



Understanding the barriers to student engagement

Information and good practice for higher education institutions and students' unions on the barriers to engaging students in their learning experience.



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Foreword

Foreword

NUS is an organisation that believes in the transformational potential of universities, not just for individual students but wider society; the 'public good' of higher education. But for institutions to be able to fulfil this vital societal role, they first need to understand and enhance students' learning experiences. We firmly believe that the best way to do this is to engage students in shaping their education through a partnership approach. Students must be treated as partners so that they, and indeed the institutions at which they study, can reach their full potential. We believe that students' unions should be the collective voice for their students. Partnership between students' unions and their institutions is essential for creating a high quality learning experience for all students.

This report is an outcome of three collaborative projects which the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) funded the National Union of Students (NUS) to deliver in the 2011/12 academic year. The partnership between NUS and QAA is of great value to both organisations and we thank QAA for providing the opportunity to produce this report.

Student engagement and the concept of 'students as partners' is currently being explored and debated across the sector. This report is designed to contribute to the knowledge of the higher education sector on the barriers to engaging students in their learning experience. As part of the NUS/QAA collaborative projects, we have been working with 15 self-nominated students' unions and their institutions to provide bespoke support on improving student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement activities. This report has been produced based on the experiences and evidence developed from working with these students' unions and institutions.

With a rapidly changing sector, students' expectations and perspectives changing with each new intake, now is the time to redouble our efforts on student engagement. We need to work together to generate, share and evaluate innovative ways of engaging students as partners in their learning experience and it is in this spirit that we present this report. We hope that it will inform and encourage debate on this important issue across the sector.

Rachel Wenstone,
NUS Vice President (Higher Education)

Introduction

Introduction

During the academic year 2011/12, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) funded the National Union of Students (NUS) to deliver three collaborative projects on student engagement and the student experience. These collaborative projects are a recognition of the importance of student engagement to the design and delivery of UK higher education. They have helped NUS and QAA to further promote and deliver our shared commitment to ensuring students are actively involved in local and national quality assurance and enhancement processes.

Strand 1 looked at researching different aspects of the student experience, including students' expectations and satisfaction with the quality of their learning experience*. Strand 2 looked to support student engagement in institutional review and other quality processes through the production of the new Quality Matters website**, training materials and events. Strand 3, which this report is based on, had two key aims. Firstly, to promote greater collaboration between students' unions and their institutions in engaging students in quality processes. Secondly, to build the capacity of students' unions that do not have a tradition of being involved in quality assurance at their institution, to be able to tackle quality issues, and become involved in quality assurance and enhancement processes.

To fulfil these aims we have been working with 15 self-nominated students' unions and their institutions to provide bespoke support to improve student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement. This report has been produced based on the experiences and evidence developed from working with these students' unions and institutions and is

designed to contribute to the knowledge of the higher education sector on the barriers to engaging students in their learning experience.

The report is structured around five key themes:

Theme 1 - A partnership approach.

Theme 2 - Communicating with students.

Theme 3 - Understanding and developing the role of student representatives.

Theme 4 - Delivering student engagement at different levels within institutions.

Theme 5 - Raising issues, but who finds the solutions?

Each theme sets out a particular issue or process, which has the potential to become a barrier to student engagement if it is not tackled or delivered effectively. In the report you will find further detail and examples of how students' unions and institutions have approached these barriers.

We launched the themes of the report at the NUS/QAA 'Quality (still) Matters' event on 29th March 2012 and since then we have been collecting the case studies you will find showcased throughout the report. The report features case studies from a diverse range of institutions on a variety of issues relevant to the key themes. A full list of the students' unions and institutions that have contributed to the report, either by participating in Strand 3 of the NUS/QAA collaborative projects or providing a case study, can be found in Appendix B. Contact details for the students' unions and institutions that have authored case studies can be found throughout the report at the end of each individual case study.

* This research was published in April 2012. Please see Appendix A for information on how to access the research online.

** Please see Appendix A for further information.

How the report can be used

This report has been designed to contribute to the knowledge of the higher education sector on the barriers to engaging students in their learning experience. We encourage institutions and students' unions to use this report to reflect on and openly discuss the barriers to student engagement that exist in their local context. We encourage institutions and students' unions to work in partnership to overcome these barriers and to work with their staff and students to understand existing internal approaches and practice. Identifying the barriers to student engagement can form an important part of developing robust policies and procedures on student engagement that promote a strategic, long-term and collaborative approach to this agenda.

We know that new practice on student engagement is being developed all the time and existing mechanisms are being continually reviewed and improved. We hope this report will be a gateway to further sharing of good practice and discussions on student engagement locally and nationally. To help facilitate the sharing of this good practice, there will be a section on the new Quality Matters website dedicated to the report. The report will be available to download and we will be encouraging students' unions and institutions to upload new case studies on the report themes on a rolling basis.

Definitions of student engagement

NUS believe that when it comes to student engagement, it is through a collaborative partnership approach that the best results can be achieved. Only by working together can students, their representatives and their institutions gain the great benefits of effective and authentic student engagement: shared ownership of the learning process, better-informed decisions and an improved learning experience for students.

QAA believe student engagement is all about involving and empowering students in the process of shaping the student learning experience. It is about making sure that all students have the chance to make their voice heard and to inform the way that universities and colleges provide learning opportunities.

We encourage students' unions and institutions to engage in open and honest discussion about student engagement, both locally and nationally. It is important that institutions, in partnership with their students' union and students, define what student engagement means in their local context.

Theme 1: A partnership approach

A partnership approach

The concept of 'students as partners' has been a key challenge and point of discussion emerging from our work with students' unions and institutions. There is much debate about the nature of this partnership, what it means for students and staff and the extent to which that partnership is or is not one of equals. Following the publication of the Student Engagement Chapter of the UK Quality Code^{***}, this debate is likely to continue and grow. The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about student engagement, which higher education providers are required to meet: 'Higher Education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience'. As further discussion and work on the concept of 'students as partners' takes place locally and nationally, it is likely that different models of partnership will emerge.

The NUS/HEA 'Student Engagement Toolkit'^{***} helpfully defines a partnership stage of student engagement as "collaboration between an institution/faculty/department and student, involving joint ownership and decision-making over both the process and outcome". It is clear from the work we have undertaken that for some institutions, seeing students as partners in their learning experience is a key underpinning factor in the way they understand and approach student engagement in their local contexts. This approach may have required a culture shift within institutions that can take years, and may run contrary to the expectations of some staff and future students, for example. As you will see in the case study from Birmingham City Students' Union and Birmingham City University below, an important aspect of their joint approach to student engagement, was for it to be seen as 'a conscious choice to change the culture of the University around a set of principles and values'.

It could be argued that for a partnership approach to become meaningful, it should be a recognisable and widely understood concept throughout institutions, supported by clear and accessible policies and procedures on student engagement. Being a part of such an approach may be a transition for some students' entering higher education. For example, in the case study from Leeds University Union below, they note that their partnership agreement with the University of Leeds 'helped students understand how the learning relationship at University is different to school'. One possible way to address this transition could be introducing the concept of partnership as a key part of a student's induction to higher education and then ensuring the approach remains consistent throughout their learning experience. If students are expected to embrace and take ownership of their role in a partnership with their lecturers/department/faculty/institution, it may assist them to understand the meaning and value of this partnership, the impact it can have on their learning experience and the responsibilities that accompany it.

For many institutions, their students' union is the main vehicle for collective student engagement. For these institutions, an important aspect of fostering a partnership approach to student engagement will be open dialogue with their students' union, through which areas of collaboration could be identified and developed. Examples of different types of collaboration and partnership between students' unions and their institutions can be found in case studies throughout the report, including those from Birmingham City Students' Union and Birmingham City University, Leeds University Union, Southampton Solent University Students' Union, the University of Exeter and University of Exeter Students' Guild, Bournemouth University Students' Union and Staffordshire University Students' Union.

^{***} Please see Appendix A for further information.

Case study

Birmingham City Students' Union and Birmingham City University

An emergent refocus of student and staff relationships and the UK Higher Education sector's increased focus on student engagement has resulted in an in-depth scrutiny of the complex nature of the student experience. Over the last four years this has stimulated a challenging but open dialogue between Birmingham City Students' Union and the University within a fast changing university landscape. Occurring alongside a series of projects, which places students at the heart of design and delivery, the students' union and the university are on a journey of partnership which symbolises the developing role of students within their own learning experience. The impact and benefits to all are substantial with an increased sense of engagement, a reinvigorated approach to staff and student involvement and new directions in championing the student voice within 'quality' systems.

Since 2008 Birmingham City University (BCU) has seen great leaps in developing the role of students into an integral component of the learning experience. Our flagship project, the Student Academic Partners Scheme (SAPS) has developed joint student and staff projects driving forward pedagogic

development in and out of the classroom. From the initial goal of changing the culture of student engagement through to a broader body of student-orientated activity, this has been underpinned with a consistent ethos being that of 'students as partners'.

