



## Beyond Borders

A mapping project of international students' engagement in the Scottish higher education learning experience

sparqs 







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International students add immeasurable value to Scotland's higher education sector, but in a way that the all-too-common use of the term 'internationalisation' doesn't come close to describing. From the social capital that comes from exploring and embracing cultures and friendships from across the world, to the real imperative for Scottish graduates to think in an international context if they are to remain employable in a globalised job market, the benefit is clear.

In order to repay this benefit, Scottish higher education institutions and students' associations must provide international students with a world-class student experience.

Over the last few years, we have seen increasing numbers of international students studying at Scottish institutions, and these numbers are only likely to increase whilst pressures on university and college budgets grow. However, international students must be seen as more than just a budget line. They are not consumers of education but need to be just as much the co-collaborators we have come to expect of Scottish students.

Many of the issues international students face are well rehearsed. Falling foul of plagiarism, a lack of language support and, despite being surrounded by Scottish students daily, never fully integrating or feeling included. For as long as international students pay extraordinarily high tuition fees, it is up to the sector to ensure they can shape their own learning experiences so these issues are avoided.

Students' associations have known for some time that they need to be better at reflecting the wide demographic of students they seek to represent and support, and international

students are no exception. We know that international students from some regions of the world remain isolated from the student community. We can't accept this as inevitable.

Scotland can be proud of the student representative structures we have in many universities and some colleges. We have the structures; the task for us is to ensure international students are able and willing to engage. International students do make up a significant proportion of academic representatives, but we currently provide little targeted support or promotion.

We need to listen to our international students, and the International Student Barometer can be a powerful tool for identifying areas of best practice and concern to be explored in more meaningful ways. But a conversation needs to happen if we are to avoid ISB becoming another marketing tool that results in little more than a league table ranking or celebratory email sign off. We should never replace genuine engagement with consumer-based surveying.

NUS Scotland and sparqs are committed to supporting the HEI sector in putting international students at the heart of shaping their learning experience, and the Beyond Borders report is an exciting step forward towards this goal.

We hope this report will help you further understand what barriers exist to enhancing the international student experience and spark new ideas that will ensure Scottish HEIs remain renowned for producing students without borders.

**Liam Burns**

**President NUS Scotland**



# Introduction

## Introduction

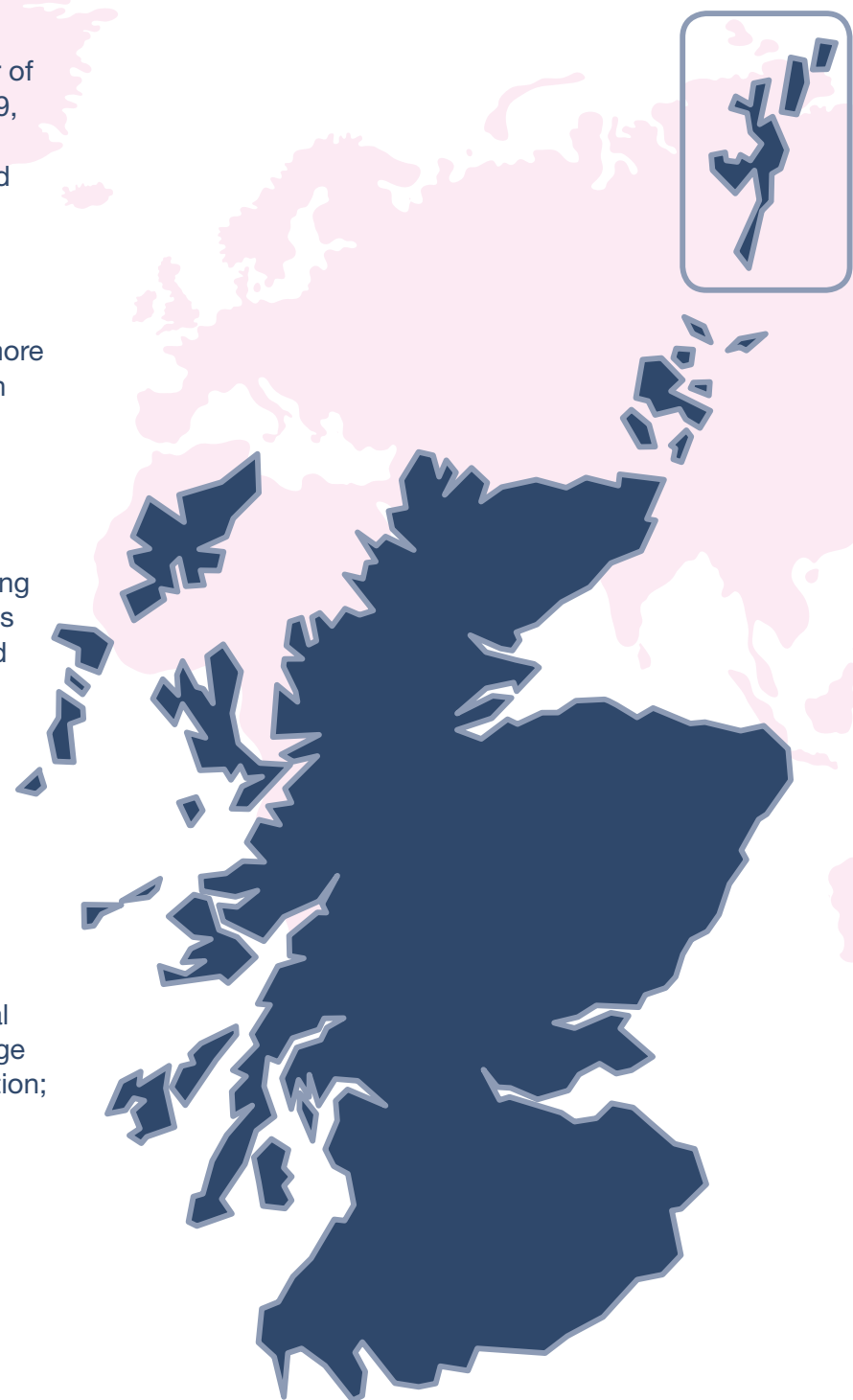
Scotland attracts an increasing number of students from outside the UK. In 2008/9, the number of non-UK European Union students studying in Scotland increased by 10%, while the number of non-EU international students increased by 11%. In total, 17% of students enrolled in Scottish HEIs during this time period came from outside the UK, with even more studying in Scotland's further education institutions.

