

Synergy: Student Engagement, Partnership & Teaching Excellence

TSEP Response to the BIS HE Green Paper

The Student Engagement Partnership exists to support, develop and promote student engagement activity in the higher education sector across England.

We receive funding from HEFCE, QAA, GuildHE and AoC and are housed by NUS. Our work is directed by a sector-wide Steering Group, which is made up of representatives from our funders, as well as other sector organisations, institutions and students' unions. Our staff team provide expert training and consultancy to those working in student engagement and we work across the sector to share new ideas and practice through our [website](#) and specific targeted projects.

Our response to the HE green paper has been shaped by guidance from our Steering Group¹, as well as our extensive experience and expertise in supporting the development of student engagement policy and practice. Our Steering Group is chaired by Prof. Anne Greenough² and includes representatives from HEFCE, NUS, QAA, GuildHE, AoC, UUK, HEA, OIA, LFHE and CUC.

In this response we have answered questions where we feel our experience and expertise in the field of student engagement in learning and teaching can add value to the debate. Student engagement encapsulates those practices and approaches that higher education providers can take to develop learner autonomy, empower students as change agents and support the formation of learning communities³. In recent years the concept of students as partners has gained significant currency. For example, Chapter B5 of the UK Quality Code sets out the Expectation that "Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience". The notion of students as partners is derived from the insight that learning has to be a partnership; as the BIS, UUK and NUS guidance on 'Building a framework for partnership with students: student charters three years on' suggests:

Education is a partnership: higher education providers make resources available to students and create the infrastructure and support for students to make the most of their engagement with those resources, but it is the intellectual effort of students and their active engagement with their learning community that leads to transformative educational outcomes.⁴

It can be said that through excellent teaching, it is the development of understanding and students' relationship with disciplinary and professional knowledge that make a university degree a higher

¹ <http://tsep.org.uk/our-partners/> [accessed 11th January 2016]

² <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/about/members/Professor,Anne,Greenough/>

³ Healey, M., Flint, A. & Harrington, K. (2014) *Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*. York: HEA

⁴ <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/winning-for-students/resources/building-a-framework-for-partnership-with-students> [Accessed on 15th January 2016]

form of education⁵. In addition, a strong sense of belonging as a result of engagement has been shown to be critical to retention and success⁶ and so it is our contention that student engagement is central to our understanding of teaching excellence and should therefore be central to the TEF

Taking this a step further, adopting a partnership approach in student engagement means giving students greater or equal responsibility in the decisions, policies and activities that make up the wider learning environment or the institution as a whole. As we state in response to question twenty, both individual and collective student engagement activities can give rise to continual enhancements to teaching and learning.

In response to questions ten and eleven, we have set out ways in which student engagement could be embedded within the architecture of a teaching excellence framework through the valuable role that students can play both at the institutional and external panel level.

TSEP is well placed to assist students' unions, HE providers, and indeed those developing the TEF itself, with ensuring that students are actively engaged as vital partners in all elements of this process.

There are many ways this could take place including, but not limited to, the provision of training and support to students involved in TEF panels; helping support and engage students in pulling together submissions of evidence; developing and designing effective communications materials for students to engage them with TEF; offering HE providers consultancy and projects in developing strategic approaches to student engagement that drive enhancements to teaching and learning; and in working to advise on the design of effective engagement of students in the TEF in its next stage of development.

We look forward to working in partnership with others to ensure that effective student engagement is a key focus of the TEF.

⁵ Ashwin, P. (2014) Knowledge, curriculum and student understanding. *Higher Education* 67. Springer doi: [10.1007/s10734-014-9715-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9715-3)

⁶ Thomas, L. (2012) Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change: final report from the 'What Works?' Student Retention and Success Programme. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

Consultation Responses

Question 4. Where relevant, should an approved access agreement be a requirement to the TEF?

We welcome the link between excellence in teaching & learning with access & retention. It has long been recognised that widening access to higher education does not stop at the point of entry to the institution and that a crucial aspect of an access agreement is about the work the institution does for the retention and success of those groups of students considered as part of their access work.

Belonging is critical to student retention and success, [evidence] firmly points to the importance of students having a strong sense of belonging in HE, which is the result of engagement⁷

Through the work that we do with higher education providers and as detailed in the Paul Hamlyn Foundation's *What Works* report of 2012 quoted above, we can show that strategic approaches to student engagement are central to a University or College's work on access and retention. Initiatives and approaches to inclusive teaching, learning and assessment practices, empowerment of the student voice and recognition of and reinforcing the role of students in their learning community are some ways a provider may strengthen their retention levels whilst simultaneously promoting excellent teaching and learning.

It is our contention that a fully accessible approach to the provision of higher education and 'teaching excellence' are intrinsically linked and perhaps requiring a statement of the work the institution intends to carry out in the form of an 'access agreement' does not go far enough.