It could be seen that a barrier to student engagement seems to be the innate need to over-focus on the term and definition of the practice of student engagement. It seems easier and more commonplace to see components of student engagement as mutually exclusive; as individual projects in their own right, the sum of which will lead to better student engagement and as such an enhanced learning experience. Our joint approach to student engagement between the institution and the Students' Union was not to see student engagement as a bolt on to a series of everyday projects but as a conscious choice to change the culture of the University around a set of principles and values. By setting out a vision of establishing 'the learning community' through a debate outlining how we see students experiencing university life alongside staff members, we set out to demonstrate this by combining strategic directions, sharing resources and seeking

to establish a framework in which these values could develop for mutual benefit.

Initially three statements could explain these values and principles:

1. Equal partnership and collaboration between students and staff members contributing to the 'learning experience'
2. Students being integral to the design and delivery of learning interventions, pedagogic projects and student involvement opportunities
3. The intended and unintended outcomes of student and staff interactions support and develop a holistic learning community

A common area of difference between union and institution is around working on activities that support Quality Assurance or Quality Enhancement. We feel that a key component in the move from quality assurance towards quality enhancement is not in seeing these as distinct from each other, but a combination of both leading to a change to the culture, makeup and role of the students informing the University of their opinion both within Boards of Studies and Course committees as well as outside of formal

Birmingham City case study continued

frameworks. To this end we hope to use students and the student voice as a mechanism in changing our culture to enable a wider range of student conversations within the whole quality enhancement and student feedback debate.

Within the student community we now have a wealth of student-focussed engagement activity including a tailored student employment scheme, student advisory boards, Executive Dean's lunches, student liaison officers, an enhanced and well supported Academic Manifesto, student and graduate interns and students leading work on the development of our student charter as well as facilitating our first ever learning and teaching awards. We look for, and welcome, 'opportunistic collisions' between staff and students, with the next step being to maximise the impact of their occurrence alongside the traditional structure of Faculty Board Meetings, Boards of Studies, Course Committees and Democratic Structures within Students' Union. We believe that these committees, and the need to re-purpose the role and input of students and student representatives alongside these

accidental collisions are one of the final steps on our journey towards holistic student engagement.

Factors we believe are integral to a positive working relationship include:

- Establishing a shared vision and mutual goals from the start generated by both parties.
- Trust, openness and confidence from both sides in their abilities and strengths, as well highlighting areas where support may not be equal i.e. finances.
- Knowing the boundaries and having transparency upon perceptions of risk, issues or ground one party may not be able to shift their position on i.e. policy, organisational autonomy or conflicting objectives.
- Regular communication, enhanced in this instance by the secondment of the Head of Engagement from the SU to the University.
- Shared and celebrated successes.
- A contract or agreement documenting joint activity.

- Continual monitoring ensuring that the partnership is equal, 50/50.

Overall we see this as a continuation of work well established in the realm of student and staff partnership. BCU has a respected track record of engaging students alongside staff in variety of roles creating positive impact for staff and students, faculty and University. The Union and University's open and strategically honest relationship has been at the forefront of this approach as the manifestation on campus.

For further information, please contact:

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Prof. Stuart Brand - Head of Learning Experience, Birmingham City Students' Union stuart.brand@bcu.ac.uk

Case study

Southampton Solent University Students' Union

In Solent Students' Union new strategic plan our members identified that they wanted us to focus on developing our relationship with our Institution. We realised that although work in this area was occurring, there was no organisation wide method for ensuring the development of this relationship and the positive outcomes that this will create. It was decided to adopt a more systematic approach in order to fulfil our strategic aims. Our focus is on influence and partnership (with some specific focus on Documentation – Student Charter etc).

Initial conversations made it clear that there were patches of good partnership working and influence occurring, but it was inconsistent and poorly communicated internally. It was agreed that frameworks needed to be created to identify and improve areas of influence and partnership that were felt to be important. Firstly, it was acknowledged that creating a matrix would be complex due to the varied avenues for interactions (in principle) open to us. We highlighted that influence and partnership could be person to person and department to department, as well as being formal and informal. Additionally, every new project or initiative from

the SU or University could have the potential to create relationships where there was previously no need.

It was decided that the matrix would, in the context of the points raised above, outline:

- Our current position of influence/partnership within a specific area, including key outcomes.
- Our desired area of influence/partnership.
- Who is the most appropriate lead (Sabbatical or staff member).
- Actions to move from the current position to the desired level of influence/partnership.

Work carried out in conjunction with the NUS/QAA Strand 3 collaborative project began the process of mapping our relationships in an academic context. The Students' Union worked with the University to identify committees that we attend and those that we do not, before discussing the merits of joining several committees. We are also looking at the experience of our students/staff on these committees (including impact), the lines of communication that stem from them and what we can do

to enhance our preparation and delivery.

The next stage of the process is to gather information from the organisation's staff and volunteers to continue developing our knowledge base. We may determine that in some areas of the University there is no benefit to building these relationships. Indeed, as a result of the mapping exercise we discussed the merits of leaving several committees. This is not a problem if it is a decision that is made with appropriate evidence (and reviewed regularly), rather than in a haphazard way.

The key outcome of this project will be an organisation wide understanding of our interactions with the University and the steps being taken to improve it. This will have many benefits, for example helping to better prepare for block grant negotiations. The framework will be a live document and as our work continues this document will be updated accordingly to ensure everyone is working in harmony for the good of our members.

For further information, please contact:

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Case study

Leeds University Union

In 2011 The Partnership was developed by students and staff at Leeds. The agreement outlined what staff could expect from students, what students could expect from staff as well as what students could expect from other students and staff from other staff. Many of the expectations were common to everyone.

2. Concurrently, by making it clear that their relationship with their learning is an active one rather than passive, student representatives were given a clear reason for being; because if you know that you have a say, but you know you can't always be there when decisions are being made, then

is not a transactional one but transformational one.

Authorship

Rather than being written by a central management committee, the Partnership was written by staff and students at Leeds. Firstly demographically representative groups of students were brought together to give their initial thoughts which were then amalgamated by school reps and tested out with more students via surveys. Workshops were then conducted to bring staff and students from different schools and levels together to broker an agreement. Finally the finished document was approved by University Council and LUU's Better University forum. Taking a bottom up approach and enabling staff and to students to co-author the agreement had the following benefits:

- Breaking down the traditional student/ staff binary in recognition that students impact on other student's learning was equally important and effectual - and recognising staff's relationships could also not be ignored
- Written by staff and students, the language used to write the

We will:

Be responsible, accessible and respectful

Prepare for, engage with, and contribute to learning at Leeds

Help each other to reflect, develop and improve

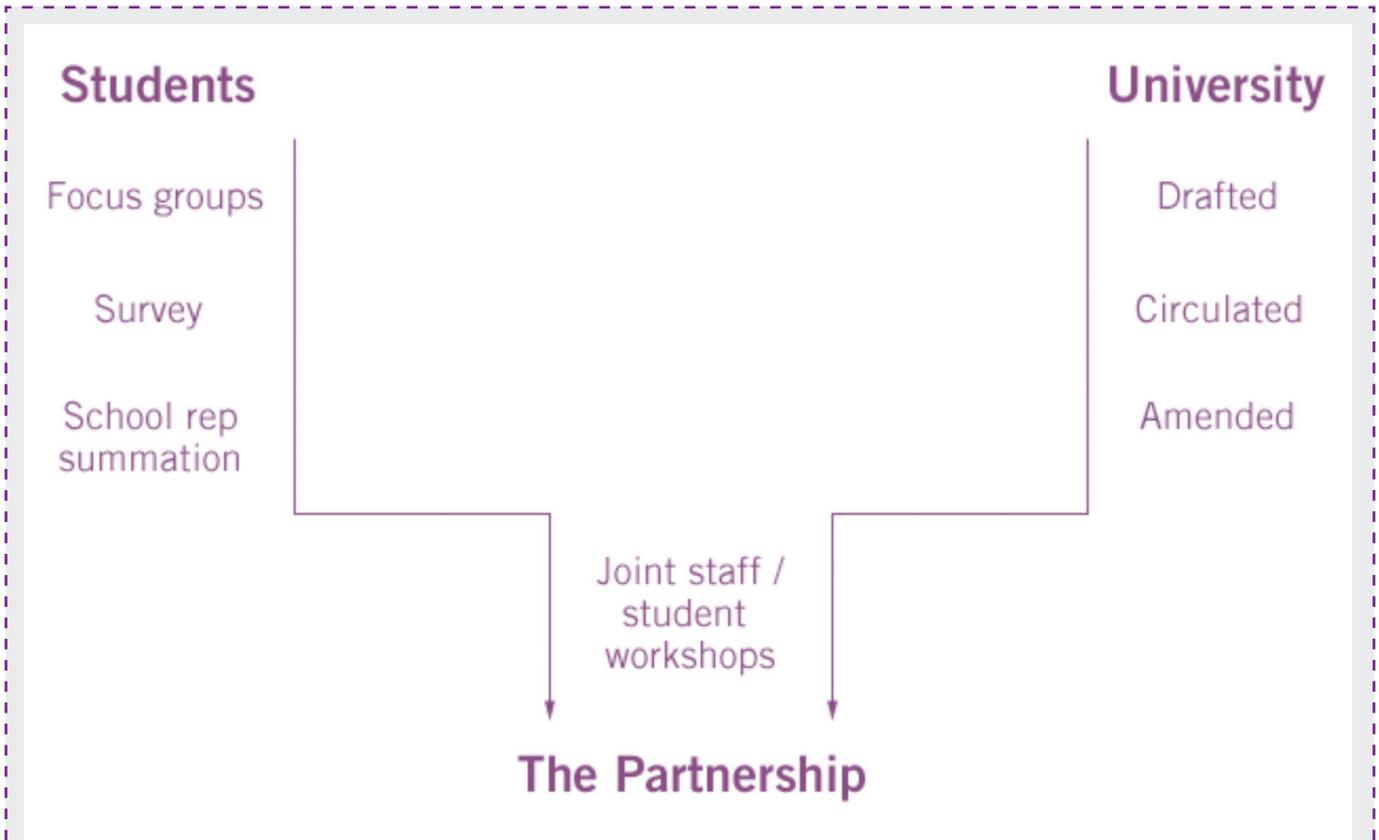
Why Partnership

Creating a partnership agreement with the University of Leeds (UoL) fulfilled three immediate functions for Leeds University Union (LUU).

