
Background

This year's National Student Survey (NSS) contains questions on 'Student Voice' that will be asked of all participating providers in the main body of the survey, producing comparable published national data, for the first time in its history. Questions cover issues such as whether students believe they have the right opportunities to feed back; whether staff value those views; and whether students can see that their views have been acted on. The role that students' unions (or associations/guilds) play in representing students' academic interests is also the focus of a specific question. In short this is the first time that HE providers have been explicitly and publicly measured on how well their students think they engage with and respond to their views.

For those working in student voice/engagement it is quite a watershed moment. The development of student voice, whilst new to the National Student Survey, has been the subject of concerted efforts from both HE providers, students' unions and the various sector bodies - most noticeably QAA but also HEFCE, HEA and others for many years. Whilst there have been questions on student voice in the optional banks of questions that Universities could choose to add on the end of the NSS these did not result in published or comparable data. This development of student voice has been supported by an increasingly shared view that facilitating students to express their views on their own learning experience, and then acting in partnership with students on them, supports service improvement, satisfaction, retention and outcomes.

This briefing looks at some of the key issues highlighted by the national data and makes some suggestions about how institutions might respond. For this briefing we've focused in particular on the national outcomes in England:

	% of Full Time students who agree	% of Part Time students who agree
Student voice		
23 - I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course.	84	77
24 - Staff value students' views and opinions about the course.	76	68
25 - It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on.	62	45
26 - The students' union (association or guild) effectively represents students' academic interests.	58	46

It's good to ask: but what you do with the answer matters too

Whilst individual institutions' results will vary - at a national level at least it seems that a large majority of full-time students, on the whole, do think they get the right opportunities to feed back. 84% of FT students surveyed give the two most positive responses in this area. Clearly there is always more to be done to ensure a good balance is struck between seeking input and avoiding the curse of 'survey fatigue' but in



broad terms the drive to provide these opportunities in a considered and appropriate manner has clearly not gone unnoticed. Whether or not what students *think* are the right opportunities are in fact the right opportunities, is of course another matter entirely.

What is not so clear is that enough students believe that anything is being done with their feedback, with only 62% of FT students giving positive responses around clarity of how feedback is acted on. You can almost hear the collective sigh of student voice practitioners across the land. 'You said: we did' has been a frequent refrain of student engagement initiatives over the years; to the extent that those working in this area often demand more than this reductive 'consumer satisfaction' approach and something more akin to meaningful partnership. But clearly even in those most basic of consumerist terms large numbers of students simply aren't clear about how or whether their views have been acted on.

So what to do? Well, it's important to remove a straw man. Ensuring students know how their views have been acted on does not mean just trying to do whatever students tell you, as it can often be presented. Rather, being systematic about ensuring that whenever feedback is requested you are clear about what was done with the last set of answers, even if they could not be directly addressed, is the minimum that students should expect.

More innovative initiatives abound in the sector about how best to 'close the feedback loop'. But our experience suggests that these are often piecemeal, not systematic across an institution and not part of a joined-up wider approach to communicating effectively with students. They are often dependent on particular individuals or the result of particular innovations in particular subject area. A more holistic, systematic and monitored approach is clearly needed, with closing the loop part of 'business as usual' ensuring that students consistently see how feedback is taken forward and build trust that their institution takes them seriously.

Part-time students need a voice

The results for part-time students do not make for happy reading and are substantively lower across the board in student voice than their FT counterparts. Of particular concern is that only 45% say they are clear how their feedback has been acted on – significantly lower than the 62% of FT students. And only 46% of PT students say their students' union is representing their academic interests effectively. The challenges of engaging part-time students are well known. Far smaller in number and less 'present' on campus or in the SU they are often juggling education with a hectic work and/or family life. Both their time to give feedback and to recognize its results are likely to be limited. Institutional structures and mechanisms also tend to be heavily skewed towards meeting the needs of FT students.

Research commissioned by the The Student Engagement Partnership looking at the needs of [commuter students](#) is a particularly helpful place to start in thinking about how some of these challenges might be addressed. From our experience we would stress the importance of ensuring that any feedback or representation mechanism aimed at PT students is designed 'from the ground up' in partnership with them. Of particular importance is the principle of 'taking voice to them'; that is to say PT students are perhaps less likely to have the time to seek out opportunities to engage that do not fall within their already timetabled sessions – so integration with timetabled activity and 'taking it to them' has to be the starting point.



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And finally.... is it time for all Students' Unions to make academic representation their core mission?

As a former Education Officer in a students' union, this writer would say this wouldn't be. But the undeniably poor results for students' unions (58%/46% FT/PT) in representing students' academic interests are worth taking note of; even if some doubts remain about students' understanding of the question.

Now, anyone who has been in contact with a modern and effective students' union may well have found a vibrant 'beating heart' in their campus offering life-changing opportunities through societies, sports, campaigns and of course fantastic support and entertainment for students. And the now annual promotional campaign for SUs led by the NUS through its #LoveSUs campaign has seen all parts of the sector including the often non-partisan HEFCE fully endorse SUs and the work they do.

No-one would suggest that any of that should cease. And indeed many students' unions absolutely do focus on representing students' academic interests. But perhaps these NSS scores indicate that it is time for more SUs to really take stock of why they exist, what they are for, and how they prioritise their often limited resources. After all, not every student is in the X society or sport club – but the one thing that unites all students is their status as a student, the academic experience they have come for, and the need to have their academic interests represented.

Perhaps it's time for all SUs to see academic representation as their core mission.

How Uniac can Help

We can work alongside you to design, develop, assess and assure efficient and effective student voice and academic representation systems that help ensure you provide the right opportunities for feedback and that students are clear that their views will be acted on. We will work hard to understand the specific context of your institution and to develop straightforward, pragmatic recommendations informed by best practice.

With staff with direct experience of developing student engagement policy and practice at national level for QAA and HEFCE and in developing strong students' unions for NUS - combined with our systematic and rigorous audit approach, we are well placed to provide independent advice and assurance to help support your Institution or Students' Unions performance in the area of student voice.

To discuss this further, please contact Chris Taylor.



Email: ctaylor@uniac.co.uk

Tel: 0161 2472860



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