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## STUDENT CONSULTATION: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE, BEST PRACTICE & FOCUS GROUP FRAMEWORK

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## 1. OVERVIEW

Leeds Conservatoire is actively engaging in student consultation and would like to better understand this area to implement effective student feedback, consultation, and collaboration practices. This short literature review provides an overview of the rationale for institutional consultation with students, including defining the levels of consultation from feedback to engagement and partnership. It also provides a short summary from the literature on student consultation best practice.

### 1.1. RATIONALE FOR STUDENT CONSULTATION

Student consultation has increasingly become emphasised in higher education policy initiatives across the UK, with ‘engagement’ and the concepts and principles of ‘student partnership’ aiming to help institutions connect with their students, involve them in institutional priorities and development, and understand the experiences of students at different stages of the higher education lifecycle.

Engaging students effectively as a concept is integrated through a range of institutional areas, including teaching and learning, assessment and feedback, employability, widening participation and so on. There are a range of reasons why engaging students in consultation may be desired by an institution, such as to design engaging learning experiences, make HE more accessible, to address challenges facing the HE sector or to develop a sense of belonging.

Furthermore, there is evidence that engaging students in consultation can be beneficial for student's personal and academic development and outcomes, alongside developing a sense of community between students, and students and staff. Evidence from the 'What Works? Student Retention & Success' report (Thomas et al., 2017) emphasises the importance of student engagement and belonging for their retention and success.

The changing higher education landscape, including the increased choice available to students about how they learn, the accessibility of information and the increases to fees have placed new demands on institutions to ensure that they are able to offer value to the student experience. In this milieu, engaging the student voice to help direct and craft institutional responses is seen as critical.

*Higher education is not a passive process - it is transformational for the individual as well as having transactional elements. Higher education providers [should] promote active involvement by students in all aspects of their learning, and provide opportunities for students to influence their individual and collective learning journey. (QAA, Chapter B5, Student Engagement, 2012)*

Healey et al. (2014) note that the importance of recognising students as partners is increasingly recognised at government policy level and from national professional bodies. For example, the UK 2011 white paper 'Students at the Heart of the System'; the NUS 'A manifesto for partnership' (2012); and in 2013 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) established The Student Engagement Partnership among sector bodies, including QAA, HEA and the NUS, thus demonstrating the increasing movement of the sector towards recognising the importance of this concept as of significant benefit for higher education.

## 1.2. DEFINITIONS

A wide range of terms are used to describe engaging and consulting with students and are often used interchangeably despite describing different depths of engagement. It is important for a higher education provider to define what they mean when they use these terms, and therefore consider what they are trying to achieve when involving students in the institution.

- **Student feedback** – a one-way response given by students concerning their experiences, usually on a specific defined topic(s).
- **Student consultation** – a way of listening to students and promoting dialogue, for example using forums or face-to-face focus groups.
- **Student voice** – the 'argument that students have an authentic and valuable voice in the decisions that impact their learning and education' (Matthews and Dollinger, 2023), where students can express their individual values, opinions and perspectives.
- **Student engagement** – staff and students 'learning and working together' placing 'reciprocal learning at the heart of the relationship'.

- **Student partnership** – a process of learning and working together, with constructive and continuous dialogue (Advance HE<sup>1</sup>) placing ‘reciprocal learning at the heart of the relationship’ (Healey, 2014).
- **Student co-creation** – meaningful collaboration, where students are active and empowered participants. This term (unlike might be implied by ‘partnership’), does not assume a certain level of equity (Bovill, 2019).

The four-stage model of student engagement from the NUS/HEA suggests that **consultation, involvement, participation and partnership** are different forms of student engagement. Broadly speaking, these types of engagement exist on a continuum from transactional (consultation) to transformative (partnership), where the level of engagement moves from that of narrow scope and minor strategic value with infrequent interaction, to that of central importance, of significant strategic value with broad and complex scope (see Austin and Seitanidi, 2012, The collaborative continuum<sup>2</sup>). It is therefore important for an institution to understand and clarify the type and process of engagement that they are seeking to implement at different stages of the student experience lifecycle. Furthermore, these engagement types may operate on different levels at an institution:

- **Micro** – students engage with their own learning and that of other students.
- **Meso** – engagement in quality assurance and enhancement.
- **Macro** – engagement in strategy partnership (Healey et al., 2010).