1. It helped students understand how the learning relationship at University is different to school. That, unlike a traditional teacher-pupil relationship, the staff-student relationship was more equitable in that students have a say over both what they learn and how they learn it.

you understand you may need someone else to speak on your behalf.

3. Thirdly there was a more political dimension. Contributing more in fiscal terms, students could have easily considered themselves consumers and staff providers of their immediate satisfaction rather than intellectual development. By outlining what they can expect from each other, the Partnership made it clear that the relationship between students and staff



agreement was instantly more understandable and relevant to its key stakeholders.

- The discussions raised new interesting questions such as who is “the University” and does “the University” did not exist separately to students and staff?

Promotion

The students involved in developing the Partnership stressed the importance of the agreement’s practical application. In other words, it was important to produce something usable that, although not contractual, could be referenced and applied by students and staff if the expectations outlined were not being met. In response to this LUU worked with the UoL’s

communications department to utilise a process developed by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) called DEMOCS. DEMOCS (Deliberative Meeting Of CitizenS) is a kind of card game used to help people’s understanding of a given topic. The DEMOCS helped students and staff in each school come together and for each line in the Partnership agree i) how the expectation applied to their school and ii) what advice they would give to someone who felt this expectation was not being met.

To further populate and celebrate the Partnership an award ceremony was held in April with awards for students and staff who’d exemplified the behaviours outlined in the Partnership. The awards received over 500 nominations for 9 awards. The

ceremony was accompanied by an exhibition of partnership at Leeds and videos of the staff and students who nominated the winners talking about the impact and value of their work. A book is currently being produced to document the ceremony and celebrate those involved. Once completed, the book will be sent out to schools to encourage more staff and students to work in partnership to make the University of Leeds better for everyone.

For further information, please contact:

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Website: <http://partnership.leeds.ac.uk/>

Theme 2: Communicating with students

Communicating with students

We have observed that many institutions and students' unions wish to improve at least one aspect of the communication cycle within their various student engagement processes, whether it's seeking the views of students, receiving a response to student feedback or subsequently communicating these back to students. We have seen that effective systems of communication between students, student representatives, the students' union and the institution can be an important aspect of student engagement processes.

It could be argued that when there are robust mechanisms in place for student representatives to gather feedback from their peers, this will help them to be effective and confident in their role. It could also be argued that knowledge of this evidence base may increase the confidence and receptiveness of staff to the feedback they receive from student representatives. In their case study below, Bournemouth University Students' Union note that when gathering peer to peer feedback has been 'encouraged and supported by academic staff the results have been spectacular'. As you will see, there are different approaches to gathering data demonstrated in the case studies below, but both students' unions have developed a clear understanding of the purpose and destination of that data.

The NUS/QAA 2011/12 Student Experience Research**** shows nearly a third of students (31.9%) do not know whether or not the feedback that they provide is acted upon, which suggests that this is an issue many institutions still need to address. It could be argued that students may be less inclined to engage if they do not believe their feedback will be listened to and where possible, acted upon. Therefore, information that is widely available about what has happened as a result of student feedback could be considered useful in encouraging student engagement and helping to

ensure student representatives remain active. In their case study below, the University of Bath Students' Union note that 'feeding back successes and progress is key to closing the engagement circle'.

In many institutions, student representatives play a valuable role in communicating with students about issues that have been raised on their behalf and changes that have been made as a result of their feedback. As you will see in the case study from Bournemouth University Students' Union below, they have found that actively encouraging student representatives to gather data from their peers to feed into course committee meetings, has meant that 'actions are recorded at meetings attended by the student reps and then reps can immediately report these actions back to students'. However, institutions may wish to consider whether there is enough time and scope in the role of a student representative for this mode of communication to always be consistent and far-reaching. This might be a particular issue for student representatives at school and faculty level. It may be that institutions and students' union will need to employ multiple modes of communication in order to reach the greatest number and range of students. This has been the approach taken by University of Bath Students' Union, as shown in their case study below.

**** Please see Appendix A for further information.

Case study

University of Bath Students' Union

The University of Bath Students' Union (BUSU) first ran its Student Opinion Survey (SOS) in 2007/08 in order to get direct student feedback on the Students' Union, its processes and engage with students on the issues which are important to them. Using this survey along with other data and engagement BUSU formulates a Top Ten of priority representational issues for the year ahead and monitors the progress of these issues throughout the year.

Gathering data

BUSU uses a variety of means to gather feedback and data on the key issues students feel are important to them, these include:

- SOS – An annual survey sent to all students of the University of Bath consistently receiving around 2000 responses every year since 2007/08. Covering awareness and importance of the services of BUSU, feedback on the decision making processes, elections, the impact which BUSU has upon the student experience, the relationship between University and BUSU and the key issues affecting their student experience.
- This survey is not just a satisfaction survey, it is used to

demonstrate understanding and involvement.

- Academic Council – A Students' Union led meeting held every three weeks for all Academic Representatives to attend to discuss issues in their departments and key academic issues.
- Face to face engagement with students throughout the year.
- ISB, DSB, NSS, PTES and PRES results.
- Advice and Representation Centre casework statistics.

Setting the direction

Using data from sources listed above a 'Top Ten' of student issues is collated by the Sabbaticals and Senior Management Team. There are two specific questions which are used to identify these issues within the SOS which ask students to comment on the one thing they would like improved in their academic experience and what the biggest issue is in their student life. Once the results are analysed and the top issues identified a Top Ten is collated. Often data from other sources is also used to influence the Top Ten e.g. if 'Group Work' was identified as an area of concern, Academic Council

would be used to identify what the specific concern with group work is and actions to address these proactively.

Once identified the Top Ten is then broken down into a clear development plan with SMART targets to assist Sabbaticals with the goals of each of the Top Ten issues. Once the targets are agreed a week by week calendar is drawn up highlighting key pieces of work or meetings at different points during the academic year and who is responsible.

Results from the SOS are also used by all departments within BUSU to set targets and measure impact in the annual development planning period as well as within BUSU's Three Year Plan. Key questions within the SOS are also used to monitor progress and measure impact for Students' Union Evaluation Initiative (SUEI) audits.

Tracking progress

Fortnightly meetings are held with the Sabbatical team, Senior Management Team and key members of staff who work within SU representation. At these meetings Sabbaticals update on actions completed and highlight any changes to the plans e.g.

movement of a meeting and development of an issue. This year in addition to these meetings, weekly emails are sent to the Sabbatical team outlining their individual and team tasks which they in turn report back on. The SU President then picks up on any difficulties in the Sabbatical team meetings which happen on a weekly basis and adjusts the plan and calendar accordingly.

Through this constant tracking and updating of the development plan and calendar the Top Ten priorities are not lost amongst the day to day issues which naturally arise over the course of the academic year. This mechanism also enables impact to be recorded and for successes to be promoted soon after they have happened rather than at the end of the year. Termly reports are also made to the Board of Trustees updating them on the progress with the Top Ten priority issues.

Closing the circle

- Continued engagement with students and feeding back successes and progress is key to closing the engagement circle. BUSU uses a number of mechanisms to do this including:
 - Top Ten website www.bathstudent.com/your-union/topten/ is used to update on progress or discussions taking place.

- Campaigns website www.bathstudent.com/campaigns is used to inform students of the campaign work BUSU is doing.
- Exec discussions. At each of the Students' Union Executive Committees (e.g. Academic Exec, Postgraduate Exec, Diversity and Support Exec, Societies Exec) the Top Ten are discussed with the area's Sabbatical giving a brief update on work carried out to date. The Execs are then asked to feed in ensuring that the various groups of students' views and needs are taken into account.
- Student Forums take place 5 times a year where all students are invited to attend to hear progress reports on the Top Ten priorities from the Sabbatical team.
- Academic Council. Members of Academic Council are given updates on the academic priorities within the Top Ten and asked to feed these back to the students within their academic departments.
- Question in SOS to rate awareness of BUSU working on the Top Ten. This highlights which of the priority issues BUSU was most effective at engaging with students. E.g. in 2011/12 transport was highlighted as a priority issue and this resulted in the Sabbatical team engaging with students in early morning bus queues resulting in over 1000

short surveys being completed and further work carried out. Unsurprisingly this was the priority of which students were most aware.

