



UK Quality Code for Higher Education

Advice and Guidance

Student Engagement



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Regulatory contexts for the Quality Code

The Quality Code articulates a set of principles that apply across the UK through four Expectations. These Expectations are then explained and contextualised through Core and Common practices in a way that allows institutions to demonstrate them. The Expectations, Core and Common practices are not regulatory requirements in England, but the Practices should be demonstrated by providers operating in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

National regulators and QAA are not bound by the information in this advice and guidance and will not view it as containing indicators of compliance. This guidance does not interpret statutory requirements.

Terminology

Stakeholder: Used to define and describe anyone with an interest in student engagement, and may include the following:

- students
- students' union, association or guild
- academic and professional services staff
- the provider
- employers
- regulatory bodies, such as professional, statutory and regulatory bodies
- the wider external community, for example, service users
- alumni.

Student body: Used to describe the entire student population. Depending on the context, this may include:

- individual students
- groups of students with a common experience or interest (such as a club or society)
- formal representatives of a group (such as students' union, association or guild), or groups of students.

Students' representative body/organisation: Used to describe a formal body that represents and promotes the interests of students. This may be a students' union, a students' association or guild.

Partnership: For the purposes of this Theme, 'partner' and 'partnership' are used to define and indicate joint working between students and staff (or the students' union, association or guild and the provider). The level of each partner's engagement will vary depending on the context and aspect of the student experience.

Partnership working is based on the values of: openness; trust and honesty; agreed shared goals and values; and regular communication between the partners. It is not based on the legal conception of equal responsibility and liability. Instead, partnership working recognises that all members in the partnership have legitimate, but different, perceptions and experiences. By working together to a common agreed purpose, steps can be taken that lead to enhancements for all concerned. Partnerships reflect a mature relationship based on mutual respect between students and staff.

Partnership working can occur both in informal and formal arrangements, including representation mechanisms involving a students' union, association or guild where one exists.

Co-creation: Defined as the act of bringing different stakeholders together, to jointly produce a mutually valued outcome. Students can be engaged as co-creators at different levels, ranging from curriculum design negotiated jointly with staff, to participation in policy and strategy development.

Quality system: Covers any formal or informal quality enhancement or quality assurance policy or process used by a higher education provider.

Students: The term 'student' refers to all individuals studying a higher education course regardless of demographic, mode of delivery, level of study, subject area or geographic location.

Course: An approved pathway of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads towards a qualification. UK higher education courses must be approved and validated by UK degree-awarding bodies. They might also be referred to as programmes, units or modules.

Expectations and Practices

The advice underneath the Expectations and Practices is not mandatory for providers but illustrative of a range of possible approaches.

This Theme describes the meaningful participation of students in quality assurance and enhancement processes, which results in the improvement of their educational experience as well as benefiting the wider student body, institution and sector. For student engagement to contribute effectively to quality assurance and enhancement processes, it needs to capture the voices of all students, irrespective of location, mode of delivery, level of study, or discipline.

Expectation for quality

Courses are well-designed, provide a high-quality academic experience for all students and enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed.

Learning is a partnership; the effort and engagement of students is an essential aspect of their achievement. Students provide an invaluable perspective on the conditions needed for a high-quality academic experience and how this can be continuously improved.

Students can provide feedback, work collaboratively with staff and other stakeholders as they consider feedback and other quality indicators and work as co-creators of the curriculum. These activities will contribute to effective course design and approval, periodic review and the recognition of high-quality teaching.

Core practice

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

In practice, this means that effective, meaningful and inclusive student engagement requires continuous effort to ensure the development of new and innovative approaches.

Students can engage individually in their learning and in quality processes, which might involve working in partnership with individual staff, or groups of staff and other students. However, individual student feedback is not a substitute for formal structures of collective student representation.

Collective student engagement involves students considering, deliberating and developing informed views, independent from the provider, which are representative of the wider student body.

Collective engagement will happen primarily through the student representative structures such as course/class/faculty representatives, and where they exist through the students' representative body (such as the students' union, association or guild).