Currently, access agreements consist only of:

- Statement of proposed tuition fee limits
- The access and student success measures intended to be put in place
- How much these measures will cost
- Targets and milestones how students are told about the financial support offered

Approaches could be developed to broaden the nature of the access agreement and to strengthen the requirements to commit to a range of 'access and student success measures'. Embedding a process of checking the efficacy of these practices through the wider TEF process could be explored, such as including this in the criteria for the 'institutional evidence' requirement that is proposed in Chapter 3. Furthermore, encouraging and supporting ways for institutions to share good practice in these areas would be a useful and welcome way of both reinforcing the commitment to widening access to higher education in England and promoting a culture of broad, inclusive and engaging teaching and learning practices in the higher education sector.

⁷ Thomas, L. (2012) Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change: final report from the 'What Works?' Student Retention and Success Programme. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

Question 5: Do you agree with the proposals on what would constitute a 'successful' QA review

In principle we welcome the recognition of an existing successful QA review as a first level for the TEF, in particular due to the strong emphasis on student engagement in the UK Quality Code and the role that students play in the review process, such as through the Student Submission and student reviewers. However, we have a number of concerns to raise.

The green paper states that a *successful QA review should be defined as the most recent review undertaken by the QAA or an equivalent review used for course designations (eg an ISI review); which is published by the end of February 2016*. The current cycle of QA reviews is not scheduled to end until the summer of 2016⁸, therefore a 'level playing field' will not exist as some institutions' reviews will be six years old by February 2016 and will not have been carried out using the full UK Quality Code. For example, the student engagement chapter of the UK Quality Code, which sets out the Expectation that "Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience", was published in June 2012. Whilst we accept that by necessity the UK Quality Code has had a rolling cycle of publication and subsequent review of Chapters in order to be responsive to the higher education sector, it seems clear that institutional reviews based on the 19 Expectations in the UK Quality Code⁹ will be more relevant and robust.

Given that the quality assessment system is currently under review, we are concerned that if a successful QA review continues to be the entry level for the TEF that the importance of student engagement as an underpinning principle in QA is recognised and upheld. As we outlined in our response to HEFCE's consultation on quality assessment in February 2015, where robust support is in place to fully realise mechanisms such as student reviewers, the Lead Student Representative and the Student Submission, they afford students and their representatives meaningful input into the review process. Chapter B5 of the UK Quality Code has helped to enhance student engagement practice and ensure that students are involved in internal quality management and play a meaningful role in the enhancement of learning and teaching. Any future quality system should take seriously the need to maintain and build on the high levels of student engagement in current QA processes. Quality assessment systems should be able to be satisfied that the student views expressed through the assessment process are evidenced, representative of the generality of students or a specific sub-group, and arrived at independently of institutional pressures and priorities. Our full response to the HEFCE consultation on quality assessment in February 2015 is available here: <http://tsep.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/TSEP-response-to-HEFCE-quality-assessment-review.pdf>

Question 6: Do you agree with the proposed approach to TEF assessments on Assessment panels?

We agree with the suggestion that student representatives should be part of the judgement panels for the TEF. However, we reserve judgement on the wider approach to assessment panels and await the detail contained in the technical consultation. We hope that the inclusion of a student panel member reflects a commitment to an expectation that higher education providers engage students

⁸ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/HER-handbook-15.pdf> [Accessed on 11 January 2016]

⁹ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Quality-Code-19-Expectations.pdf> [Accessed on 11 January 2016]

in internal quality management processes and key decision making bodies and that students are empowered to provide leadership and help shape institutional thinking and practice. It is not clear from the green paper whether the judgement panels will *require* a student member, however we strongly hope that this is the case. The QAA in particular and TSEP have significant experience working with student reviewers in the current QA system and supporting institutions and students' unions to engage students in internal quality processes, such as ensuring they are inducted, trained and supported appropriately and we very much hope such approaches to supporting student panel members are embedded from the start and that existing expertise can be utilised in relation to the TEF and any future QA system.

Question 10. Do you agree with the focus on teaching quality, learning environment, student outcomes and learning gain?

We welcome those themes identified as dimensions of "teaching excellence". Taken on its own, teaching quality would be a narrow lens through which to consider teaching excellence. We welcome any sector-wide approach aimed to improve and enhance learning and teaching in higher education that takes account of the depth and breadth of the factors that underpin excellence in teaching, rather than, for example, simplistic or stand-alone measures such as 'contact time' and 'satisfaction'.