- An annual Impact Review is created identifying the key areas of development which have taken place during the year.

Changes for 2012/13

Now in its third year BUSU is evaluating the Top Ten and refining it with the following actions planned for 2012/13:

- It is easy for a Top Ten to become a Top Twenty Five by allowing the big issues to be broken down into smaller issues. 2012/13 will see a more focused Top Ten.
- Overhaul of the Campaigns and Top Ten websites to make them more of a hub for students to use to find out about any of the big issues and campaigns across the whole of the BUSU and to promote discussion and engagement with its members.

For further information, please contact:

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Charlie Slack - Representation and Research Manager, University of Bath Students' Union C.A.Slack@bath.ac.uk

Case study

Bournemouth University Students' Union

"You said, we did" has been around for a quite a while now. Everyone knows it as the shorthand for talking about the importance and difficulty of first of all hearing the student voice, then getting a response to it, and finally completing the feedback loop by reporting this back to the students

At Bournemouth University, we have thought about this in some detail for some time now, and we've come a few conclusions that have effected how we have developed our student engagement between students and the university and tried to maximise our effectiveness in this cycle.

In their report on student engagement of 2009, the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI)

concluded that one of the key barriers to effective student engagement was the apparent disconnect between institutions that conducted formal feedback questionnaires with students and student reps who presented anecdotal evidence alongside this formal feedback. There appeared to be no recommendation on how to resolve this issue.

At Bournemouth we thought we would try to combine the two as a possible solution. This involved some significant trust in the student reps, but that fitted with our 'high trust' culture. An open surveymonkey account was opened for all reps to run their own surveys online using a template supplied by us. We then also began helping reps prepare reports for their meetings based on the evidenced research that

they had produced. The added benefit of providing the online account was that we are able to capture the data as soon as the reps collect it.

So far this academic year we have collected and analysed responses from 12.3% of the students at Bournemouth University from over 200 different surveys started by reps. Not outstanding figures, but a great start in its first full year, and comparable with the university's own cross campus survey the year before. However the benefits of our survey over the one produced by the university are:

1. We gather the data over the whole year.
2. The students own the survey, as they act as the generators of their own survey, even though we provide the template.

3. The results are taken by the student reps to their 'local' committee as the first port of call to raise the student views.

This last point is particularly important. It is often stated that students do not feel that their voice is listened to and that their whole student experience can feel 'de-personalised' because of this. By ensuring that it is the student reps who gather the evidenced research and present it to their course committee as the first port of call means that the ability to respond to the student voice stays as close to the student as possible – not floating around in the ether of central/senior management committees.

The result of this 'local' research, evidence gathering and reporting to 'local' committees means that actions are recorded at meetings attended by the student reps, and

then reps can immediately report these actions back to students. Even if the result is that the decision must be referred higher in the university, then that is still reported back to students.

We won't pretend that this system is perfect yet, but we are very satisfied that it is producing some big improvements in student engagement across the university. Where it has been encouraged and supported by academic staff the results have been spectacular. To quote one Course Leader this year: "I've just chaired a framework meeting and the first year reps gave us the most feedback we've ever had in over a decade teaching here at the uni. This was the most comprehensive and useful student feedback I've ever heard - by miles. World class. It kinda exposes us warts and all to the world, but I can take a hit."

But perhaps the most telling aspect that has come out of all our work this year is the phrase we now use to reflect this whole process. Because the process allows quick reporting at a level close to the students, and because the actions are reported back to students as quickly as possible, we now don't use "you said, we did"; we now use "you said, this happened" which we think reflects the process far more accurately and creates far less of a 'master and servant' type relationship. We like this partnership feel.

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Theme 3: Understanding and developing the role of student representatives

Understanding and developing the role of student representatives

For many institutions, an effective student representation system is a crucial aspect of student engagement on an individual and collective level. We have seen that this is often one of the key areas of collaboration between institutions and their students' unions on student engagement. In their case study below, Cardiff University attribute the effectiveness of their Student Academic Representation System in large part to their relationship with their students' union. They explain that in the system they have developed, 'everything that is created and implemented is done through agreement and in partnership between the University and Students' Union, with key staff or officers taking responsibility for different tasks'. We have also observed that even in cases where the students' union fully manages the student representation system, buy-in and support from institutional staff is often still sought and valued. This might be to help facilitate the smooth running of the system, perhaps by gaining assistance from academic and support staff with the elections for student representatives at course/programme level or supporting student representatives to gather feedback from their peers by providing the time and space within lectures and seminars to do this, for example. Buy-in and support from staff at different levels within an institution might also serve a broader purpose of helping to ensure that the student representation system is well understood and its existence valued across the institution.

We have observed that training and ongoing support for student representatives can be an important part of ensuring that individual student representatives are equipped to carry out their role effectively and that there is a level of consistency across the system. There are a variety of approaches to delivering training and support for student representatives, as demonstrated in the case studies below from Staffordshire University Students' Union, Bournemouth University Students' Union and the University of East London Students' Union. In their case study under Theme 4 of this report, the University of Bristol Students' Union outline how they have linked their training for student representatives with the university schools.

Policies, procedures and strategic, long-term planning on student engagement within institutions may include the student representation system. In these circumstances, institutions and their students' unions may find it useful to work together to understand the effectiveness of their existing student representation system and establish what is required for future improvements. The case study from Cardiff University below lists four key mechanisms they use to evaluate their Student Academic Representation System, including a survey of student representatives. Consulting with your current pool of student representatives to understand their motivations for becoming a student representative, what works well in their role and what could be improved, could be an informative and valuable evaluative tool.

Case study

Cardiff University

The Cardiff University Student Academic Representation System is constantly being developed and refined to increase its effectiveness. This last academic year has seen a number of important changes that have led to improvements in the evaluation of the process and impact of student representation at Cardiff.

Cardiff University currently has over 900 Student Academic Reps across the University at Undergraduate, Postgraduate Taught and Postgraduate Research level. Each of our 27 schools has a member of staff that co-ordinates the system at a School-level (the Student Rep Co-ordinator) and two Senior Reps, one Undergraduate and one Postgraduate, that sit on Academic Council. Academic Council is the Students' Union body chaired by an elected officer that sits three times a year and discusses University-wide matters and feeds back to student reps.

Within each Academic School there are a number of Student-Staff Panels, dependent on the number of students within the School, each chaired by a student representative, meeting at least twice a year.

The changes that have been introduced this year have been to encourage a more consistent use of Student-Staff Panels; to introduce web materials for staff and student reps; and to set up a range of tools to evaluate the system and the impact that student representation is having on the University.

Throughout the year Cardiff University has referred back to the NUS/HEA benchmarking toolkit: this has been useful to help focus whether the developments made with the processes have been in line with the sector and given an idea on what areas of the system should be prioritised for enhancements.

The outcomes from the evaluative mechanisms developed are populated into an Excel 'dashboard' which uses a traffic light system to highlight which schools may need more support and which should be used as examples of best practice. Each school's dashboard is sent to the staff member and the Senior Rep, along with a University average, so that they are able to monitor their progress against other schools.

The key evaluative mechanisms utilised are:

1. An annual briefing for staff involved in the system - early September

This sets out the deadlines for the appointment and election of representatives; allows staff to feed back about the operation of the system in the previous year and changes that are planned for the coming year; and allows the sharing of good practice between Schools. Student reps and Senior

University management are invited to speak at the event to give staff a rounded view of the representation system.

2. The Student Rep Co-ordinator Survey – December

After the appointment and election process, and when Schools have had time to hold their first Student-Staff Panel of the year, Student Rep Co-ordinators are asked to comment on a range of areas including: how the process has gone; further resources or support that could have been offered; how reps were appointed; the level of contest for positions; and confirmation that certain information has been given to reps. The data from this survey is collated, given to staff and used to populate the dashboard.

3. The Student Rep Survey – March

This survey aims to capture the reps' views about the system, the process, what impact they have had at School-level and

University-level, and the support that is offered to them. The survey purposefully includes some subjective questions about whether they feel effective. The headlines are published on our student rep and staff web pages and the Senior Reps and staff are sent the survey results. Some key questions in the survey are also monitored in the dashboard.

4. The Annual Review – June

Each Student-Staff Panel chair has to complete an Annual Review (a one-page form) outlining the progress and any barriers that they have faced during the academic year. Although it is filled out by a student, the staff member signs it to confirm they have had sight of it and to demonstrate school oversight. These forms are collated and the Students' Union summarise the information in an Annual Statement, which is presented to University Council in July. The Annual Statement highlights University-wide successes and issues and

can make recommendations to improve the system.

The Student Academic Representation System is run through a Student Representation Executive Group, which is made up of staff from the University, the Students' Union and Elected Officers from the Students' Union. Everything that is created and implemented is done through agreement and in partnership between the University and Students' Union, with key staff or officers taking responsibility for different tasks. It is this relationship and close working with the schools that has allowed the system to develop so effectively in the last few years.

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Case study

University of East London Students' Union

Early in 2010 a full-time dedicated Programme Reps co-ordinator was recruited to develop and support the Programme Rep system. This led to changes in the way the programme reps were inducted and ongoing support throughout the year. October 2010 saw the arrival of an additional full time staff member to support the Programme reps system.