Common practice

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

In practice, this means that it is widely accepted throughout the sector that the views of all students, both individually and collectively, should inform activities undertaken by providers. This should, in turn, inform quality processes and practice with the purpose of ongoing improvement of the student experience, for current and future cohorts.

Guiding principles

The guiding principles given here are not mandatory for any provider. They are a concise expression of the fundamental practices of the higher education sector, based on the experience of a wide range of providers. They are intended as a framework for providers to consider when establishing new or looking at existing higher education provision. They are not exhaustive and there will be other ways for providers to meet their requirements.

1

Student engagement through partnership working is integral to the culture of higher education, however and wherever provision is delivered – student engagement is led strategically, but widely owned.

Partnership working is a key concept for student engagement in higher education – students and staff fulfil mutually important roles in shaping the student experience that enables staff and students to recognise and value the impact of student engagement in enhancement and quality assurance.

By fostering a culture of mutual respect, openness and sharing of information, providers can benefit from the insights, views and effective engagement of students. Where they exist, providers work with their students' representative body (such as students' union/association/guild) to set mutual goals and desired outcomes from student engagement activity at a strategic level, to orientate students and staff towards a shared understanding of success.

Providers in partnership with their student body should determine how the partnership will work in the context of their own institution. For example, in some providers the students' representative body is the primary vehicle for achieving partnership in institution-wide activities. In others, formal representative structures for partnership working may be embedded throughout.

2

Higher education providers, in partnership with their student body, define, promote, monitor and evaluate the range of opportunities to enable all students to engage in quality assurance and enhancement processes.

Higher education providers ensure that students and staff can define, own and promote the full range of opportunities for student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement processes.

Providers regularly monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their approach to student engagement. Students play an active role in these monitoring and evaluation activities, including identifying appropriate key performance indicators to be used to measure progress, and demonstrable enhancements to the educational experience.

3

Effective student engagement supports enhancements, innovation and transformation in the community within and outside the provider, driving improvements to the experience of students.

Student engagement can produce changes that help build a dynamic and inclusive learning community. A provider-wide approach will demonstrate multiple student engagement activities at all levels. Providers demonstrate how approaches to student engagement drive enhancements to the educational experience at each level.

Within the institution, student-led approaches may look at issues and approaches to the curriculum, the wider learning environment, student service delivery and policy development. Outside the provider, student partnership activities might focus on initiatives such as widening access, or community and employer engagement.

4**Arrangements exist for effective representation of the collective student voice at all organisational levels including decision-making bodies.**

Providers work with their student body and students' representative body (such as students' union, association or guild) to ensure there are mechanisms in place at all levels to allow for the collective view of students to inform and shape the student experience. Collective student engagement involves students considering, deliberating, and developing informed views, independent from the provider, which are representative of the wider student body. Collective engagement will happen primarily through student representative structures such as course/class/faculty representatives, and where they exist through the students' representative body.

5**Providers recognise and respond to the diversity of their student body in the design and delivery of student engagement, partnership working and representation processes.**

Providers ensure that approaches to student engagement and representation are designed to include the diversity of their student body, identifying and removing barriers to participation, to ensure that the full diversity of student voices can contribute to enhancement and assurance activities. Consideration is given to students' modes of study, the composition and demographic of the student population, and the different backgrounds that students have, to ensure effective engagement and representation.

6**Student engagement and representation processes are adequately resourced and supported.**

Effective student engagement requires clearly identified resourcing at a strategic level. Students and staff benefit from induction and ongoing training and support relating to student engagement.

Providers offer and evaluate the training and support provided to ensure it is appropriate for the role. The students' representative body requires adequate resource to lead on facilitating student academic representation, and providers often work with them on the delivery of induction and training activities. Consideration is given to ensuring training supports students to develop informed views, independent from the provider, which are representative of the wider student body.

7**Providers work in partnership with the student body to close the feedback loop.**

All stakeholders are clear about their role in the dissemination of feedback related to the student experience. Providers recognise and promote joint recognition and value of enhancements made to the student educational experience, and the contribution of students in achieving these successes.

Providers devise effective and appropriate ways of communicating with students how, when and where their feedback has been used and acted upon. Where action is not taken in response to student feedback, the rationale for this decision should be effectively communicated to students.