In 2008, sparqs and NUS Scotland undertook a joint mapping project to investigate how international students were engaging with learning and teaching structures and students' associations as part of the Scottish Government funded Students Without Borders project.

The aim of the report is to assist institutional staff who work in quality enhancement, international student support or international recruitment, and students' association officers or international student representatives, identify the following:

1. how and to what extent international students studying in Scotland engage in learning and teaching representation;
2. barriers to such engagement; and
3. good practice used to overcome obstacles.

It is worth noting that although the mapping project involved international students in Scottish HEIs, many of the findings and recommendations can be applied to domestic students, FE students and students studying in the rest of the UK.



## Mapping project methodology

The mapping project was conducted over the course of 2009.

The first stage of the mapping project involved interviews at 18 Scottish higher education institutions. Staff and students at the Open University and the Scottish Agricultural College were not interviewed due to the low numbers of international students enrolled at these institutions.

The project worker secured interviews with staff at 17 of the 18 targeted institutions, mainly institutional representatives who were primarily involved in quality assurance or enhancement. Some international office and student support staff also took part in the interviews. Throughout the report, any reference to "institutions" or "universities" refers to this set of interviewees.

Interviews were held with students and staff at 12 out of 18 targeted students' associations. Participants included students' association presidents, vice/deputy presidents whose remits included learning and teaching representation, and association staff. Of the six student associations that did not take part in the study, three did not respond to repeated interview requests, one declined to take part in the project and two cancelled scheduled interviews and did not reschedule. Any reference to "associations" refers to this set of interviewees.

The second stage of the mapping project's research involved two focus groups, which included students from China, Botswana, Greece, Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Poland and Hungary. The participants in the focus groups were presented with questions based on the findings identified in the interview phase of the mapping project.

All participants were granted anonymity to allow them to express their opinions freely, though arrangements can be arranged with the project author to put inquiries to participants.

## Key findings

### General representative structures for students at Scottish HEIs

- The designated student places on institutional-level committees tend to be filled by sabbaticals or executive board members.
- The designated student places within school-level committees often remain unfilled.
- Representative structures vary between and within universities, particularly at the school level, which sometimes leads to confusion among institutional staff and students on how they operate.
- Associations of all sizes report difficulty getting the names of course representatives in a timely fashion from university staff.

### Pre-Induction processes for international students

- Institutions focus on welfare issues in their communications with international students prior to their arrival in the UK.
- Very few institutions provide information on student representation structures for learning and teaching at the pre-induction stage to the incoming international students, as they believe sending such information would result in information overload.
- Student officers report difficulty in producing material in time to mail the material abroad. They also cite the high





costs in doing so and expressed doubts whether information would arrive at their intended target audience.

### Induction processes for international students

- International student induction focuses much more on welfare than learning and teaching representation.
- Some associations present information on learning and teaching representation opportunities during induction sessions and through face-to-face contact, though they are uncertain as to whether this translates into participation.
- The most common international student orientation method is a mixed approach, in which international students participate in both general student inductions and specific sessions targeted at international students.
- A small number of universities use a targeted approach to international induction, in which international student-specific events are held days or a week prior to general student induction.
- A small number of universities use an integrated approach to international induction, in which foreign students take part in the same induction processes alongside domestic students and are offered few targeted sessions.

### International student issues within representation structures

- Associations and universities identify a number of learning and teaching issues specifically related to international students that are raised at course and institutional committee levels. These include plagiarism,

language provision and lack of course integration with the domestic student body.

- Associations are unable to track the number of international student representatives due to a lack of detailed information returned to the association from the institution.
- Most associations and institutions gave anecdotal evidence that the proportion of international students who are course reps matches or exceeds the proportion of their population in the general student body.
- Some focus groups participants say they do not perceive international societies as making up part of the students' association.