Recruitment

The University & the Students' Union reviewed the Reps recruitment process and for 2011/12 decided to go to online registration of Programme Reps details, thus minimising duplication and other data gathering errors.

Training

Training is of course the foundation of our Reps system. In 2009/10, the Reps only had Introduction training; this was completely revamped in 2010/11. From the feedback gathered during the training additional training sessions were introduced which covered skills and employability. The training sessions advertised to all our Reps are:

Introduction training session

This training session gives you an insight as to what is involved with being a Programme Rep and how to consult the students you represent as well as how to voice their opinions.

The Development training session

The Development training session gives you and insight into time management, understanding of the quality assurance processes of the University, gathering quantitative and qualitative research to back up issues you raise in your programme committee as well as negotiating Skills.

Employability Training session

This session gives you the opportunity to reflect on the transferable skills you developed during your time as a programme rep and how to demonstrate that to a potential employer.

From the end-of-year feedback gathered from our Programme Reps in 2010/11 and Programme Reps conference the SU concluded that it needed to split the Development session into two

different sessions. From 2012/13 there will be a skills session and the other would be on Quality and NSS.

The SU runs the training sessions during lunchtimes and late evenings to allow as many full time, mature and part time reps to attend. From the feedback gathered from the Reps who were unable to attend the SU will be running Saturday session as from the start of the next academic year.

On-Going support

Prior to 09/10 there was little evidence of on-going support for the Programme reps once the initial Introduction Training was done. In 2010/11 a completely revamped Introduction Training was run, a new version of the handbook and lanyards were made available to the programme reps through school helpdesks and at all training sessions.

The Programme Reps were actively encouraged to contact the dedicated staff members throughout the year whenever they felt the need through appointments and walk-ins. The SU is looking into having

dedicated drop-in/walk-in hours during each week from the start of next academic year which will be advertised to all programme reps.

Programme Rep-centred activities

School Forums were introduced in 2010/11, currently chaired by SU officers; this brings together all the Reps from each school to discuss issues and concerns being faced as well as a mechanism to share good practice. These concerns are then raised with the University's School Boards. '87.4% of Programme Reps feel that their comments have either been received very well or quite well by staff at Programme Committee meetings'.

Source: UELSU Programme Reps Survey 2010/11'

Programme Reps Conference

was held for the first time in February 2012, which saw contributions from various colleagues from NUS, QAA and UEL. Programme Reps volunteered to help organise the event and registration at the opening of the event.

Programme Reps Society is a recently created and Rep-led society. Although currently still

finding its feet, it's fast becoming 'the society' to be in for social interaction amongst reps.

NSS launch week was hosted by NSS ambassadors and for the first time this job was done by the Programme Reps. The Programme Reps were recruited, trained and supervised by the SU. At the end of the launch week, the University provided us with the Friday lunchtime statistics from Ipsos-Mori which 'showed 363 completions, or 10.6%, compared with 276 / 8.3% at the same stage last year. This is also the first time the percentage has ever reached double figures in week 1.' The anecdotal feedback from our Reps was that they had enjoyed the experience as a whole and the training that was offered to them had created a better understanding of NSS.

Programme Reps Week was introduced on the basis the informal feedback gathered from the reps and programme leader as to the 'understanding of the role and purpose of the Programme Reps'. This awareness week was coordinated by the SU and the Programme Reps volunteered to staff stalls on all campuses to

talk to their fellow students and University staff members.

Programme Rep Awards were introduced in 2010/11 to recognise those Programme Reps who have been especially active during the year. To qualify, Reps had to attend at least six different events/activities throughout the year, and in 2011/12 a new condition was added where the Programme Reps were asked to write a report detailing their experience and what they would like to hand over to in-coming reps. 2010/11 saw 16 Programme reps awarded and 2011/12 saw 18 Programme Reps awarded.

The past two years has been a period of extreme change and adjustment for the Representation System steadily led by the various feedback received from the Programme Reps. The SU has also received feedback from various programme leaders how valuable they found contributions made by the Reps.

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Case study

Bournemouth University Students' Union

Student representatives are absolutely fundamental to improving student engagement at Bournemouth University. We have spent many weeks and months over the last 2 years refining our support for their development and recognition. The key elements that have proved most successful for us are:

1. We are clear that our reps are 'Student Reps' not 'Course Reps'. Yes, they are elected from their course cohort, but they are not just for reporting on academic issues. The role of the rep is the official voice of their cohort on any matter relating to the students experience. This makes our whole system simple, understandable and usable.
2. Reps are all trained as much as possible face to face. Online training is only provided where face to face proves impossible. Even then we ask all reps who do the online training to ring our Rep Services team afterwards to check they have got what they needed from it. This ensures that we personalise our interaction with reps from the start. We train as many as we can on one day at the start of the year. Last year we trained 350 of 709 in one day, with a

further 172 trained face to face after this.

3. Every trained student rep is given a 'uniform' hoody and explained the importance of wearing it. This is very effective way of promoting the reps around campus.
4. In the first and second term, the student reps run a "Speak Week" that promotes the rep system. Based on the one question of "do you know who your students rep is?" a whole series of promotional events take place. This includes gathering anecdotal evidence for students about what reps have done for them.
5. The union has provided and online template survey for reps to use to gather evidence for their feedback so that it is not just anecdotal, please see our case study under Theme 2 of this report for more information.
6. Reps are encouraged to ask students to give their feedback using the headings of 'Keep. Stop, Start' in relation to their experience. In this way there has been much positive feedback collected about what students value about their experience (Keep), what they don't like (Stop) and what they think would help improve

their experience (Start). This solution oriented approach to the feedback has improved the quality of feedback considerably.

7. Where reps see or hear of any staff member being brilliant for students, they are encouraged to nominate them for a "You're brilliant!" award from the students' union. There is no criteria, and there is no time frame. Any rep can nominate any staff member at any time. The union then 'ambushes' the staff member, often in the middle of a lecture or seminar, and presents them with their award. In this way, lots of students get to see that we recognise and reward brilliant staff all year round.

The result of all this activity around student reps at Bournemouth is that they are now a well-established and well recognised part of daily life in and around campus, and are equally a trusted part of the student engagement process.

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Case study

University of Wolverhampton Students' Union

Our Student Voice project ensures that the learner voice is heard at all levels throughout the University. It is of much benefit to the University to have a proactive Student Voice as it helps assist the University keep its courses fresh and student led,. It is also of great benefit to students as it helps them gain great experience and many transferable skills. 201 Reps were trained in November 2011 by the Sabbatical Officers of the Students' Union. There are approximately 384 reps across the University in total.

In the Academic year 2010/11 we undertook the challenge of revitalising our Student Voice System, the system hadn't been updated for over 6 years and was no longer fit for purpose. The system was non-aspirational and buy in from Schools was minimal, meaning that the system was often ineffective. We began the process by discussing the issues with current students, finding out what would work best for them. We took our findings and created a model guide to representation. We then went to each School and all centralised departments and asked lobbied for them to implement it. There were some difficult conversations in the University, as not all Schools were as willing to get involved, however we managed to get a paper passed by the University Quality Enhancement Committee-

"The Development of Student Representation".

"The Development of Student Representation" (2011) had five key recommendations.

- Each School should have a separate Undergraduate (UG) School Rep, Postgraduate Taught (PGT) School Rep and Postgraduate Research (PGR) School Rep.
- The current committee structures should remain the same, but new ways of engaging students through online forums, virtual meetings and web conferencing should be developed for those Schools that have a large proportion of part-time, distance learning and placement students.
- Schools should trial the payment of all UG and PGT School reps across the University for the academic year 2011-12 to achieve student-focused and quality-enhancing outcomes through the achievement of set objectives.
- The Students' Union will employ a full time Student Representation Assistant to support the Student Voice.
- Each School's input into student representation should be led by an Associate Dean and delivered on a day-to-day basis in Schools by Principal

Lectures, administration staff or the Student Support Team as appropriate.

Since the paper passed one year ago, the Student Voice System has come on leaps and bounds and really started to make a difference in students' lives, with academics buying into the system and helping students by listening to their feedback. The Schools value their School Reps and offer financial incentives and the Reps work closely with senior academics in a harmonious and equal relationship. We have also introduced a termly catch up meetings between academics who support the Student Voice System across different Schools, this enables good communication between the different Schools as they can share common problems and solutions, such as afternoon tea with students and newsletters. The Students' Union has also committed £1000 towards a development fund for School Reps. This enables the Reps to hold meetings, offer prizes for Course Reps and generally get students more engaged with the Student Voice.

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Case study

Staffordshire University Students' Union

The student voice is at the heart of everything we do at Staffs and for many years we have worked collaboratively with the University to ensure that this voice is heard loud and clear and acted upon appropriately.

It seems difficult to imagine a time when the Union wasn't taking a lead on Student Academic Representation at Staffs but it wasn't until 2001 that Academic Board approved "proposals from the Students' Union to enhance and embed academic representation for students". Prior to this representation had existed but was somewhat "ad hoc" and whilst encouraged, was not always consistent.