Practical advice

This section provides practical, contextualised advice to providers on student engagement. Where relevant, we have indicated which guiding principles the advice will help you achieve. Please bear in mind that this guidance is illustrative and intended to inform the approaches you consider and ultimately implement.

Definitions of student engagement should be set in the context of individual providers through a collaborative approach to define the scope and desired outcomes that orientate students, staff and other stakeholders towards a shared understanding of success. These definitions can be wide ranging but often cover two main domains that are linked to create a holistic approach to student engagement across a provider including the following:

- The participation of students in influencing and improving their educational experience. This is related to the participation of students in quality assurance and enhancement processes, which includes, but is not restricted to, representation of the student view through formal representation mechanisms. This is the focus of this Theme.
- Students engaging in their own learning as active partners in the learning process. This involves improving the motivation and investment of students to engage in learning and to learn independently, and is covered in the [Learning and Teaching](#) Theme.

Students play a key role in a range of areas associated with quality assurance and enhancement including, but not limited to: recruitment, selection and admissions; induction and transition into higher education; course and curriculum design, development and delivery and review; learning and teaching; learning opportunities and resources; student support and guidance; assessment and feedback; student progression and achievement.

Student engagement strategies and culture (Guiding principles 1, 2, 6)

Providers make explicit their commitment to student engagement and partnership working by incorporating clear principles and goals in institutional and departmental strategies. These strategies should be developed in partnership with the student body and embedded across the provider. There should be a continuous programme of activity to develop a culture of student engagement throughout the provider. To ensure this is developed, these activities will need to be supported by quality assurance and enhancement policies and procedures.

To embed a culture of student engagement, a provider may wish to consider the following:

- **Student engagement strategies** that detail how a provider will engage students in decision-making processes, quality assurance, and enhancement processes, and the wider provider community.
- **Partnership agreement between the student representative body and provider** detailing how they will work together in decision making, quality assurance and enhancement processes, and key strategic and institution-wide projects.
- **Development of key performance indicators or enhancement indicators to support the measurement of engagement by staff and students and the outcomes of engagement activity**, that can subsequently be used to share good practice and indicate where further enhancement and interventions may be needed.

In addition, providers take active steps to communicate the importance of student engagement and partnership working. Senior staff play a key leadership role in fostering an environment that is open and transparent and empowers students to engage and work in partnership. However, all staff and students share responsibility for maintaining and developing a culture of student engagement, and as such they will require access to support and guidance on their formal and informal roles and responsibilities around student engagement.

Providers recognise and celebrate effective student engagement and partnership working through a range of formal and informal mechanisms. These can include skills accreditation, award schemes and ceremonies and/or recording achievement on formal documentation such as transcripts.

Reflective questions

- To what extent do your strategies and approaches encourage a partnership approach to student engagement?
- How did you develop and approve these policies?
- How do you communicate these strategies and policies to students and staff?
- How do you measure impact and engagement with these policies?
- How would you characterise the roles students play across your institution?

Inclusivity (Guiding principles 1, 2, 6)

To ensure that all students can engage in quality assurance and enhancement processes, providers consider the context and demographic of their student populations in decision-making and development processes. Providers should take account of the unique diversity of their student body, including different modes of study and those with protected characteristics.

Providers work in partnership with the student body to identify potential barriers to engagement and ensure students and their representative bodies, including those from under-represented groups, are involved in the design, delivery and review of quality processes.

Providers are encouraged to use sector resources and research to support the development of inclusive practice and to use it in the development of innovative student engagement initiatives.

Reflective questions

- How do your student engagement systems take account of the diversity of the student population?
- Have you considered barriers to engagement in the design of your processes? If there are barriers to engagement - what steps do you take to address them?
- Do your quality assurance processes enable all students to engage if they wish to do so?
- Do students engaged within your student representative structures, reflect the diversity of the student population? Are there any groups of students that are not engaging?

Quality assurance and enhancement policies and procedures

(Guiding principles 2, 3, 4)

Quality assurance and enhancement policies and procedures embed and promote student engagement. Students are actively involved in the design, implementation and review of policies and procedures, which should link to the strategies and support the development of a culture of partnership.