### Barriers to involvement

- Language difficulties, cultural differences, expectations about the role of students' associations and time pressures are cited as the most common barriers to international student engagement in learning and teaching representation.
- There is broad agreement that Chinese students do not engage with representative structures relative to their numbers on campus. Many participants suspected that this was due to cultural and educational differences and their resistance to participation in democratic structures.
- Similar but less frequent concerns are raised about the engagement of Indian students.
- Students' associations attempt to overcome these barriers mostly through face-to-face contact such as visiting international student halls and attending events with large numbers of international students present.

### Feedback



- The most common method of obtaining international student feedback on learning and teaching issues is through surveys.
- I-Graduate's International Student Barometer is used by many institutions to collect survey data on international students.
- Most universities give positive feedback about the results they receive from the International Student Barometer, though some complaints of unreliability are raised.
- Informal feedback, including student interactions with lecturers, tutors and international support staff, is a key method of gathering international student opinion.
- Institutions report difficulties in getting the results of feedback communicated to outgoing international students.
- The failure to close the feedback loop and the fear of reprisal from academic staff are barriers to obtaining feedback from international students.

### Recommendations

1. Institutions should liaise with associations to improve the delivery of course representation information and develop methods of tracking the involvement of international students in the course representative system.
2. Associations and institutions should work to clarify descriptions of course representative system so students can understand them prior to attending their first class and find new ways to communicate to international students about representation opportunities.

3. Students' associations should evaluate their engagement with international students via sparqs' consultancy and the NUS Internationalising Your Student Union Audit.
4. HEIs and associations should work together to overcome barriers to involvement among the general international student population and within specific groups of international students.
5. Institutions should develop methods to ensure the feedback loop for international students is closed.
6. NUS Scotland should develop a Scotland-wide network of international societies to share good practice and build stronger peer networks to help incoming students from abroad and international students already in Scotland. It should also work with associations and institutions to develop and promote international student forums.

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 Throughout this document, where an example of effective practice is included within the text, we have used a small aeroplane icon. 

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# Chapter One

## Representative structures

To better understand the issues around engagement of international students in learning and teaching representation, it is instructive to first review the structure of course, school and institutional-level representation in general and examine what problems institutions and students' associations report when interacting within those structures.

The section also looks at how universities and associations promote learning and teaching engagement to their entire study body and how students are selected to be representatives.

Throughout this chapter, for the purpose of clarification, the terms "class" or "programme" will be referred to using the generic term of "course", unless specifically stated in a quote.

### Explanation of generic course representation system

The course representative system at Scottish universities is operated by students' associations with varying degrees of support from institutional staff. Structures differ from institution to institution, and can even take different forms between schools at the same institution.

Course representation structures are a crucial way for students to engage with their learning experience and develop two-way feedback to ensure courses develop and respond to the students' needs and wishes.

A student association of a large university with hundreds of course representatives said:

*“ We ask each programme to elect representatives – there’s no set number, so we usually say two per level, per programme... unless you’ve got a big cohort, which some*

*schools do. They have ten [representatives] per year... or if there’s a small Masters class of seven or eight, they might just have one.*

*The programme leaders will sit on the [Staff Student Consultative Group], and they might invite people along like the head of each year of the programme, the placement co-ordinator, the dean of the school but, crucially, the students will always be in the majority. They’ll have control of the meeting... These meetings are fairly informal – the agenda is really student and staff issues, then other business. ”*

Much of the feedback from students' associations at smaller institutions is that the course representative has a good personal connection with the students' association officers, while associations at larger institutions say there is less personal connection due to the hundreds of students involved.

### How students find out about the course representation system after induction

Part of this report looks at how we can ensure international students are involved in course representative structures. Before looking at representation at the school and institution level, it is important to look first at how all students find out about course representation structures and opportunities once they have started their studies.

The most common method for students' associations to promote the course representative system was through face-to-face contact with students, which some participants described as "evangelising".



✈ Associations and institutions cited examples such as officers speaking to societies, attendance at hall meetings for university-housed students and even "crashing" a barbeque of North American students to talk-up representation opportunities. ✈

Other efforts by associations to promote involvement in the course representative system include "wine and cheese-type events" where students can speak to associations and institution representatives about becoming a course representative or engage in other representation opportunities.

Associations also report sending fortnightly emails to students, mailing postcards or designing posters and bulletin board displays that encourage students to take up representative roles. Board displays were cited by a focus group participant as instrumental in becoming a course representative.

✈ One university collaborated with their association to produce a publication that explained the entirety of its representative structures. The booklet was distributed to all incoming students at the beginning of the year and is now available on the institution's virtual learning environment. It also produced a newsletter, piloted for their mid-term intake in 2009, which focuses on international students. Institutional staff said the next edition will have a section on encouraging participation in representation structures. ✈

### How course representatives are selected

The selection of course representatives generally takes place on the first few days of course or during course inductions. Study participants said that course representative elections are rarely contested; when someone raises their hand in response to a lecturer's request to volunteer, the position is usually theirs.

Prior to the beginning of term, some associations send letters to course leaders and lecturers explaining the course representation system and their role in the process of selecting a course representative.