There is abundant evidence that the most effective higher education environments are ones in which the students are diligently involved as a part of a community of learners. As part of this engagement, they work together with academics to enhance teaching, to assure quality and maintain standards. In these contexts they understand themselves as active partners with academic staff in a process of continual improvement of the learning experience.¹⁰

The Student Engagement Partnership has worked extensively across the English higher education sector focussing on a collaborative approach with providers and students' unions to identify and support enhancements in approaches to learning, teaching and broader student engagement initiatives. Notably we have worked with further education colleges providing higher education, with alternative providers, with post graduate provision, and on a major research project looking at approaches to independent learning techniques¹¹.

Our work shows that a culture of partnership, reinforced through student engagement activity that not only empowers students as autonomous learners, but as change agents within their learning community are crucial to our understanding of what constitutes teaching excellence. This is an extension of the example of criteria for teaching quality outlined in the green paper, which states "Students are intellectually stimulated, actively engaged in their learning, and satisfied with the quality of teaching and learning". Beyond simply being 'satisfied' with the quality of teaching and learning, students should be provided opportunities to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. The criteria for teaching quality outlined in the green paper casts students in a fairly passive role beyond engagement in their own learning, which is out of step with approaches adopted by the

¹⁰ Ramsden, P. (2008) *The Future of Higher Education Teaching and the Student Experience*. London: BIS. Retrieved from:

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20121212135622/http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/BISCorporate/docs/H/he-debate-ramsdn.pdf> [Accessed 5 January 2016]

¹¹ <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/independent-learning-student-perspectives-and-experiences>

majority of institutions and encouraged in Chapter B5 of the UK Quality Code. Students' role as partners in their learning and the institution could also be emphasised in the criteria for learning environment. We would suggest incorporating the role of students and their representative bodies in first criteria example in this section, "Leadership and the teaching and learning strategy support and promote excellent teaching and learning"; it could be changed to "Leadership from the institution in partnership with the students' union (or equivalent representative body) and the teaching and learning strategy support and promote excellent teaching and learning", for example.

Questions remain as to whether the approach to making TEF assessments outlined in the green paper will either succeed in driving sector-wide enhancements in learning and teaching, or elicit a full and accurate picture of the aspects and criteria of teaching excellence outlined. The risk, here, is that there is a fundamental mismatch between the aspects of teaching excellence agreed upon, and the method by which that will be identified. We agree with the focus on teaching quality, learning environment, student outcomes and learning gain but await further details in the technical consultation on how these will be realised in assessment methods. We are also concerned that sufficient time is allowed for detailed consultation whilst allowing institutions time to prepare for higher levels of TEF in year two.

Question 11. Do you agree with the proposed approach to the evidence used to make TEF assessments - common metrics derived from the national databases supported by evidence from the provider?

We are concerned that the set of metrics proposed will not adequately provide a base of evidence upon which to authentically make a judgement about teaching excellence. Furthermore we would question the value of the proposed timescale of introducing the TEF, given the ongoing reviews of the NSS¹² and the system for Quality Assurance¹³, both of which presently feature as parts of the new TEF arrangements.

The government should be wary of undermining or distorting the aspects of teaching excellence outlined in the green paper, which overall we think have been well thought through, and the ability of the TEF to drive enhancements to teaching and learning with some of the metrics it has outlined.

Of particular concern is the danger of over-reliance on the National Student Survey. The NSS is a survey which is primarily a measure of student *satisfaction* with aspects of their course and wider university experience. Whilst that may be a helpful proxy for some aspects of teaching quality, and has undoubtedly created significant focus on the improvement of teaching quality, it is not currently designed to discover the extent to which excellence in teaching (and in particular *learning*) is in evidence.

It is therefore vital that the NSS is seen as just one source of partial evidence within a broader range of information. Of particular concern will be the need to ensure that any application of judgement to NSS scores by panels is undertaken in the knowledge of the role that student and subject characteristics play on influencing levels of satisfaction. In short, only satisfaction scores that have been controlled for these variables should be used.

¹² <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2014/nssreview/Title,92164,en.html> [Accessed on 11 January 2016]

¹³ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/reg/review/> [Accessed on 11 January 2016]

Care will also need to be taken to ensure that comparisons between NSS scores at different institutions and different subjects are not inappropriately made. As far as possible NSS scores should only be used where a reasonable degree of statistical confidence can be achieved that the comparisons or assessments undertaken actually reflect a possible influence of the provider on the satisfaction of the students.

We are conscious of the long track record that HEFCE in particular has in undertaking detailed analysis of NSS scores and in providing guidance on the valid use of NSS data and we would very much hope that this level of care and analysis would be undertaken to ensure that any use of NSS in the TEF was robust.