To ensure that students are involved in the development of quality processes and procedures, providers need to have student representatives as equal members on relevant decision-making committees and use appropriate feedback mechanisms to obtain wider student input into process and decision making. These may include:

- having student representatives on quality committees and decision-making committees at institutional level
- having student members on working groups
- undertaking pilots of new policies or processes and capturing student feedback on the process to inform development decision making
- gathering feedback from the wider student population on policies and procedures on a regular basis.

The following list offers examples as to how a provider might enable students to access, understand and engage with the processes they are involved with:

- trained and supported student representatives on approval and review panels
- student involvement in the annual monitoring process to support the development of actions to enhance the student experience
- facilitating student representatives to engage in the development of action plans arising from external examiner reports and survey action plans
- ensuring that information related to the student experience is accessible to all students.

Reflective questions

- How are your students engaged in quality assurance and enhancement activities?
- Where are your students represented on decision-making committees?
- What provision is available to support the engagement of students in quality and enhancement processes or decision-making committees?
- How do you obtain feedback from those students who have engaged with quality and enhancement processes?
- How do you recognise the contribution of students to these processes?

Student representation (Guiding principles 3, 4, 5, 6, 7)

Providers actively promote, support and use effective student representation at all levels of decision making, including on governing bodies and senior committees at provider, faculty/school or department level. The level of representation should be decided in partnership between the provider and student body, and, where they exist, within the students' representative body. Using flexible approaches to supporting active student engagement, and in the constitution of committees, providers can assist representatives to represent the diversity of all students.

Providers can work with student representation to gather feedback, share good practice and make enhancements to courses. Providers support engaged students in the promotion, training and implementation of student representative systems at course level and develop processes for these representatives to engage with their cohorts and staff.

Examples of how this might be achieved are as follows:

- Course committees where student representatives and academic and support staff can engage in discussions to share good practice and enhance the student experience.
- Providing student representatives the opportunity to engage with their cohorts by collecting feedback and reporting on changes that are being made to the courses.
- Regular engagements with student representatives and facilitating discussions and development.
- Establishing and making effective use of department/school/faculty-level committees where student representatives can engage with peers and staff, and contribute to discussions to enhance the experience of students.
- Enabling staff and students to work in partnership to determine the most appropriate engagement structure to suit the provider's mission and student context.

Students in a representative role benefit from induction, as well as continued training and developmental support from the provider and students' representative body. Providers are advised to review the training to ensure it is appropriate and fit for purpose to support the range of representative roles. Similarly, staff benefit from training and support to enable them to work effectively in partnership with student representatives. Providers will need to make adequate resources available to support the processes, including training and implementation.

Student representative and staff training should be specific to the context of the provider, and may include (but is not limited to) the following aspects.

Student representative training:

- their role within the provider and where and how they can effectively engage
- how to gather feedback from cohorts and report back to staff
- how to feedback to their cohorts
- how to make best use of the feedback they have received
- an understanding of the difference between individual and cohort feedback
- an understanding of the skills that they can develop from participating in the role
- an understanding of any regulatory requirements pertaining to the gathering of feedback (for example, GDPR).

Staff training:

- the role of partnership and student representative systems at the provider
- processes for engaging with student representatives
- how to support student representatives in gathering cohort feedback and engaging in the role
- how to close the feedback loops with students
- where and how to take appropriate action and escalate issues if the process is ineffective and intervention is needed to support engagement.

Clear information should be accessible to students and staff about the representative role, including how to contact representatives, the process for disseminating decisions, and where to access outcomes from committee meetings, or equivalent.

Providers promote and support the enhancement of the representative role, including the development of transferable skills. Providers help students to recognise these benefits and consider ways of recognising the learning achieved through representation. Examples of this include:

- formally recognising the benefits of participation in representative roles on extended transcripts or higher education achievement records
- the development of modules (credit or non-credit rated) highlighting the transferable skills that can be achieved through participation
- the promotion of student representative schemes by emphasising the development of transferable skills
- offering wider training to support the role and enhance skills development, such as chairing meetings, leadership, and having difficult conversations.