✈ One student association took this a step further and sent a PowerPoint presentation explaining the role of the class representation systems. ✈

Another student association said a potential gap in recruitment exercises was that lecturers did not always ask for volunteers, and suggested that lecturers be given better instruction from the university on their role in the recruitment of course representatives.

*“ The individual lecturer doesn’t know that there’s a class rep system, or doesn’t consider it important, or doesn’t actually know how to conduct one. If they’re given ballot papers at the start of the year, and told, ‘I need to have a class rep name in three weeks’, they would do it. ”*

How course representative data is collected was also an area of contention. Associations and universities both said that once students are selected to be their course's representative, their names and course details are sent to school secretaries or





similar administrative bodies, who collate the data and pass it on to the association. One association reported that departments are given some latitude in how the students' names are collected and returned to the association, and that this leads to data going missing.

*“Some faculties and departments will send [the names] into university central themselves, some will say ‘you have to fill that in and send that to level four, turn left and use a special knock.’”*

*There should be 500 student reps. As of the end of last year we had a database of about 250. We are not getting the data at all.”*

The process of returning this data to the student association takes anywhere from two weeks to a month or longer. Some associations report difficulty in getting the names of course representatives from the secretaries in a timely fashion or having to chase up departments. Two institutions said they sent requests to school secretaries to “move them along”.

### Explanation of generic school and institutional representation systems

One association's description of how a complaint is addressed at various levels of the learning and teaching committee system is instructive:

*“At the class level, there'll be the complaint. At the school level, they'll talk about how the support system can address the complaint. Then at the institutional level... they'll discuss how they can alter the structures of all the systems to make it more centralised or more accessible.”*

Unresolved course-level issues are also brought up at students' representative councils or directly with sabbatical officers

to ensure that they are discussed on the school or institutional committees that they sit on. One association encourages course representatives to do this because officers are concerned that course representatives do not have enough influence over which issues should be raised at the school level:

*“That's why we push our mechanisms – saying to course reps: ‘the reason you're also a member of student [council] is because if there is a university or school-wide issue... our president or other executive members can go to learning and teaching sub-committees and academic policy committees and say... issues are being raised that are not specific to the programme, they're specific to the [university].”*

Student representation at the school and institutional levels varies in structure between universities and within different schools of the same institution.

As with the course representative system, schools often have a large amount of autonomy over their representative structures, leading to systems that one institutional representative described as convoluted:

*“We've just done an internal teaching review in one school. We're suggesting that they try and rationalise that system, because it's not only confusing to us, it's confusing to the students.”*

### How students find out about representative systems and how they are selected

The designated student places on institutional level committees tend to be filled by sabbaticals or associations' executives. At the school level, the places are filled by a mix of sabbaticals and course representatives or other students who have been asked to volunteer, though associations reported

difficulty in recruiting lay students to take part in these meetings. Some associations said the designated student places on school-level committees went unfilled.

*✈ One students' association worked with their university to widen school level involvement by agreeing to replace overstretched students' association executives with “Joe Bloggs' students [on school committees] to ensure a better spread in representation and more students with further knowledge”. The two students sit on each school board and form an “expert student group” which feeds school level issues down to the class representatives and visa versa. Issues of wider concern are also communicated back to the association. ✈*

An association reported that, as their schools were given wide latitude on how to run their representative structures, it made it difficult to engage students at this level:

*“We have very good institutional level representation and it's quite easy sometimes to get institutional agreement on issues – but in order to make it happen you've got to get the bottom-up representation effective as well... because the schools will say: ‘We're not going to do that. We're autonomous – we'll do things in the way that best suits our needs.’ So we have to have good representation at that level.”*

*What we sometimes end up having to do is the sort of pincer movement... sometimes the advice we get from quite senior people is... you've got to go out and make a fuss in schools - you've got to get your students to go out there.”*

## Summary

It is useful to look at how the course, school and institutional level representational systems are structured in order to see some of the issues facing student engagement in general.

Representative systems throughout Scotland's universities have commonalities, such as the association being responsible for running the course representative systems and for promoting the system to lecturers, who in turn run elections for course representatives early in the first term. It is also typical for association sabbaticals or executive board members to fill the designated student places at the institutional level, and that frequently the designated places within school-level committees remained unfilled.

The potential barriers to engagement can be seen around the differing structures for course, school and institutional representation, which create confusion among students and lecturers alike. Another potential barrier is that the interaction between associations and institutions over the course representative system can sometimes be problematic, with associations reporting difficulties in obtaining the names of course representatives from the university in a timely and accurate fashion.





# Chapter Two

## Pre-induction

When looking at how international students are able to engage in learning and teaching representation, it is important to look at the information offered to them prior to them starting their courses – the pre-induction phase, when students have yet to arrive in Scotland.

To determine the level of understanding international students have about Scotland's learning and teaching representation structures, we asked students' association officers and university staff what information, if any, was given to international students prior to their arrival in Scotland. We also asked university and association participants for their views on whether greater efforts to inform international students of these structures would prove beneficial to international student engagement, and what barriers existed to providing information of this kind.