The elected Officers worked closely with the Dean of Students to improve matters and following a Faculty restructure submitted a joint paper to Academic Board in 2004 which proposed "how a system of student academic representation can work within the new Faculty structure". The paper, which was subsequently adopted and became policy in September 2004, was quite prescriptive detailing the numbers of student representatives required at various board and committee meetings, how and

when elections should take place and where responsibility lay at each stage of the process. It was comprehensive and detailed and included opportunity profiles for all the staff and officers involved and set out clearly what the role of the Student Academic Representative should be. At this time the Union had a single member of staff who supported the Education and Welfare Officer with the scheme, their role was Representation Development Co-ordinator and they also had responsibility for Welcome Week, Council, Officer training and numerous other projects.

Even with hindsight it wasn't a bad policy just sadly one that wasn't ever fully implemented and like so many other policies started to gather dust in a cupboard somewhere! It did however formalise the relationship between the Union and the Faculties and led to some gradual improvements, but over subsequent years roles changed, further restructures took place and increasingly demand outstripped our resources.

In 2004/5 we had 299 Student Reps which we were able to increase to 377 in 2005/6, the scheme was reviewed in June

2006 with all Reps being given the opportunity to complete a survey and as a consequence further recommendations were made which included better training, more recognition for the Reps and much better promotion and awareness of the scheme.

In 2007/8 we had 400 Reps on our data base but the scheme, although improved, was not as representative or as effective as we had hoped. Some Reps were still being selected rather than elected, attendance at the required meetings was patchy and too few Reps attended training. There were pockets of excellent practise but the policy wasn't implemented either fully or consistently across the Faculties. Whilst the Education and Welfare Officer scheduled regular meetings with Reps, these were poorly attended and the role of the Union in Student Representation was not fully understood by students or academic staff. We weren't regressing, but the minimal increase in numbers in 2008/9 to 403 with only 35 reps being fully trained was disappointing to say the least.

Following a further review we agreed that the Full Time Officers (FTOs) would each take

responsibility for a Faculty and focus on building up relationships with the Reps in their area, increasing both the support available to Reps and also their own knowledge of the issues arising at a more local level.

Building on this in 2009 the Officers spent a week in their Faculty being inducted as if they were a new member of staff and by 2011 this process had been formalised with the Officers and the Faculties having clear objectives and outcomes and led to a much greater understanding on both sides. Prior to the 2012/13 Academic year the process will be repeated but as we will have four Faculties at that point following a restructure, one of the Officer team will be taking on responsibility for our partnership colleges and distance learners.

We secured funding from the university for the 2009/10 academic year for our first staff post dedicated to student representation, which enabled us to devote a lot more time to supporting both the Officer team and the Reps. Whilst there were undoubtedly improvements in terms of quality, again we only saw minimal improvements in numbers. Based on the number of courses at Staffordshire University we estimated we should have

in the region of 800 reps if all levels were to be adequately represented, we had 414, and despite rewriting our training material and offering a large number of session options only 38 Reps attended training.

The University was audited by the QAA in early 2010 with the Union being involved at every stage; the comments in their summary reports echoed our own findings:

“All faculties/schools operate student staff liaison committees or their equivalent and the Students’ Union plays a significant role in the training and support of student academic representatives. However, some variation was again apparent in the way in which the student staff liaison committees operated, in particular in the context of collaborative provision. In addition, students’ awareness of who their representatives are, was generally poor...”

At programme or award level, student academic representatives trained by the Students’ Union under the student academic representatives’ policy, input student opinion. However students who met the audit team commented on the significant variability in the structures and effectiveness of the representation at award level. Whilst the training

is consistent across the University, the use of student academic representatives was found to vary across the faculties/schools. The audit team encourages the University to continue to address this variability through the ongoing review of faculty committee structures. ”

The QAA report, our Student Written Submission and subsequent review and evaluation led to us submitting a revised investment bid to the University for the 2010/11 academic year. This was ambitious in scope and included funding for two dedicated student intern posts to support the scheme, reward and recognition for Reps was enhanced with the introduction of an engagement allowance, further training opportunities, a conference and a dedicated awards night. We were rebranding and re-launching with a new emphasis on employability, transferable skills and personal development. It felt like a fresh start and recruiting two of our own students who had graduated earlier in the year bought a new perspective to the scheme. That year Rep numbers increased by over 25% to 510, but even more significantly 223 of them completed the training which was designed to equip them with

Staffordshire case study continued

the requisite skills to be effective student representatives.

Having exceeded the targets we set for ourselves when we submitted the bid we were able to secure continuing funding from the university and were able to offer the interns core staff positions. This year we co-ordinated the election of 599 STARs, 246 of whom attended training, we adopted a much more systematic approach to recording issues and outcomes, briefing the officers who were then able to raise matters at a higher level. Increasingly we saw STARs resolving their own issues and were able to publicise their achievements with case studies in our monthly newsletter in which we celebrated both STAR of the month and University staff member of the month. The Newsletter became much more student led with Reps submitting articles and anecdotes. The Reps set up a STARs Society and several of the returning Reps helped the staff team with the promotion of the scheme and giving peer support to new STARs.

The new Union Constitution which came in to effect this year (2011/12) saw radical changes to our representational structure which really brought the STARs scheme to the fore. Our Student Council was expanded to include 6 STARs Councillors from each Faculty elected by their peers allowing a truly student led agenda to be set which has completely revitalised Council meetings and produced tangible outcomes. Both the Deputy pro-vice Chancellor and the Dean of Students attended the STARs conference and not only provided key note speeches but also hosted a Q&A session, outcomes from which have included students meeting with the library to review systems, the University giving assurances about space provision in the new Science Block and a clear undertaking to review areas of concern which included marking, feedback, assessment and more localised issues. The Dean also plans to invite STARs to focus groups to inform his future planning (he has a dual role as Director of Student Experience) and both he and the Pro-Vice

Chancellor are tremendously supportive of the scheme, increasingly seeing students as partners in their own learning experience, they are keen to work with us to engage students at all levels.

New partnership initiatives this year have included the introduction of Student Academic Partnership Projects (initially based on the Birmingham City University model), Students as Academic Reviewers, Student NSS Champions and Student Led Teaching Awards. The University were very supportive of our bid to be involved with the Strand 3 of the NUS/QAA collaborative projects and we are using the consultancy time awarded to review and rewrite our Representational Policy, hopefully in time to be ratified for the new academic year.

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Theme 4:
Delivering student
engagement at
different levels
within institutions

Delivering student engagement at different levels within institutions

Through our work with students' unions and institutions we have observed that in many institutions there is a commitment to student engagement at senior leadership level and good student representation on university committees. This is often coupled with an active student representation system at course/programme level, with varying levels of course/programme representatives being elected and trained. However, we have also noticed that within some of these same institutions, there can be a lack of student engagement at school/department/Faculty level. As a result, these institutions can find that student engagement processes do not run as smoothly and effectively as they would wish. For example, it might be difficult to deliver top-down expectations and directives on student engagement or ensure that issues gathered at course/programme level are fed upwards to the appropriate staff and committees when necessary. It can be argued that for a commitment to student engagement from the senior leadership of institutions and students' unions to be meaningful, students, their representatives and staff should be encouraged and supported to deliver it at every level within the institution. In their case study below, Bournemouth University Students' Union explain that 'each of the 6 Schools within Bournemouth University now has a Student Experience Champion, at a senior level, who is responsible for liaising with the students' union over the implementation of the Reps system in their School'. Institutions may find it important and beneficial to recognise and value staff that are willing to champion student engagement, particularly if this involves them going beyond their usual remit and responsibilities.

In institutions where there is a good level of student representation on university committees, these representatives may still need to be encouraged and supported to contribute fully to meetings. The nature of some university committees- complex information being discussed in very formal settings, often by

long-serving members, for example- may require time and thought to be put into making them accessible to student members, in order to ensure their contributions are effective. As you can see in the case study from Southampton Solent University and Southampton Solent University Students' Union below, they are working on ways to make inputting into organisational decision-making more accessible to students.

For institutions that operate a system of semi-autonomous departments/faculties, a one-size-fits-all approach to student engagement may not be appropriate. This has been the case for the University of York Students' Union, as outlined in their case study below. In these cases, it may be helpful for top-down expectations on student engagement to be clearly communicated and students and staff in individual departments/faculties supported to explore their own ways to meet them. Students' unions could play an important role in working with and across schools/ departments/faculties on student engagement. In their case study below, the University of Bristol Students' Union outline how they have 'built a strong partnership with staff and schools across the University, and in turn have helped develop a stronger emphasis on partnership with academics for the student representatives themselves'. Students' unions could, for example, be involved in the induction of new staff members or help facilitate the gathering and sharing of good practice. As the University of York Students' Union note in their case study below, 'having reached a stage where all departments have Course Reps and involve them at some level, our job as a students' union is to drive departments to make the most of their Course Reps'.

Case study

University of York Students' Union

One of the challenges of delivering and developing student engagement at the University of York is the university's management structure; with no faculties, Heads of Department report directly to the Vice Chancellor. As such, there is a strong sense of departmental autonomy. This has led to a considerable variety of approaches to student representation. Some departments take it very seriously, with student reps sitting on every committee, chairing a majority-student Student-Staff Liaison Committee and having regular meetings with the Chair of the Board of Studies. Others just have the Course Reps attend the departmental Board of Studies meeting.

