UK Quality Code for Higher Education

Chapter B5: Student engagement

Draft for consultation

February 2012

Contents

Introduction

This is a consultation draft for a new Chapter of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code).[1] The Quality Code was launched in December 2011. The importance of including a Student engagement Chapter was outlined in the final report detailing the changes required to the Academic Infrastructure (predecessor of the Quality Code).[2]

About the Quality Code and this Chapter

The Quality Code is the definitive reference point for all those involved in providing higher education that leads to an award from, or is validated by, a UK higher education provider. It makes clear what institutions are required to do, what they can expect of each other, and what the general public can expect of all higher education providers.

Each Chapter contains a single Expectation, which expresses the key principle that the higher education community has identified as important for the assurance of quality and academic standards within the area covered by the Chapter. Higher education providers are required to meet all Expectations. The manner in which they do so is their own responsibility.

The Expectation in each Chapter is accompanied by a series of Indicators. These represent the broadly shared views of all those responsible for providing UK higher education about the systems, policies and procedures that are conducive to a high quality experience for all students and that support awarding bodies in maintaining academic standards and assuring quality. Indicators are not designed to be used as a checklist; they are intended to help providers reflect on and develop their regulations, procedures and practices and to help to demonstrate that the Expectations in the Quality Code are being met.

Each Indicator is numbered and printed in bold and is supported by explanatory notes giving more information about it, and its purpose. The *General introduction* to the Quality Code provides further technical information for users, including an explanation of the terminology used throughout the Quality Code. It should be considered in conjunction with this document.

This Chapter sets out the Expectation and the Indicators of sound practice that relate to student engagement for the purposes of the Quality Code and that will be used by QAA in conducting reviews or parts of reviews that relate to this area.

The Expectation

The Quality Code Expectation about student engagement that higher education providers are required to meet is:

> **Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage students, individually and collectively, as partners to enhance their learning experience.**

What is student engagement in the context of this chapter?

The concept of 'student engagement' has existed for a number of decades. The meaning has evolved over time referring to any of the following: time on task; quality of effort; student involvement; social and academic integration; good practices in undergraduate education; and learning outcomes. Currently the term covers two main dimensions. These relate to:

- improving the motivation of students to engage in deep learning and to learn independently
- the provision of feedback by students and their participation in quality assurance and quality enhancement processes, resulting in the improvement of their learning environment.

This Chapter focuses on matters related to the second bullet point, which includes but is not restricted to representation of the student view by formal and informal mechanisms.

Further consideration of the area covered by the first bullet - students' engagement in deep and independent learning - will be included in the new version of *Chapter B3: Learning and teaching* of the Quality Code, due to be published later in 2012.

Student involvement in quality

It is widely accepted that the experience of students, individually and collectively, should inform quality assurance systems, with the effect of improving the student experience for current and future cohorts. Student involvement in quality can have an influence on the delivery and/or development of any aspect of the student learning experience, whether by the institution, by a department or by an individual. Such aspects might include:

- application and admission
- induction and transition into higher education
- programme and curriculum design, delivery and organisation
- curriculum content
- teaching
- learning opportunities
- learning resources
- student support and guidance
- assessment.

Ideally all students will be involved in quality assurance and enhancement processes. However, in reality, it is more important for higher education providers to create a culture and environment that promotes student engagement and offers all students an **opportunity** to be involved. For such an environment to be effective, the provider is likely to:

- be aware of the importance of feedback from students, individually and collectively
- have transparent mechanisms, agreed between the student body and the provider, for the nomination and election of student representatives
- provide induction and ongoing support for students and staff appropriate to their roles
- monitor and review the effectiveness of their policies and processes for engaging students in their quality processes.

The Indicators contained within this Chapter cover all of these areas.

Terminology

Partner/partnership

In this Chapter, the terms 'partner' and 'partnership' are used in a broad sense to indicate joint working between students and staff. This might involve both formal and informal arrangements, and representative mechanisms involving a students' association, guild, or union where this exists. The terms reflect the importance of a mature relationship where students and staff treat each other equitably based on respect of the expertise that both have.

Quality system

The term 'quality system' is used throughout this Chapter to cover any quality assurance or quality enhancement policy or process used by a higher education provider.

Student body

The term 'student body' is used in the broadest sense, which, according to context, could include:

- individual students
- groups of students with a common experience or interest
- formal representatives of a group or groups of students.