### Information sent to international students prior to induction

Universities and associations reported that information sent out to international students focuses on "practical" issues. These include both educational and non-educational topics such as opportunities for academic support, tuition fee payment options, details about the NHS and Scotland's climate. As one institutional representative summed up, "it doesn't go into a huge amount of detail in terms of the representative structures at that stage."

Printed material is sometimes not sent directly to the student but delivered through private, in-country agents who are responsible for passing on the information to students. International recruitment staff also provided information to students in the course of their work abroad.

Institutions and associations reported that printed pre-induction material (e.g. prospectuses, prospectus supplements and newsletters) often includes information on students' associations, ranging from a brief mention of the association and a website address to a more expansive description of the role associations play in supporting students through democratic and university governance structures, student support and international societies.

One focus group participant, when asked what information they received prior to arriving in the UK, recalled receiving information about the international society but made a distinction between the society and the students' association: "They didn't send much about the student association. They did talk about the student association but not in detail, not as much as they would talk about the international student society."

### Information on representation opportunities

When queried, many universities and associations had not considered sending out information on course representation to international students prior to induction.

Those universities that had rejected this idea believed that describing opportunities for learning and teaching representation was irrelevant to what international students needed at that time and potentially could contribute to information overload: "At that stage, you wouldn't like to talk about what happens at the university in terms of representation and joining clubs – that comes later."

International students at one university receive a series of newsletters prior to arrival, some of which are specific to the

student's country of origin, that cover general information about the university and student experience. The university said that the newsletters do not provide course representation information:

*“That kind of information tends to go in the more departmental-specific stuff – so the departmental handbooks will have mention of the representation processes... The reminder about the opportunity for representation is in the course handbooks, and I know that [the student association] does quite a lot of work to ensure that course representation actually happens.”*

A colleague said the reason for not including course representation information during pre-induction was one of fairness:

*“It's a conscious decision to make sure you're not singling out any one group and treating them differently. There's an issue with ensuring that you get people who are truly representative of the cohort of students – regardless of whether they are international or predominantly home students.”*

Another university questioned the timing of sending pre-induction information about learning and teaching representation:

*“I suspect that they do need to know about [learning and teaching representational issues] but I wonder whether that would be the right time... people are much more concentrated on moving from one country to another: 'I need to know what course I'm doing; I need to know when it starts'.*

*I suspect that people don't take on board that side of things at that point, but that's not to say there shouldn't be something signposting people to the representative nature and side of things within the institution.”*

This view of "too much-too soon" was repeated in a focus group dialogue between three international students, two of which were Chinese. One student suggested that pre-induction material would be helpful to the Chinese students.

*“You don't have programme reps where you come from, and you don't understand what the whole thing is about, so how are you going to get involved in something that you don't know what it is about and don't understand? There is probably an issue of raising awareness and telling you what it is about when you are in China, so when you come here you already know and can get involved.”*

One of the Chinese students said there was a need for further information: "If we don't know, we can't be involved." However, the two Chinese students also indicated that the cultural differences between education systems was so great that receiving pre-induction information on course representative structures while still in China would be unhelpful, as Chinese students would be unaware of the types of issues that would be raised before classes began.

Another Chinese student taking part in the focus group agreed:

*“Before I came here, X University is some university far away from me. It took 3 days to get here... Everything is very, very strange here. I think that you can send me the information about X University but I would really not care about it because it is not familiar to me. But when I come here I really recognise the problem.”*

The first student, reflecting on their own experience arriving at university years earlier, saw the value in this argument:







“ When you are in your home country, you think that when you come here everything will be alright. You don’t care about any programme reps, or mentors, but when you are actually here and you think ‘Oh my God, this is so strange.’ You’re probably right, it’s better to advertise it here. ”

✈️ Edinburgh Napier University’s Dr Monika Foster has produced a case study (<http://bit.ly/cHi2Fu>) as part of the “Hearing the Student Voice Project” which address some of the concerns raised in this chapter.

Her case study, ‘In their own words – using student voices to design effective pre-arrival induction for international students’, focuses on Indian students within the university’s BA Hospitality Management programme who were found to rely on peer advice rather than the university for academic and welfare guidance.

Dr Foster, interviewed incoming Indian students about “their hopes and fears, how they prepare themselves for the challenge of studying abroad, what they think may be useful” prior to arrival in Scotland. Questions based on the comments made by pre-arrival students were then put to Indian students already on the course. Audio extracts of their responses were played back to the pre-arrival students, who said the information provided was “more focused on the academic skills than the advice they tend to get from their peers”. ✈️

### Barriers to communication from students’ associations prior to induction

One association described the barriers to sending information abroad to international students this way:

“ We don’t send it out to every international student, because a) the cost would be enormous, and b) the addresses tend to differ. Some people go through an agent – and the address they provide to the university is an agent’s address. ”

At another university, information about representative structures, including the course representation system, was included in the association’s freshers’ magazine. But the students report difficulty in producing the magazine in time for it to be posted out to international students, and instead rely on sending the magazine to their university’s international student halls.

## Summary

This chapter explored what kind of information universities and associations send abroad and whether sending information on learning and teaching representation opportunities would improve engagement with international students in learning and teaching representation.

