

Quality Matters Conference 2021

Key Messages for QAA Members

Quality Matters is one of QAA's annual student-focused conferences. It provides an introduction to student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement, preparing student representatives for the year ahead.

Quality Matters 2021 provided opportunities for our members to hear from QAA and sector colleagues on the most recent policy updates, student voice and representation practice, and examples of student engagement in enhancement activity from across the UK.



This document shares key highlights and lessons learned from the conference. QAA Members can also access recording and presentations from the event on our [Membership Resources site](#).

How can students effectively engage in quality assurance and enhancement?

Vicki Stott, QAA's new Chief Executive, delivered the opening keynote discussing how student engagement has developed to become a key feature of the quality systems across UK higher education. As Vicki takes on her role as QAA's Chief Executive, she is committed to ensuring student engagement continues to grow as a core tenet of what we do.



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There is no single way to 'do' student engagement, and ongoing improvement and innovation is central to practice... In my view, it should be led strategically, but widely owned and supported.

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Vicki Stott, Chief Executive, QAA

Vicki reminded us that it's essential for student engagement to be tailored to the context and environment in which students and providers find themselves. It is vital that students have the opportunity to do that tailoring, to say this is what we need, this is what's happening, and this is how we would like to work with you. Quality in UK higher education is deliberately and purposefully designed to allow that tailoring, shaping and co-creation, and to encourage students and providers to have a meaningful dialogue.

The student voice project

Colleagues from the University of Wales, Trinity St David's Students' Union shared their ongoing work to enhance student voice systems to suit their range of campuses, types of students and modes of delivery to broaden engagement.

Research undertaken by the European Students' Union, presented in [Bologna With Student Eyes 2020](#), has identified the key barriers to student involvement in quality as:

- a lack of information about quality assurance among the student body
- participation not being facilitated or recognised
- a sense from students that their participation will not result in meaningful change.

“ To authentically engage students with quality we cannot force them to only engage with what we think is important and topical... we must integrate them throughout quality so they can truly shape, build and understand the frameworks approaches and definitions of the quality they're experiencing. ”

Hillary Gyebi Ababio, Vice-President (Higher Education), National Union of Students

What everyone ought to know about student engagement in quality

A panel of QAA experts took participants through quality arrangements in each of the UK nations, introducing key stakeholders and outlining recent developments in the sector. Through sharing the role of students in quality at both a provider and sector level, opportunities and resources for student engagement were highlighted enabling greater understanding of student engagement in quality.

Co-creating sustainability learning - closing the gaps

The University of Gloucestershire shared insights from over 10 years of integrating education for sustainable development into academic life and highlighted how students are partners in closing the gap between what's being delivered and what they most need to learn. Student partners felt they'd gained new skills and developed their adaptability through their engagement, including one final-year Geography student who said: 'I was working from home to engage students in a wider practice around sustainability, certain things I had to do I'm going to take forward as a graduate in whatever career I go into.'

An essential guide to academic integrity

Academic integrity is a key topic for higher education and a space where student engagement is vital. On what was International Day for Action Against Contract Cheating, students from Swansea University gave an insight into their experience working closely with their institution to combat academic misconduct. They provided a student perspective on the challenges and opportunities for promoting academic integrity.

Jakub Grodecki, Vice-President of the European Students' Union (ESU) provided the day 2 keynote. Jakub represents almost 20 million students in Europe, with a mission to represent, defend and strengthen students' educational, democratic and political and social rights, and working for sustainable, accessible and high-quality higher education in Europe.



“ It’s easy to say that students are not engaged, it’s much harder to help them to engage and to establish the platform for them ”
Jakub Grodecki, Vice-President, European Students' Union

As we move into new ways of delivering and accessing higher education, what will student engagement look like?

The methods and mechanisms for engaging students may have changed but the principles of student engagement remain the same. For many students a move to online engagement has reduced barriers and for some created more balance in power. We can learn from the lessons of the pandemic and build on positive engagement, increasing accessibility, transparency and knowledge.

Increasingly in an online or hybrid delivery model it's important to engage students where they are. Students have created their own groups and activities, these should be resourced and supported. While the incidental interactions on campus, at the end of a lecture, or in a coffee shop, have been reduced there are opportunities to create online spaces for informal discussion and feedback.

Student leaders in disrupted times: What we have learned from 2020-21

We were joined by Chrystalle Margallo and Nina Cupric, members of QAA's Student Strategic Advisory Committee (SSAC) who had undertaken roles as student officers during the 2020-21 academic year. Sharing their experiences of leading student voice and engagement through a disrupted period for higher education, they were able to demonstrate how they'd overcome these challenges and stressed the importance of teamwork and self-care.

Student engagement with the Scottish Enhancement Themes and the broader Quality Enhancement Framework

Colleagues from QAA Scotland, sparqs and Aberdeen University led a session focusing on the partnership approach to enhancement in Scotland, which provides students the opportunity to engage throughout and to lead a project as part of the wider theme. The current Enhancement Theme for the Scottish higher education sector is Resilient Learning Communities, with topics including innovation in digital communities; flexible, accessible learning; and promoting parity of learning opportunities.

Adapt, support, implement, deliver: How the School of Mathematics adapted to hybrid teaching.

Staff and students from the University of Edinburgh shared their experience of supporting hybrid delivery in response to Covid 19. Importantly students were involved early in plans, co-developing academic activities and student support for the coming year.

Authenticity in assessment

As institutions evolve and adapt practices to best suit the needs of students as future graduates, QAA is building a body of work around authentic assessment. Quality specialists were joined by members of SSAC who shared their experience whilst capturing that of the audience to inform our work. Authentic assessment is built around the notion that assessments should relate to the 'real world', rather than simply be tasks removed from context, and aim for the meaningful application of skills and knowledge.

Hillary Gyebi Ababio, Vice-President (Higher Education) of the National Union of Students, QAA Board Member and Co-Chair of QAA's Student Strategic Advisory Committee provided the final keynote to close Quality Matters 2021. Hillary celebrated the work of the sector and of QAA as authentic leaders of student engagement. She also acknowledged the difficult period we've all faced. From the lessons of the pandemic, Hillary encouraged members to reignite student engagement through three steps:



- 1** We must enable students to engage with quality without becoming disenfranchised by acronyms, unrecognisable terms and frameworks.
- 2** We must be prepared to adapt and support students as they transform education.
- 3** We must break down the walls of unseen meetings, decision-making and initiatives.



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