Student representatives may be affiliated with a students' association, guild, or union where this exists. Where possible it is important that providers work with representatives as well as individuals.

Indicators of sound practice

Indicator 1

Higher education providers, in partnership with their student body, define what student engagement means in the context of their quality systems.

Higher education providers have different missions, operate in different contexts, and have student populations that differ in composition and demographics. Providers tailor their educational offering to meet their mission and the needs of their student population.

Higher education is not a passive process - it is transformational as well as transactional. The general consensus is that the more active students are in all aspects of their learning experience, the greater the benefits they will gain.

The nature and extent of opportunities for students to engage in quality systems will vary between providers, and according to programme and academic level. However, once these opportunities have been agreed it is appropriate for them to be defined and widely communicated to staff and students in providers' policies.

Student charters may provide one way of communicating a definition of student engagement.

Further information

The Student Charter Group Final Report (January 2011):
www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/higher-education/docs/s/11-736-student-charter-group.pdf

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> **Indicator 2**
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> **Higher education providers ensure that opportunities for individual and collective student engagement in their quality systems are reflected across their provision.**

Quality systems can operate at many different points across provision. By ensuring that there is clarity (informed by their mission and context) about the meaning of student engagement in their quality processes, and at different points, providers can identify the opportunities for the individual and collective student voice to be used effectively.

Providers are encouraged to engage the student body in an active and timely way. For example it is likely to be as important for there to be engagement with the student body during the design phase of a curriculum as it is to have student representation and/or student involvement in programme review processes.

> **Indicator 3**
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> **Higher education providers, working in partnership with their student body, create an environment that is conducive to all students engaging in their learning and in quality systems, irrespective of their programme or mode of study or previous educational background.**

While it is the responsibility of the student to engage in their studies and in quality systems, the higher education provider and, where one exists, the union of students are best placed to create the environment that encourages students to engage fully and rewards them for doing so. It is important that this environment reflects the diverse nature of the student body of the provider.

A valuable way of creating such an environment is to collect student feedback. Mechanisms for doing this include:

- questionnaires, for example at the end a module
- student representative structures
- research activities, for example through focus groups
- student membership of committees
- student consultative events
- student involvement in new projects
- student dialogue with decision makers
- online discussion forums
- formal quality processes, for example subject review.

For such arrangements to be effective, students need to understand how to give feedback that is of use to the higher education provider (see notes to Indicator 5).

To help encourage engagement across the student body, higher education providers may consider how they inform students about what happens to any feedback they provide, and about any resultant changes. It is likely that students will be more inclined to engage when this is achieved. Students often like to know when and where their feedback has been acted upon or, where change is not possible, the reasons why this has not happened. Sometimes this is referred to as the importance of 'closing the feedback loop'.

Students usually appreciate feedback systems that are timed such that they themselves experience the benefits of their own suggestions. For this reason, higher education providers might

want to consider having a framework for eliciting feedback from students that employs a range of methods, is timely, not onerous (leading to survey fatigue), and that is demonstrably of direct benefit to the students providing the feedback.

Higher education providers might make available opportunities for individual feedback, including feedback provided anonymously (for example through anonymous student evaluations), as well as opportunities for collective feedback via student representation systems.

Indicator 4

Higher education providers, in partnership with their student body, create effective arrangements for the representation of the individual and collective student voice in their quality systems.

It is important that any processes of student representation in place are as representative as they can be, and that the voice of all student categories is captured.

It is generally recognised that under-representation of some categories of students can occur; for example, those following one-year programmes, students doing part-time study while in employment, and international students.

Providers and their union of students need to be proactive in attempting to capture the experiences of all students and to avoid student tokenism in representative structures. For example, it is unfair to expect one undergraduate student to represent fully the views of all students, including postgraduate research students.

Providers may need to use different mechanisms to reach out to different groups of students. A one-size-fits-all approach will not always be appropriate.

An important dimension of collective student representation in quality systems, however this is achieved, is student representation in decision-making processes (for example, on senior committees).

Indicator 5

Higher education providers, in partnership with their student body, ensure through appropriate induction and ongoing support, that students and staff are equipped to fulfil their roles in student engagement in quality systems effectively.

