building on these themes, we discussed their meaning in the context of post-pandemic student experiences and the need to rethink the idea of student engagement to extend beyond the synchronous physical classroom experience.

## **Project partners**

The project was led by Coventry University with nine other universities involved (including Coventry University London). When designing the project, we consciously decided to avoid involving institutions that might be structurally and fundamentally different from each other; for example, combining a group of post-92 institutions with a smaller set of Russell Group or older providers. We made this decision because we know, albeit anecdotally, that the latter followed a slightly different approach in terms of their teaching and learning during and soon after the pandemic, and we did not want to bring any manner of bias into the study unnecessarily. Furthermore, now that we have completed this project, we are keenly aware that comparison of approaches to and experience of student engagement and expectations at modern universities versus Russell Group and older institutions could make for a valuable future study.

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## **Project Aims and Objectives**

The initial aims and objectives we set out with (as outlined in our original bid submission) were slightly different to what we ultimately achieved by the end of the project. As is so often the case, the project evolved through the course of its design and delivery, and we were conscious to be led by the evidence we were presented with throughout. For example, we originally aimed to design a digital guidebook for 'Better student engagement through innovative practices introduced in response to Covid', but once we had completed the student survey, it was apparent that digging deeper into the survey results during focus groups would yield greater value as students were telling us things we had not anticipated.

Otherwise, we met all our 'success measures' as defined in the bid. More specifically:

1. We were aiming to identify, evaluate and select two to five innovative practices in teaching and learning in response to Covid-19 whose response is demonstrated through measures such as staff experience and student feedback.
  - a. The challenge we faced here was that despite coming up with multiple examples of innovative practices, we realised that the document we would create in the end would become extremely long and potentially repetitive. We therefore decided that we should include one example from each institution and that this would constitute the set of recommendations we would make to any future project team. Our experience shows that when we look at more than five or six institutions, much of the work can become very similar and it is worth keeping this in mind to avoid repetitive content.

2. We were aiming to design and distribute a student survey that tested innovations we introduced during the pandemic with regard to student perceptions of their effectiveness and engagement.

- a. This was the longest part of our study in terms of generating the most appropriate survey questions. Although we began the project in March 2022, we launched the survey around mid-summer of the same year after encountering a number of challenges along the way. First of all, the project partners came up with a large number of good survey questions, to the point where the final survey would have needed to include around 120 questions.

It took us the best part of two months to narrow it down to 14 questions only - you can view the final version of the survey questionnaire in Appendix 1 of the Student Engagement Guidelines. With 10 Deans, Associate Deans, Executive Deans, bringing everyone together in one meeting was by far the greatest challenge of the project. In fact, we did not have any meeting when we were all present. Once questions were finalised, securing ethics approval for the survey took another five to six weeks.

Inputting the survey on Qualtrix was also difficult as just two colleagues had access to it and, in hindsight, we should have been a lot more strategic and assess whether Qualtrix was the best software before starting the project, as it did not really help us that much with the results investigation. But this step took us three days.

Rolling the survey out, in the summer of 2022 was also not the best in terms of timing. However, it seems to have worked well in the end. We sent the survey to around 8,000 students across the 10 institutions and we had 658 students complete it. Many students who did not complete the survey emailed us saying that they did not have any/sufficient teaching and learning experience during the pandemic to be able to respond fairly. In total, we had around 10-12% response rate.

3. We were aiming to complete at least one roundtable with student unions and representatives at each of the participating institutions to gather in depth views of students on these practices.

- a. This was by far the most interesting part of our projects.

First of all, almost everything we thought, to begin with, that we were going to cover in the focus groups was wrong. And this is because the responses we received from students completing the survey were very different to what we anticipated and we had to change our strategy and dig deeper during our focus groups.

For example, we did not expect 30% of students to say that they were not keen on spending time on campus outside of their timetabled sessions. As a result of this, we designed Question 7 of the focus group to try to understand if there were any challenges students faced when studying online, but also Question 2 in trying to see how students define engagement themselves.

Secondly, although we expected this before starting the focus groups, some of our groups suffered from self-selection bias quite significantly. The students who engaged with us were the students who engage with everything. Through the follow up questions we asked in the focus groups, we tried as much as possible to see how these students would think and feel if they were not 'as engaged students' as they were.