To enhance the student representative system further, providers may make students aware of opportunities to engage with external representative activities, for example, sector networks or working groups, and actively support and resource student engagement in such activities.

Periodic reports on student engagement activities considered by the deliberative committee structure will allow providers to ensure these systems continue to remain fit for purpose. The reports could use data available on number of representatives elected to indicate:

- details of training activity and engagement
- details of engagement point/meetings
- student representative attendance at meetings
- summaries of common feedback items at institutional level
- performance against relevant indicators, and any recommendations or actions.

Reflective questions

- What student representative structures do you have in place?
- What support do you offer students and staff to support the structures?
- How visible and accessible is your student representative structure to the student body?
- How do you test the effectiveness of the representative structure?
- Do your staff understand the student representative structure?

Student surveys (Guiding principles 2, 3, 5, 7)

Providers develop mechanisms to enable students to provide feedback on their experience. Student surveys are an effective means of collecting the feedback, and providers should ensure that surveys are appropriate, timely and accessible to students. Clear and concise information stating the purpose of the survey should be made accessible to all stakeholders and providers need to be aware of their legal requirements (such as GDPR) in relation to the collection and processing of survey data.

Providers work with student bodies in developing question sets to ensure that they obtain accurate intelligence that can be acted upon accordingly, and to enable students to give full and honest feedback on their experience. In order to secure ongoing and future engagement, it is important that students do not perceive that they are overburdened with surveys. Providers are advised to work with student representative bodies, staff and the wider student population to promote the benefits of participating in survey activity and ensure participation rates meet thresholds to allow for enhancements to be completed in response. Providers work with the student body in analysing the results and developing action plans.

Providers ensure that feedback in relation to student surveys is communicated to students and that action plans resulting from the surveys are agreed with the student body. Action plans from surveys are reported to relevant committees to ensure that both staff and students can engage with the feedback, and that actions and communications are agreed, understood and delivered by both staff and students.

Reflective questions

- How many surveys do you ask your students to complete, and for what purpose?
- Do you review the content of these surveys to ensure that they continue to pose relevant and appropriate questions?
- How do you agree the questions and minimum level of participation?
- How do you report the results of surveys to students?
- How are surveys made available? Are they accessible to all students?

Closing the feedback loop (Guiding principles 1, 2, 7)

Providers listen, engage with and respond to feedback received from students and student representatives. A provider-wide policy of closing the feedback loop in an effective manner should be adopted and embedded, alongside openness and transparency in the decisions resulting from feedback and those that impact on the student experience.

Providers can achieve this by establishing communication channels accessible to all students and staff, outlining agreed actions and feedback. Providers are advised to make sure documentation on decisions and student feedback is made available to students including relevant committee papers, action plans, and any actions taken in response to student feedback.

In developing a feedback culture, providers respond to student feedback and, where students are involved in that process, student representatives are given an effective platform to respond to that feedback on behalf of their cohorts and peers.

Examples of closing the feedback loop might include:

- the use of 'You said, We did' activities
- making committee minutes available on virtual learning environments
- completing large communication campaigns to highlight actions being taken
- developing action plans in response to feedback which are discussed and agreed with student representatives
- making staff aware of changes through internal communications.