There is a clear focus currently on welfare issues when sending out pre-induction material to international students. The material sent, posted on their website and communicated through recruitment staff, does sometimes make mention of student associations, but very few institutions provide information on student representation structures for learning and teaching, either to the international or domestic student body.

Institutional staff indicated that this type of information was more appropriately provided once students arrived, and feared that providing such details would result in information overload at the recruitment and pre-arrival stage. Some international student participants in focus groups agreed with this analysis.

The few associations that provide information for international students prior to arrival reported difficulty in producing material in time to mail materials abroad. They also cited the high costs in sending material abroad and expressed doubts whether information would arrive at their intended target audience.



# Chapter Three

## Induction

This section of the mapping exercise report examines what information universities and associations provide to international students on learning and teaching opportunities during induction. The report examines this issue in order to determine if such engagement is seen as necessary by associations and universities and empowering to international students.

Throughout the course of the research, institutions and students' associations were asked what type of information was provided to international students during institution-wide inductions and how much of that information is related to representation opportunities. Based on their responses, the induction methods were broken down into three types: mixed, targeted and integrated approaches.

The mixed approach describes universities where international students participate in a mix of general student inductions and specific international student sessions. The targeted method involves international students taking part in a week-long series of international student-specific events prior to general student induction. Universities using the integrated approach offer international students very few or no targeted sessions.

### Mixed approach

A majority of HEIs in Scotland use a mixed approach to international student induction. These institutions hold specific events targeted for international students in addition to a range of induction sessions and events for the entire student body.

Institutions said welfare, and general learning and teaching issues, such as descriptions of facilities, are raised during the international-specific events, while issues of course representation are left to school or course inductions.

One university said their overseas cohort takes part in sessions led by an international student advisor with a concentration on welfare issues and "ice-breaking" activities, and they are invited to a welcome event involving the principal and the local city council.

At a smaller institution, the formalised session for international students involves the international student advisor, who speaks on visa and immigration issues, a representative from the police force and a local GP. The university said it was at their general induction, not during an international session, where the students are informed that course representative elections will take place in the coming weeks.

Some institutions taking the mixed approach provide international student handbooks. At one large university, the guide includes a section on the students' association, including the mention of the association's International Student Officer. The academic section of the booklet made no mention of the course representation structure.

For students' associations, the international induction sessions are an opportunity to describe, albeit briefly, the role of the students' association and how international students can get involved. One association said it is important to get involved in international students' inductions: "Getting the induction right - so that they feel they can participate in the process, and they know that they can, and the ways they can - is really key."

The association at one university includes a few slides during their international student orientation session outlining why students should engage in representation structures.

*"It is not specific about the learning and teaching, it is not specific about student council either, but it is certainly getting the*

*point that if you get involved, you can shape your education."*

This presentation was later shown to the same students during their general course induction:

*"We tell them about the student rep process, about learning and teaching and why they should get involved in it. We tell them the different types of representatives there are, what we have done in the past... and then said 'on Friday we're holding an informal cheese and wine in the students' union, if you are interested in anything you've heard, come along and we will give you more information, one-to-one'."*

The association said the presentations to international students usually results in further enquiries from international students.

*"If I ever get a student to ask me questions about the student council, it's usually an international student. I wouldn't say immediately, because they've got information overload."*

However, the same university said that although international students make more enquiries into representative structures than domestic students, it does not necessarily translate into greater participation, as the schools with higher numbers of international students have less international student participation.

The student association at another large university stressed the importance of having international student induction events repeated for January arrivals:

*"Even in the second half of the year, the international students coming in... they're getting direct one-on-one contact from someone that is speaking about, 'you can be a class rep, you can run for students' association'."*

For one association at a small university, direct contact with almost every international student was achievable. In addition to attending more formal events, the student association met briefly with every exchange student when they were brought by the student association office during orientation week. At this same institution, both the international office and student association set up information tables while students stood in the registration queue. The association officer said: "I was present for just about the entire time, and would meet every single student who was in line, and ask questions: 'were they settling in?' They have the opportunity to have direct contact."

At a larger university, international students are brought to the students' union building and served food. There they are introduced to the executive officers, who speak about the students' association and provide details of specific international events that are planned for the coming year.

Another student association representative said they reached out to international students through their university's student ambassador programmes, which include meeting incoming international students at the airport, train or bus station. An association officer said: "I'm always prodding the education officers to become volunteers there, so they do get an interaction there. We have got quite a few class reps this year from that group, and two of our international student [representatives] were met during that process of arrival."

*✈* One student association said that engaging with international students on learning and teaching issues during induction produced results, and cited a presentation given the previous year at a school with a high proportion of international students who had no representative the







previous year. “I was swarmed afterwards for business cards. We ended up with 12 people wanting one position. We co-opted one for the position, and we took on as many others who wanted to come along. The committee isn’t 19 any more, like it’s supposed to be – it’s closer to 27. We need to make sure that the students’ association is present in a wide range of things so that people can understand why it’s relevant and why they might want to get involved.”✈

### Targeted Approach

At a small number of Scottish universities, induction sessions solely for international students are held over a few days or a week prior to the general student induction. International students attend formal sessions as well as cultural activities such as ceilidhs and institution-sponsored trips.