Course Representation at York is coming to the end of the first stage of development; this year was the third year that the students' union has run the elections (rather than departments). Departments are still integral to the process; they tell us what positions they want elected for their department and assist in publicising the elections – a true partnership approach. This year's elections were the most successful ever, with record numbers of candidates, voters

and positions filled. The next step is to go beyond basic delivery and focus on enhancing student representation. Having reached a stage where all departments have Course Reps and involve them at some level, our job as a students' union is to drive departments to make the most of their Course Reps.

Working with Strand 3 of the NUS/QAA collaborative projects, we set up a focus group of academics that we knew to be either good at, or interested in student representation. This involved staff from right across the various departments at the university and included a number of Heads of Departments and Chairs of Boards of Studies, as well as the new Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning. The focus group had a number of purposes, including finding out what works for different departments, how different academics approach student representation and also what departments and staff think that we should be offering in terms of support to both them and Course Reps. The discussions at the focus group were extremely helpful in all of these areas. The notes taken are going to form a main part of our review of the

Course Rep system over the summer and guide not only any alterations to the system for the next academic year, but also help us form a strategic direction and plan for the next few years. We are now at stage where we can think of long-term development of grass-roots student representation, having solved the main issues of delivery, and our Course Rep system is firmly at the heart of this development. Some of the most important points to come out of the meeting were how we work with all departmental staff (administrative and academic) and what role we should have in working with departments, such as offering a consultancy-style service to help them improve the utilisation of Course Reps.

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Case study

University of Derby

The University of Derby's SETL (Student Experience Traffic Lighting) Project has been externally-funded by JISC (the Joint Information Systems Committee) and explored a number of themes around the student experience in relation to engagement, retention and withdrawal. The changing higher education environment, particularly around fees, means that universities need to reassess what they are doing to support their students. Ever-increasing standards of academic and pastoral support are being demanded, so what are universities doing to provide this to students?

The SETL project team, with a recent graduate and student intern at its heart as Project Assistant, has mapped the university experience from the students' perspective in order to challenge our traditional understanding of "engagement" and "withdrawal". The team's research and evidence-base has been a mixture of academic theory, statistical data on student behaviour, service blueprinting, student profiling, personas, storyboarding and, most importantly, face-to-face contact with students to find out what influences how they do or do not engage with their course and also wider life at university. Taking the findings of this research forward, the SETL team are investigating "hard" and "soft" indicators of engagement,

both inside and outside of the classroom, to develop a tangible support tool for staff to appropriately identify which students need help, when they need it and why.

The team applied service design and enhancement techniques to three aspects of the student lifecycle: induction, learning and teaching and pastoral care in order to improve retention, progression and completion through identification of early indicators of students 'at risk'. Aspects of the student journey were mapped using service blueprinting, and student personas and storyboarding were employed to better understand how and when timely interactions and interventions could support and re-engage students.

The project has increased understanding of operational processes as well as scoping out the data requirements for a dashboard of indicators which will throw a light on student engagement, or the lack of it. We have called this approach 'engagement analytics' as we looked to go beyond the 'hard data' capture of 'learning analytics' already in use around the sector (such as footfall in the library, access to the virtual learning environment (VLE), attendance monitoring, etc). In viewing the student experience going beyond the classroom, we worked with a range of stakeholders to take account of factors relating to a

student's sense of 'habitus' or belonging, which can play just as important a part in their overall felt student experience, such as being a student rep, volunteering, transfers between modules or subjects of study, time out, resilience and preparedness for study, etc.

Through this work, the project has informed wider policy discussions at the university regarding student perceptions of value added, non-continuation, non-completion, achievement, efficiency, business intelligence, the data journey and quality standards. The outcomes of the SETL project, which will conclude in August 2012, will be of value to members of the wider higher education community who are designing and enhancing services to students; seeking to engage students as co-designers of their own experience, and those seeking to develop effective approaches to identify and support students at risk of withdrawal, non-completion or not progressing at the pace intended at enrolment.

For further information, please contact:

Jean Mutton - Student Experience Project Manager, University of Derby j.mutton@derby.ac.uk

Website: <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/bce/relationshipmanagement2/trafficlighting.aspx>

Case study

Southampton Solent University and Southampton Solent University Students' Union

Solent Students' Union has been considering ways in which students can input into University decision making at a strategic level. These 'higher level' decisions affect the whole University and require both formal and informal student input; currently this is reflected in the President's position on the Board of Governors and regular informal meetings between University's Senior Management, Sabbatical Officers and SU staff. Although this is positive, the University and the Students' Union are keen to encourage effective participation in organisational decision-making processes from the wider student body and agree that an informal Student Sounding Board is a step that can add real value.

When discussing the development of these opportunities with the Institution, the key issue remained how to ensure they were accessible to students. Although we value student involvement in these processes we also value the experience of the individual students – the report/stats heavy set up of these Institutional meetings was not deemed an attractive opportunity for our members!

A Student Sounding Board is a way for students to input into this

strategic direction in an engaging way. The idea will be to gather a group of students who will meet a number of times over the course of an academic year to talk about the University's future. It will be an opportunity for University senior managers to discuss ideas with these students, whilst encouraging students to input their own thoughts. There may also be scope for the Board to have greater focus by deciding a theme or project that it would consider over the academic year. This would allow its members to move from being evaluators and participants, to become partners and co-creators.

Key thoughts and concerns as we move forward with this project are:

- How to gather and retain these students. We envisage the group's make-up remaining the same within the academic year to ensure meaningful engagement.
- Ensuring it does not undermine the Students' Union as the collective voice of the student body, but rather acts as an extension of the Students' Union's structures.
- What involvement Sabbatical Officers will have. As student leaders should they chair the meetings, bring an

organisational (Students' Union) perspective, or encourage the students to take a more active lead?

- How to ensure the students are representative (they will be unelected). The very nature of turning up to such a meeting is more difficult for part time students, for example. Should they, or the Students' Union, be conducting research to inform their views?
- How will this project link into other areas of work, for example the Sabbatical Officer's campaigning priorities? Could this be a forum for presentations on such topics or would that shape the meeting too much?
- How to track its effectiveness. Is it positively shaping senior management decision making?
- The project will undergo a thorough review at the end of the next academic year to ensure we can continue to build on its potential.

For further information, please contact:

Matt Richards - Representation and Democracy Coordinator, Southampton Solent Students' Union matt.richards@solent.ac.uk

Case study

University of Bristol Students' Union

Prior to the creation of our advice and representation service – “JustAsk” we had a real lack of knowledge about who student reps were, where they existed and who supported them. Due to this the Unions engagement with the student representation system was extremely sporadic and it had relied solely on the passion of our elected officers. During this period some training and forum style sessions were run by the Union, but take-up from student representatives was often extremely low. The perception from both staff and students was of a highly scattered approach to representation.

In 2009 as the University of Bristol Students' Union began to move into a new era and a clear shift occurred. Elected officers and Senior Managers felt the Union needed to focus more on

education, representation and advice. Since the project began we have made considerable headway in a number of areas. Crucially, we have built a strong partnership with staff and schools across the University, and in turn have helped develop a stronger emphasis on partnership with academics for the student representatives themselves.

We made an important decision to move training sessions for student representatives out of the Union building and into the university schools. The training sessions are advertised as a one-hour ‘induction and networking’ event. Moving the training sessions into the university schools has allowed us to:

- Highlight the partnership we were trying to build with schools.

- Demonstrate the value placed on student representatives by both the schools and the Union.
- Offer schools the opportunity to input issues or experiences, which we can build into the training.
- Offer student representatives the chance to network with other representatives from across the school. The feedback from all the training sessions showed that this was by far the most rewarding part for the student representatives.

We now have regular contact with 485 student representatives across the University. Furthermore attendance at the training sessions have continued to grow and in the 2011/12 academic year we have managed to train 213 Student Reps across 16 schools, whereas

attendance at previous sessions had been poor.

In 2010 the Unions then Vice President Education began a project alongside a variety of university staff to enhance the credibility of student representatives on University Senate. These student representatives are elected at Faculty level. In March 2011 we held our first ever cross campus election for Undergraduate Faculty level and Post Graduate Research level student representatives. In 2011/12 all Senate positions were elected. They have been trained by the Union and are actively contributing in University Senate. These students have improved the credibility of the role, highlighted by the fact that just under 100 students registered an interest and 38 candidates ran in the elections for the 2012/12 academic year, an 84% increase on 2011/12.

The success of this project to date has encouraged the university to renew their approach to student representation on committees above programme level. For example, the university agreed to allow students to be recruited to sit on Faculty Quality Enhancement Teams (FQETs) for the first time. FQETs are a key component of the university's quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms. They exist to assure the quality of learning, teaching and assessment and the student learning experience in the context of the research environment which underpins it. Through Union representation we were able to secure a focus on personal tutoring and communication to students in this year's FQET themes. These are two key issues that were raised by some student representatives as their biggest frustrations with their programmes - and issues which they felt were

not easily resolved at department level, but rather by the faculty.