TSEP has very much welcomed the current review of the content of the NSS to propose the inclusion of questions addressing a number of issues in relation to student engagement and the continued focus on these issues that that would bring. And indeed whilst we agree¹⁴ the review goes some way to addressing the need for wider questions about student engagement, it must be recognised that when limited to four questions, the scope of what the survey will elicit with respect to student engagement in teaching and learning is limited. We also think the focus of the proposed questions on student engagement could be improved, as outlined in our response to the NSS consultation. This needs to be addressed before the NSS can play a defining role in the TEF.

The green paper mentions the UK Engagement Survey, which is a good model for the kind of information that may help discover more about the quality of teaching and of learning gain. It is important not to confuse and conflate *engagement* with simple numerical metrics such as the number of teaching hours or the proportion of staff time spent teaching, as page 34 of the green paper suggests, as these are neither a useful measure of engagement nor a genuine proxy for teaching excellence. Furthermore, we are concerned that assessments of learning gain are not limited to interpretations of data from the DLHE. As HEFCE's current project investigating methods of measuring learning gain¹⁵ acknowledges, graduate employment/destinations is only a part of a broader picture of how excellent teaching and associated learning gain benefit a student and taken by itself, graduate destinations information used as a proxy for teaching excellence may further risk diverting attention away from more meaningful measures of learning gain and their potential to drive genuine improvements in teaching.

Given some of the concerns raised above about the metrics identified, it is our contention that the role of the 'institutional evidence' in providing qualitative and contextual information would be of great significance to the process of assessing teaching excellence and that at least equal if not more weight should be given to this process. The content of this evidence should be wider ranging than suggested; rather than merely providing context to the metrics identified, this is an opportunity to collect the kind of qualitative evidence that could meaningfully inform a judgement based on the full breadth of the aspects and criteria of teaching excellence outline in the green paper. In particular, the construction of an institutional evidence base is a fantastic opportunity to embed the student voice into the process, which would otherwise be limited to being a survey participant or panel member.

There is a great opportunity here to learn from the approaches to involving students in the current QA system, which has been advanced over a number of years to be highly successful and valued by

¹⁴ <http://tsep.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSEP-Response-to-the-Review-of-Information-about-Learning-and-Teaching.pdf> [Accessed on 11 January 2016]

¹⁵ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/lq/> [Accessed on 11 January 2016]

students, institutions and sector bodies alike. In particular the collective student voice provided by the students' union through the Student Submission, as well as the opportunity for a panel of students to meet with the review team during a visit. It is notable that the green paper suggests that neither an institutional visit nor any sort of submission directly from students will necessarily form part of the judgement process, and students and students' unions are not listed as being involved in the provision of the contextual 'institutional evidence'. This presents both a missed opportunity and a weakness in a system which is claiming to put students' interests first and should be carefully addressed.

Question 20: What steps could be taken to increase the transparency of student unions and strengthen unions' accountability to their student members?

The green paper is right to recognise the important role students' unions, guilds and associations play in representing students and the work they carry out in the name of students' interests.

We would go further to highlight the significant benefits that we have found through our work, which is also reflected in the QAA's research¹⁶, where institutions and students' unions collaborating in partnership are best placed to successfully enhance teaching, learning and the student experience. There are numerous examples of successful partnerships between students' unions and institutions to drive up the quality of teaching and make enhancements to the student experience including Exeter¹⁷, Winchester¹⁸, Leeds¹⁹, Birmingham City²⁰ and Lincoln²¹ to name but a few.

It is through this collaboration and the kind of valuable activity it delivers, such as student led teaching awards, student collaboration in institutional teaching enhancement conferences, co-delivery of student voice functions such as class representation, focus groups, surveys and so much more, that transparency and accountability of students' union activity can be found. Whilst this kind of work often supports the aim of promoting and understanding teaching excellence, we have found that very often students' unions are delivering this activity on very limited funds and resources. Our recommendation on what steps BIS can take would be to support the further development of such partnership working across the English higher education and students' union sector through a continued emphasis and support for student engagement at a national level and encouraging university governing bodies and support those providers without students' unions to deliver appropriate funding and support to develop students' unions in order to further the aims of partnership activity.

¹⁶ Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, (2012) *Outcomes from Institutional Audit 2009-2011: Student Engagement*. Gloucester: QAA.

¹⁷ <http://as.exeter.ac.uk/eqe/projects/change/> [Accessed on 11 January 2016]

¹⁸ <http://www.winchester.ac.uk/Studyhere/ExcellenceinLearningandTeaching/student-fellows/Pages/student-fellows-scheme.aspx> [Accessed on 11 January 2016]

¹⁹ http://students.leeds.ac.uk/info/10900/the_partnership/868/about_the_partnership [Accessed on 11 January 2016]

²⁰ <http://www.bcu.ac.uk/about-us/celt/student-engagement/student-partnerships> [Accessed on 11 January 2016]

²¹ <http://edeu.lincoln.ac.uk/student-engagement/> [Accessed on 11 January 2016]