As with universities that take a mixed approach, students’ associations are invited to speak during these induction sessions. Some associations also hold events just for international students. A staff member at one large university said that the message communicated by their association is that “you don’t have to have been there for several years before you can take part in representation”. She commented that this message about getting involved in representation was better received than if it had come from the university: “it grabs their attention and the enthusiasm of the [student] representatives... [it] wins them over.”

The university said information on learning and teaching representation is not conveyed during these inductions for fear of contributing to information overload. It also commented that the association “doesn’t go into a great deal of detail at that stage. Probably because of the time factor and also they feel that they have quite a lot to cover in telling the students about the organisation...”

Another university said course representation opportunities are raised during schools’ welcomes, rather than during international orientation week.

“They do tell them this is what happens - this is how to raise a complaint, this is how to make your voice heard - all of those different things. But to be honest there is an awful lot of information being thrown at people at a time when they are more concerned about how do I make friends, how am I going to survive this first week; this is all very scary.”

At one large university, the association spoke during their allotted slot but also distributed generic association information packs to international students and held a question-and-answer session. The event failed to attract any international students, which the sabbaticals put down to there being too many events scheduled for international students (i.e. information overload). The student association was also given five to ten minutes to speak during the general schools’ welcome about “who we are and what we do”, but said that they did not speak about course representation.

Another association said they spoke generally about the students’ union at international inductions both at the beginning of the current academic year and again the following January, but not specifically about representation issues in the course, as the sabbatical had “just started” and “wasn’t fully aware of the class representation structure”.

“Myself and the sabbs attended and we spoke about what the students’ association is - to make it clear to them that, yes, there’s a bar and café here, but there’s also a quiet study space - and even if the building didn’t exist there would still be a students’ association which would give them representation.”

The same association were unclear about how much representation information was conveyed to international students during the week-long international student induction, though the sabbaticals believed that the association’s involvement in these induction sessions led to further interaction.

“A lot of international students approached me much more than other students. I have had more dealings with international students... and they’re more open to approaching you and speaking about things. When I email the class reps I receive more replies from international students.”

### Integrated Approach

The third approach to international student induction can be categorized as an integrated approach. This method avoids separating international students’ induction from domestic student induction to the greatest extent possible, as the universities believe that the same issues hold for both sets of students.

One large university said they were in the process of restructuring their Freshers’ Week events to eliminate one-off international student activities and replacing them with “a series of events that involve all students - rather than ghettoising students - to assist integration.”

Their concentration on integration focuses on societies and the promotion of activities that started in Freshers’ Week but continues into the rest of the school year, with the goal to “move closer to the norms of the whole community - so it spills over into their academic work and also into their participation in other things... It’s a way of opening doors for them to integrate and not isolate.”

The university said it is focused on providing specific help to certain nationalities, rather than the entire international student body in one go:

“This is the first time for many years we’ve actually tried to look at everything and say: ‘let’s induct every student as best we can for their background’ - we’re thinking more about the cultural side to say, ‘get involved, be a representative,’ and look at them in a different way from all students. All students will be told about representation, but we will target things about, say, Chinese students, and try and get them to be more involved.”

Another large institution which had recently revamped their entire induction procedure decided to focus on the experience of all advanced entry students, rather than just international students.

“We’re in a situation where far more than 50% of our students come in advanced entry... people from FE colleges, who obviously have a different academic culture. It’s the same issue about helping them adapt to their academic culture - we don’t necessarily have to look at it from an international student’s point of view - it’s an issue for the advanced entry students.”

The institution said that as part of their new engagement strategy information about representative opportunities now comes from both the student association and the institution.

Another university with a high proportion of international students abandoned targeted international student orientations when home students asked “why international students get this when [we] don’t”. At this institution, orientation and related activities such as airport meet-and-greets are open to all students and include over 300 events which involve a team of 200 people. International





# STUDENTS WITHOUT BORDERS

students, the university said, are no longer considered as a separate group.

“In some respects, we’ve moved beyond the identifying of peripheral groups and all this stuff with international students... We’re at the stage where induction is the same for absolutely everybody.

I would need to be convinced that the needs of international students are specific to

them to demand extra input. That’s maybe a dangerous thing to do... in terms of equalling the playing field, I’m absolutely convinced about disabled students – I’m convinced about many students in smaller groups.

But when it comes to the international students – I’ve had no evidence that they feel that they’re marginalised...”

## Summary

This section of the mapping exercise examined what information institutions and associations provided to international students on learning and teaching opportunities during induction.

Universities and students’ associations were asked what type of information was provided to international students during institution-wide inductions and how much of that information was related to representation opportunities. Based on their responses, the induction methods employed were broken down into three types: mixed, targeted and integrated approaches.

The research found that the most common international student orientation method is the mixed approach, in which international students participated in both general student inductions and specific international student sessions. Institutions said their induction information focuses on international students’ welfare issues, not learning and teaching representation. Some associations do present information on learning and teaching representation opportunities during these induction sessions, and receive positive responses, though there are mixed opinions about whether interest is translated into engagement.