We still have a long way to go, but our hope is that as the project develops two things will happen:

Being a student representative becomes a valuable experience and a credible role.

A genuine and effective partnership will exist between student representatives, the Union and the university.

For further information, please contact:

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University of Bristol Students' Union
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Case study

Bournemouth University Students' Union

Many reports in recent years have highlighted the issue in Higher Education institutions of engaging students at different levels in the institution. It is often found that there is good representation at an institution level via the students' union officers, and there is also often good representation at course level with student reps. What is not usually as good is the bit in the middle; the bit that considers faculty level issues.

At Bournemouth University we have focussed on developing this over the last few years, with the most important element of the development being the partnership approach between the university and the students' union in doing this. The development of the quality of our student reps has been the starting point, but the real key to ensuring that the system develops depth has been in the policies and practices developed with the institution.

Firstly, we have agreed that the students' voice at Bournemouth University is a simple three level model with the individual voice, the student rep voice and the students' union voice. Each has a different role and responsibility, but it is quite clear that there are just these three levels.

Secondly, we began to support the method by which student reps could ensure that their voice was heard beyond their course committee if it was needed. This has been achieved by a number of initiatives:

Each of the 6 Schools within Bournemouth University now has a Student Experience Champion, at a senior level, who is responsible for liaising with the students' union over the implementation of the Reps system in their School.

Each Champion holds at least one "Student Experience Forum" each term for student reps to raise issues that are specifically not related with their course. These forums are also attended by representatives from the students' union and the support services of the university.

The student reps provide evidence based research to their course committee each term, and the SU analyses all these reports from across the School and provides a "School Synoptic Report" to each School each term that summarises the key themes and issues arising from all the reports. The SU also pre-meets with the School Reps to brief them on these reports.

The university has set up, with the students' union, a central "Student Voice Committee" that brings together all the Student Experience Champions, leaders of support services and the students' union to monitor issues that come up through these routes. This way all issues are monitored and responded to appropriately at every level.

These initiatives and others are proving to be so useful and effective that the students' union and the university has also just completed an exercise of bringing all the university policies relating to student engagement into one central, easy to understand policy. This has been a mammoth effort, but has been a great exercise in true partnership working between the university and the SU on developing the quality of our student engagement at Bournemouth University.

For further information, please contact:

Joff Cooke - Head of Representation Services,
Bournemouth University Students' Union jcooke@bournemouth.ac.uk

Theme 5:
Students raise
issues, but who
finds the solutions?

Students raise issues, but who finds the solutions?

Some institutions have found that an important aspect of their approach to student engagement has been to encourage joint ownership and decision-making over outcomes. In the case study below from the University of Exeter and University of Exeter Students' Guild, they introduce their Change Agent scheme, a 'student-led action research initiative that brings students and staff together to improve experiences of higher education'. The Student Academic Partners Scheme at Birmingham City University, mentioned in their case study under Theme 1 of this report, is another example of this approach.

This approach has the potential to improve relationships between staff and students, encouraging them to work positively and productively to find solutions that could be mutually beneficial. In their case study below, the University of Exeter and University of Exeter Students' Guild note that their Change Agent scheme 'has been popular and is having an impact on students' learning and lecturers approaches to teaching'. It can also be argued that involving students in finding solutions to issues they raise can be a useful quality enhancement tool, because it may encourage students and their representatives to look beyond existing processes.

Case study

University of Exeter and University of Exeter Students' Guild

The University of Exeter has a strong track record of student engagement and commitment to working with students to bring about change, but equally strong is a commitment to expanding and deepening the scope of the partnership with students.

In 2008, the Education Enhancement Unit developed an innovative and exciting student-led action research initiative that brings students and staff together to improve experiences of higher education.

Students from across the university have contributed to this initiative, providing recommendations and solutions to improve their experience. This student research has driven organisational change, added a whole new dimension to student engagement, and supported students' graduate skills in the areas of research, project management and presentation of outcomes, leadership and understanding organisational development.

Although the scheme had been very active, it didn't have a high enough profile within

the institution. As Professor Janice Kay, Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor recalls, "This scheme was too good to be slipping under the radar. It takes our work with students to a whole new level and makes such a real and significant difference to the student experience"

The scheme has been highly successful with student led projects being delivered in every academic department of the University and an annual conference being organised each year by the students so that they can share their research and findings. Some of the topics that have been explored have been employability, online study skills support, peer assisted study and assessment and feedback.

As well as continuing with individual Change Agent projects, where groups of students work together across the entire institution, the University has also asked individual colleges to support six projects each. A post of Student Engagement Manager has been created (jointly between Guild and University) to develop and lead initiative to increase student involvement in all aspects

of University life. Reflecting on the projects Professor Kay says that working with students in this way is refreshing and challenging "This is not designed to be safe for the University to take something that is a big issue and give student the freedom to come up with and deliver their own solutions. We don't control the outcome, but all the work so far has been outstanding, it speaks for itself"

The project has been popular and is having an impact on students' learning and lecturers approaches to teaching. Professor Kay says, "Because you have engaged students, they become far more effective learners, and they're much more interesting to teach and work with." There are benefits all round. "Students are living in a world where change is the only constant; it's an ever changing world. This is a way to help students take control and by doing that demonstrate leadership. That's a very important skill."

For further information, please contact:

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Appendices

Appendix A

There has been a significant amount of activity on student engagement in recent years. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but here are some other resources on student engagement that you may find useful.

The UK Quality Code

In December 2011 the new UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) was launched and will fully replace the Academic Infrastructure from the 2012-13 academic year. The Quality Code sets out the Expectations all providers of UK higher education are required to meet. It gives all higher education providers a shared starting point for setting, describing and assuring the academic standards of their higher education awards and programmes and the quality of the learning opportunities they provide. Individual education providers use the Quality Code to design their policies for maintaining academic standards and quality. The Quality Code is also used as a benchmark during QAA reviews when judging the academic quality and standards of a higher education provider.

The Student Engagement Chapter of the Quality Code was published on 29th June 2012. To read and download the Student Engagement Chapter, please visit <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/quality-code-B5.aspx>

The Quality Matters Website

The new Quality Matters website was launched on 29th March 2012 as part of the NUS/QAA collaborative projects. The website contains resources for course representatives, managers of course representative systems, student officers and anyone interested in students and institutional quality processes in higher education in England.

Please visit <http://qualitymatters.nus.org.uk/>

The QAA website

The QAA student engagement website was updated with all new content at the beginning of 2012. Here you can find out more about student engagement at QAA and the current projects the team is working on, access guides to the different review methods, and read the latest information and briefings.

Please visit <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Partners/students/Pages/default.aspx>

The NUS/QAA Student Experience Research

Since 2008 NUS has been working with partners to produce student experience research which really gets to the heart of students expectations and satisfaction with the quality of their learning experience. From 2008-2010 this was funded by HSBC and from 2011 this research has been funded by QAA. The 2011/12 reports are now available.

To read and download the Student Experience Research reports, please visit <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/highereducation/learning-and-teaching-hub/teachingandlearningresearch/>

The NUS/HEA Student Engagement Project

Beginning in November 2009, this project, a collaboration between NUS and the Higher Education Academy and funded by HEFCE, provides materials and tools for students' unions and institutions to support improved engagement of students, including the Student Engagement Toolkit.

For further information, please visit <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/highereducation/student-engagement/nus-heaproject/>

Appendix B

We would like to thank all the students' unions and institutions that contributed case studies to the report. Furthermore, we would like to thank all the students' unions and institutions that participated in the Strand 3 of the NUS/QAA collaborative projects and thus informed the development of the report.

- Arts University College in Bournemouth Students' Union and Arts University College in Bournemouth
- Birmingham City Students' Union and Birmingham City University
- Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln Students' Union
- Bournemouth University Students' Union and Bournemouth University
- Bradford College Students' Union and Bradford College
- Cardiff University
- Leeds University Union
- Loughborough University Students' Union
- Southampton Solent University Students' Union and Southampton Solent University
- Staffordshire University Students' Union and Staffordshire University
- Teesside University Students' Union
- Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance Students' Union and Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance
- University of Bath Students' Union
- University of Bedfordshire Students' Union and the University of Bedfordshire
- University of Bristol Students' Union
- University of Derby
- University of East London Students' Union
- University of Exeter Students' Guild and University of Exeter
- University of Ulster Students' Union
- University of Wolverhampton Students' Union
- University of York Students' Union and the University of York

The National Union of Students (NUS)

NUS is a voluntary membership organisation which makes a real difference to the lives of students and its member students' unions.

We are a confederation of 600 students' unions, amounting to more than 95 per cent of all higher and further education unions in the UK. Through our member students' unions, we represent the interests of more than seven million students

Our mission is to promote, defend and extend the rights of students and to develop and champion strong students' unions.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)

QAA exists to safeguard academic standards and quality of education in UK universities and colleges. Each university or college is responsible for ensuring that appropriate standards are being achieved and a good quality education is being offered. QAA is an independent organisation that checks how well universities and colleges meet their responsibilities by:

- reviewing universities and colleges
- giving universities and colleges guidance on how to maintain their academic standards and improve the quality of the education they provide
- providing reference points that help to define clear academic standards.



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