## 2. CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

### Defining student involvement

The varying definitions of student consultation, partnership and engagement can themselves present a challenge to institutions attempting to put these concepts into practice and policy, when used interchangeably or uncritically (Healey et al., 2014). Healey et al. highlights how surveys or focus groups may often be framed as partnership, when ‘listening to students does in and of itself constitute partnership’ (2014). Institutions therefore must face the challenge of defining their student engagement strategy and approach and reflecting upon the varying implications that these each have.

Furthermore, students and staff will have different motivations, reasons, experiences of the institution and so on, all of which can lead to different understandings about what approaches to engagement and partnership mean and are trying to achieve, as well as their role within this.

*The desire to change will also vary among individuals. Even when there is the will to do so, working and learning in partnership is rarely automatic; it presents significant challenges to existing ways of being, doing and thinking, and requires confronting assumptions about*

<sup>1</sup> [Student engagement through partnership in higher education | Advance HE \(advance-he.ac.uk\)](https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/partnership)

<sup>2</sup> Austin and Seitanidi (2012). Figure 1. Page 737. See: [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-collaboration-continuum-Source-Derived-from-Austin-J-E-2000b-The-Collaboration\\_fig1\\_235827130](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-collaboration-continuum-Source-Derived-from-Austin-J-E-2000b-The-Collaboration_fig1_235827130).

*ourselves and others and – ultimately – a change in mind-set and one's sense of self.'* (Healey et al., 2014).

### **Institutional complexity**

Student consultation can be a complex process. On the one hand, the institution has a need to obtain useful feedback from students, while under time pressure to produce results and make change, and on the other hand students must be provided with the opportunity, time and space to meaningfully share their experiences.

The way that institutions are structured is often grounded upon policy, directed by policies dictated by government, focuses upon the directing of work, whereas the concept of partnership requires an openness to that which cannot be planned, but may emerge through the process (Healey et al., 2014). As a result of institutional time or funding pressures, it may be likely that feedback and consultation mechanisms are designed in a way that does not allocate sufficient time to discussion, or with questions that limit the opportunity for detail or breadth of feedback, there is a high risk that the process will place students in a passive role, and that results will merely confirm the expectations of those who designed the process (Pauli et al., 2016).

*Student satisfaction survey results, employment outcomes, and global rankings dominate the minds of some institutional leaders. In such contexts, academics and senior administrators are caught up in a web of measurable outcomes to be achieved, which diminishes the time, energy and resources devoted to the process.* (Matthews, 2017)

The structure of universities can result in a student being asked for feedback from multiple directions - departments, central services, student unions etc. – all of which can result in feedback fatigue. These feedback mechanisms often rely upon the importance of results and outcomes being *quantifiable*, is incompatible with the idea of student consultation or partnership being that of 'experiential discovery and engagement with a creative process where outcomes may be unpredictable or difficult to measure' (Pauli et al., 2016).

## **3. BEST PRACTICE**

The following section of this report synthesises best practice guidance from sector research and practice to institutions looking to design and implement student consultation, engagement or partnership.

### **3.1. DEFINED AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

Define what the process of consulting with students seeks to achieve and identify a process of student engagement that will achieve this. Each consultation method will have benefits and disadvantages and to be meaningful should take into account and barriers such as time.

### **3.2. COMMUNICATION**

As Matthews (2017) highlights, students will be often asked to take part in a wide range of feedback and engagement activities, but many do not understand why or for what purpose. Effectively communicating the aims and objectives defined for consultation, as in the above point, is essential to ensure that students understand what is required of them and why they may participate.