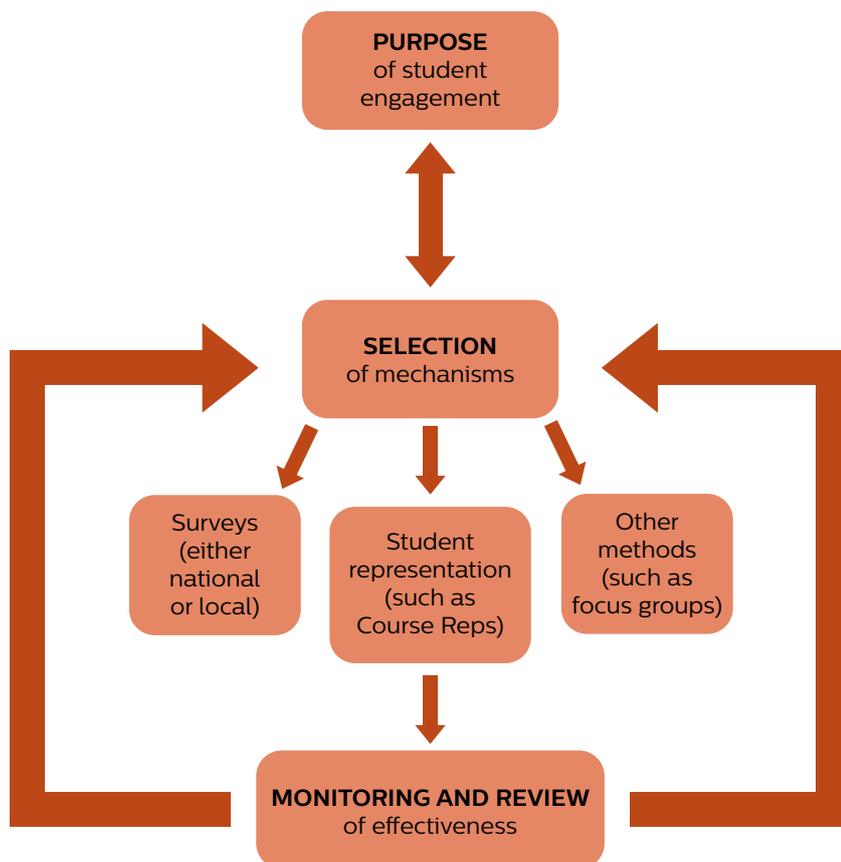
Reflective questions

- What mechanisms do you have to close the feedback loop?
- Do you have a strategic approach to feedback that is embedded at all levels of your institution?
- How do you make information available to students on decisions that affect the student experience?
- Is there a strategic approach to closing the feedback loop and then to keep lines of communication open?
- To what extent are your students active participants in the discussion around actions arising from feedback?

Monitoring and evaluation (Guiding principles 1-7)

Figure 1 illustrates a cycle of review for student engagement (based on CHERI Report to HEFCE on Student Engagement 2009).

Figure 1: A cycle of review for student engagement.



Providers ensure that the wider student body and the students' representative body (where it exists) are actively involved in a strategic approach to regular monitoring and evaluation of student engagement, through the established committee structure. Any enhancements that arise from monitoring and evaluation should also be evaluated to ensure they meet the specific needs of the student body and institutional context.

In the monitoring and evaluation process, providers are encouraged to review, monitor and enhance processes relating to student engagement as well as ensuring that feedback loops are closed. Sector bodies that specialise in student engagement activity have benchmarking tools and engagement principles that providers may wish to use to support their monitoring activity, and when developing institutional indicators.

Monitoring and evaluation activity for student engagement should take account of:

- individual engagement and feedback (such as surveys or complaints and appeals)
- collective engagement and feedback (such as student representation, focus groups or workshops)
- closing the feedback loop
- an inclusive approach to student engagement.

Datasets that could be used for monitoring and evaluation of student engagement might include, but are not limited to:

- evidence of a Student Protection Plan (for English higher education providers), a student charter, partnership agreement or equivalent
- survey results and participation rates - including the externally administered National Student Survey, Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey, Postgraduate Research Experience Survey, and internal course and module evaluations
- evidence of engagement with student representative systems, including election/representative data, minutes from meetings, and any other supporting data
- survey results and other feedback-related action plans, and evidence where student feedback loops have been closed, such as 'You Said, We did'
- benchmarking data reports provided in the Teaching Excellence Framework and Student Outcomes Framework and other external reports
- policies and procedures that detail student engagement mechanisms and expectations
- feedback from those engaged with quality assurance and enhancement processes.

Reflective questions

- How is student engagement monitored and reported? What could you do to enhance monitoring, improve engagement and remove barriers?
- How do you measure the impact of student engagement in these processes?
- What student feedback mechanisms do you have to inform decision-making processes?
- How do you measure the impact of change as a result of student feedback?
- How do you inform students about enhancements made based on their feedback?

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