Both students and staff benefit from initial induction and ongoing support relating to student engagement. It is important for such induction and support to be appropriate for the roles that they play. Clearly identified resources may assist students and staff to fulfil their respective roles.

It may be useful, for example, for students to be briefed on how to give feedback that is of use to the provider. Student representatives might need to understand the mechanisms that exist to support them in their role, such as opportunities to gather feedback from the student body.

> **Indicator 6**
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> **Higher education providers, in partnership with their student body, share information so that students and staff involved in quality systems have an equally informed voice.**

A mutual sharing of information between students, their representatives, and the provider enables meaningful dialogues to take place.

The nature of the information shared will vary depending on the quality systems in place, but might include the results of student questionnaires, external examiners' reports, and reports from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. Higher education providers and their students may want to agree between themselves further useful sources of information.

> **Indicator 7**
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> **Higher education providers, in partnership with their student body, monitor and review the effectiveness of student engagement in their quality systems.**

All quality systems are regularly monitored to ensure that they are working effectively. It is useful to regularly monitor the effectiveness of student engagement within those systems, and to propose and implement improvements as necessary. Providers will want to ensure that the student body is fully involved in that process.

> **Further information**
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> Working with the Association of Managers of Students' Unions, the National Union of Students has piloted a benchmarking tool for representative systems. Students' unions and higher education providers can use this to measure and improve the effectiveness of the representation systems at their institution. See: www.nusconnect.org.uk/asset/news/6066/courserep-benchmarking-systems.pdf

Appendix 1: The Expectation and Indicators

The Expectation

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about student engagement, which higher education institutions are required to meet:

> **Higher Education providers take deliberate steps to engage students, individually and collectively, as partners to enhance their learning experience.**

The Indicators of sound practice

Indicator 1

Higher education providers, in partnership with their student body, define what student engagement means in the context of their quality systems

Indicator 2

Higher education providers ensure that opportunities for individual and collective student engagement in their quality systems are reflected across their provision.

Indicator 3

Higher education providers, working in partnership with their student body, create an environment that is conducive to all students engaging in their learning and in quality systems, irrespective of their programme or mode of study or previous educational background.

Indicator 4

Higher education providers, in partnership with their student body, create effective arrangements for the representation of the individual and collective student voice in their quality systems.

Indicator 5

Higher education providers, in partnership with their student body, ensure through appropriate induction and ongoing support that students and staff are equipped to fulfil their roles in student engagement in quality systems effectively.

Indicator 6

Higher education providers, in partnership with their student body, share information so that students and staff involved in quality systems have an equally informed voice.

Indicator 7

Higher education providers, in partnership with their student body, monitor and review the effectiveness of student engagement in their quality systems.

Appendix 2: Membership of the advisory group for this Chapter

Name	Position	Affiliation
Thelma Barron	Assistant Director	QAA Scotland
Janet Bohrer	Assistant Director	QAA (Chair)
Stuart Brand	Director of Teaching and Learning	Birmingham City University
Colin Bryson	Director, Combined Honours Centre and Chair of RAISE Network	Newcastle University
Dan Derricott	Student Officer	University of Lincoln Students' Union
Ian Giles	Emeritus Fellow	University of Southampton (specialist author)
Emelie Helsen	Advocacy Manager	City University London Students' Union
David Lloyd	Head of Academic Policy Support	Cardiff University
Cathy Kerfoot	Development Officer	QAA
Eve Lewis	Head of sparqs	Student participation in Quality Scotland
Neil Mackenzie	Students' Union Manager	Bradford College Students' Union
Iain Morrison	Head of Student Services	University of the Highlands and Islands
Fiona Nouri	Head of Student Support	Royal Veterinary College
Cliona O'Neill	Senior Learning and Teaching Manager	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and Wales Initiative for Student Engagement
Derfel Owen	Student Engagement and Participation Development Manager	University of Exeter
Tim Stewart	Dean of Learning and Teaching	BPP
Paul Trowler	Professor of Higher Education	Lancaster University
Gwen van der Velden	Director of Learning and Teaching Enhancement	University of Bath
Kate Wicklow	Student Engagement Manager	National Union of Students
Gail Wilson	Student Engagement Coordinator	QAA
Stephanie Wilson	Director, Corporate Performance and Quality	University of London, International Academy
Dennis John Wright	Dean of Students, Learning and Teaching	Imperial College, London