### 3.3. ACCESSIBILITY

Provide varied opportunities and channels to ensure that different varieties of students can provide student input and be involved in collaborative activity. Both formal and informal should be considered to tackle any barriers to student participation such as time or accessibility. Provide clear communication about how engagement will be structured and how outcomes will be influenced, as students are more likely to engage if they understand how their perspectives will determine outcomes (OfS, 2020). This is echoed by Advance HE's Framework with the values of *reciprocating* and *honesty* (Advance HE, 2015) (see figure 1.)

*Figure 1: Advance HE Student Engagement Through Partnership Framework (2015)*

**AUTHENTICITY:** the rationale for all parties to invest in partnerships is meaningful and credible.

**HONESTY:** all parties are honest about what they can contribute to partnership and about where the boundaries of partnership lie.

**INCLUSIVITY:** there is equality of opportunity and any barriers (structural or cultural) that prevent engagement are challenged.

**RECIPROCATING:** all parties have an interest in, and stand to benefit from, working and/or learning in partnership.

**EMPOWERMENT:** power is distributed appropriately and ways of working and learning promote healthy dynamics.

**TRUST:** all parties take time to get to know one-another and can be confident they will be treated with respect and fairness.

**COURAGE:** all parties are encouraged to critique and challenge practices, structures and approaches that undermine partnership, and are enabled to take risks to develop new ways of working and learning.

**PLURALITY:** all parties recognise and value the unique talents, perspectives and experiences that individuals contribute to partnership.

**RESPONSIBILITY:** all parties share collective responsibility for the aims of the partnership and individual responsibility for the contribution they make.

### 3.4. INCLUSIVITY

Matthews (2017) in the editorial 'Five Propositions for Genuine Students as Partners Practice' notes that fostering inclusive partnerships is one of the principles to guide effective engagement and partnership work. The Advance HE Student Engagement Through Partnership Framework (2015) (see figure 1.) also includes inclusivity as one of the values to underpin successful student engagement through partnership. Institutions must ensure that people from different backgrounds come

together, and consider the diversity of student and staff populations and reflect upon engagement design to avoid similar groups of students and staff being recruited (Matthews, 2017).

This may result, for example, in a variety of engagement approaches being adopted to ensure that all types and backgrounds of students have an opportunity to participate in a way that works best for them.

When determining who should be part of a consultation process institutions should consider if their roles, priorities or power may influence the participation of others, alongside identifying potential barriers to others participating.

### 3.5. ACCEPTING UNCERTAIN OUTCOMES

Accepting a process with uncertain outcomes (Matthews, 2017) is important for successful student engagement and partnership. This approach is one that moves beyond emphasising the importance of ranking, national surveys or global rankings, for example, and beyond what might be more familiar existing ways of working to ‘instead trust in a shared process that is inherently unpredictable in its outcome’ (HEA, 2014).

### 3.6. INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION

Collaborate with students’ unions to ensure that there are mechanisms for student representation (OfS, 2020). Collaborating with the students’ union is a way of ensuring that students are represented and included at a high level at the institution (OfS, 2020), and consequently have a greater and deeper reach than the institution or the Union operating individuals (Healey et al., 2014). There is furthermore the potential to work across the institution to incorporate all services and societies to adopt an approach to partnership that goes beyond learning and teaching, or other singular institutional priority areas.

### 3.7. SHARED RESPONSIBILITY AND VALUES

The research has shown that understandings of what partnership is and what it means can be contrasting and overlapping, and that terms can be used interchangeably and in error. Institutions should therefore seek to define what they mean by each term at different levels, and articulate shared values and aims for student consultation and collaboration (Wildridge et al., 2004). This can help mitigate differences of understanding within disciplines, for example (Crawford et al., 2015).

As Matthews (2017) argues, institutions do not need to follow the same ‘recipe’ across the university, but open dialogue about what consultation or partnership means in their specific context. This work is about another value identified by Advance HE’s 2015 framework: *reciprocity*, so that ‘all involved – students, academics, professional service staff, senior managers, students’ unions ... are actively engaged and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together’ (Healey et al., 2014).

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