Finally, one of the biggest challenges we faced with the focus groups was that we ended up with almost 20 hours of recordings with about 11 facilitators and 70 students in total, an average of around six-to-seven students in each and at the time, there was no transcribing company that would transcribe this successfully. We tested a few companies and ended up paying for one which proved to provide very poor services despite being one of the top rated in the world. When discussed this with them, they argued that the high number of speakers in each session made it extremely difficult and we should have selected and paid for an even more expensive service.

In the end, we decided to complete the transcription ourselves, focusing on 'the most important three-to-five points' students mentioned for each of the eight questions. We consolidated almost 7,000 words and then grouped them in five themes, as can be seen in the guidelines.

4. We were aiming to design a digital guidebook for better student engagement in the form of a website.
  - a. It took us three attempts to identify the best structure that the guideline ought to take, and we decided that a website was going to be too time consuming for us to build despite coming up with a few different ideas as to how webpages could be designed.

In terms of the guideline document itself, we used a file that Dr Castle (from QAA) shared with us as a rough guide on how to structure it. It took us roughly two months and probably more than 10 meetings with various colleagues from the project team to come up with the final version of the document. One of the challenges we faced was that while many of us were used to academic research designed for specialist audiences, this document had to be more practical, steering away from heavily academic research and driving the conversation towards the results we identified via the survey and focus groups. Maintaining a good level of relevance and insight while also steering away from purely academic research was quite a challenge.

## **Main project challenges**

### **1. Staff availability for meetings**

It has indeed been a challenge to bring all colleagues together and we did not have one meeting where all could attend. This has made running the project rather difficult because decisions would be made in meetings and shared via email which would then be questioned by colleagues who were not available to attend. Almost four to five months into the process, we agreed that feedback would be received from colleagues who could not attend but that if we had more than four to five colleagues in the live meeting, it would not mean that we had to change content in the document unless it was genuinely something that we all quickly agreed was a great suggestion.

### **2. Ethics approval**

Survey design and securing the ethics approvals for the survey and focus group questions were undoubtedly the longest processes in the project and we would recommend managing the ethics team's expectations much better to any future project teams.

### **3. Student representation**

We are aware that the students who completed the survey and those who attended the focus groups are those who engage with everything and attend all such events. There is a self-selection bias in the project that we did our best to avoid but we are aware we have been rather unsuccessful at this. We wanted to capture the thoughts of students who might not engage as much as those who were involved in our project, and we did our best to invite students who do not generally attend and engage but to little or no avail.

## **Impact of project**

We are hoping that our project and guidelines, through the work of 13 academics, a number of professional services teams, and the engagement of almost 900 students, will help HE institutions in the UK and more widely build a deeper understanding of how students have changed their engagement with their studies after the pandemic. We see quite considerable shifts, especially in how students learn (all of which are mentioned in our guidelines document), and we hope leadership decisions made in the near future will take our findings into account.

We feel this is necessary, which is also why we spent 14 months working on the project, as we would really want to see the momentum of teaching and learning innovation driven by the pandemic be effectively used by the HE sector in developing the approach for future generations of students. Many of our findings and case studies not only look at student experience but also embed a wide range of staff experience aspects which we find very useful for faculty, school or department leadership teams.

## Conclusion

Despite the challenges of running a project with 10 HE institutions with just as many HE leaders and almost 900 students, we feel the project has been a very successful one and our output will continue to drive the conversation on how students and their expectations are changing as a result of the pandemic. We see our findings playing an important role in the success of the sector over the next couple of years as student experience becomes more of a focus point. For example, with the recent changes in the Office for Students' Conditions of Registration: [Condition B3](#), National Student [Survey](#) (NSS), and so forth, we consider our findings timely to support the thinking process of leaders across the sector with a view of improving future student experience, student belonging and creating a more inclusive environment within their HE institutions.

Our special thanks go to Dr Kerr Castle for his patience and invaluable support and words of wisdom, as well as to all students who were involved in the study, either through completing the survey or through attending the focus groups. Our experience of running the focus groups has been amazing and truly inspiring but also informative. It is certainly an approach we will continue with beyond this study.