International students at universities using the targeted approach take part in a series of international student-specific events prior to general student induction. Universities undertaking this approach were just as reluctant as those using the mixed approach to give information on representation issues, and for the same reasons. Associations which took part in these sessions reported mixed results regarding their interactions with international students at these inductions.

As part of the integrated approach, international students are offered few or no targeted sessions and instead take part in the same induction processes alongside domestic students. Reasons given for employing the integrated approach were that domestic students have asked for the same treatment as international students and that the issues faced by international students are similar to other pre-entry students.



## Chapter Four

### Issues and Involvement

As part of the project’s aim of mapping the engagement of international students in representative structures, universities and students’ associations were asked to identify the issues raised at course, school and institutional levels that specifically relate to international students.

Study participants were also asked about the level of involvement of international students at each of the representation levels, how participation levels were determined and whether there was any effort to specifically recruit international students to become representatives.

The final section of this chapter explores the involvement of international students in students’ associations.

#### Issues raised by international students

At the course level, many associations and universities explained that the issues raised are broadly the same for international students as domestic students. When international student issues are discussed, they frequently deal with concerns over plagiarism, language provision and the lack of course integration.

Study participants generally agreed that there are few international student-specific issues raised at the school level.

It was at the top level of the representation structure, most often in committee meetings and working groups, where matters specifically related to international students are frequently advanced. Plagiarism and language provision top the list of international student-specific issues raised at this level; other examples include student visa changes, assessment, curriculum, integration, exam timetabling, recruitment and retention.

One university cited an issue that was specific not only to international students but a particular cohort of students:

“Some cultures, especially China, do not recognise disabilities. So when you are trying to help someone that could have dyslexia, there is a cultural issue in there; there is a lot of complexity that has to be carefully managed - not causing an offense to the individual while at the same time trying to demonstrate you are actually supporting them.”

Another institution said issues faced by international students did not warrant recurring agenda items, but were raised as needed, giving the recent changes to UK immigration rules as an example.

One university said they put no focus on international student learning and teaching issues at the institutional level, saying that it is in the area of welfare where international students’ issues differed most from that of domestic students.

“The issues they raise are not dissimilar from the issues that all students raise in terms of complaints about assessment overload, issues regarding plagiarism and its prevention and just general complaints about the quality of teaching and timetabling concerns.”

However, this institutional representative, citing the Anglo-centric focus of the university’s curriculum, said more needed to be done to take their international students’ background into account: “[We are] trying to get built into the institution quality assurance processes - that, when things come up for review, we ask questions about the curriculum in terms of its equity”.

At another institution, staff said the international aspect is considered as part of all issues raised at the institutional level.





*“I don’t think there would be a separate focus on any group of students – be it international students or disabled students or direct entrants. The assumption is, whenever we consider anything to do with the student experience, that we are inclusive...”*

The staff member cited plagiarism as an example of an international student issue that is discussed at this level.

*“But then we’ve gone on to broaden the discussions and make sure our policies apply to all students.”*

One association said their university was reluctant to treat international students’ learning and teaching issues separately from domestic student concerns. It was unclear to the students’ association where this message was coming from, but it was seen as problematic.

*“There was a train of thought with regard to international students that we shouldn’t be treating international students in any differently from home students... But they are different – they need that extra help. What does that say, of wherever that information is coming from, about how we actually help and support international students engage in university in general, let alone the students’ association.”*

## **Involvement by international students**

### **a) Levels of involvement in representational structures**

When the mapping project began, it was expected that participants would report that the involvement of international students in representation structures was lower than their overall proportion on campus.

Instead, the research revealed that almost every institution and students’ association believed the percentage of international

students involved matched or surpassed their overall percentage of the student population. However, whether this is based on the reality of the situation is difficult to assess.

Institutions generally assessed international student participation as healthy, with one describing international students as being “more vocal than the domestic students” and another describing international students as “pro-active – they’re willing and keen to get involved”.

One association which reported high participation numbers said the number of international students involved would be higher were it not for the lack of course integration.

*“We’ve got all these programmes with international students on, and only one or two of them can be a class rep. There might be even greater inclusion if they were evenly spread throughout university.”*

Another large university pointed to the high level of international student representation at the sabbatical level and said because of this international student involvement “kind of percolates down through the system.”

For one students’ association, the question was not whether international students are engaging, but why:

*“We do have a strong international presence within learning and teaching and the association as a whole. However, it’s fragmented in different ways – you’ll have a lot of international students from the same school, but maybe we won’t catch any international students from another school.”*

Of the few institutions that said they did not know what the level of international student involvement was, one said they did not want to know.

*“I don’t think we’d want to keep that data – it’s ghettoisation... What we really want to know, if you’re an international student with a particular set of circumstances, can we do something better to help you.”*

A student association at a different university also emphasised the importance of integration when it came to learning and teaching issues.

*“The agenda for international students is to promote more integration and cultural awareness for all our students. We work on the social space that we’re providing and cultural activities that we’re putting on – I can’t say I’ve had any thoughts about their involvement in representation or learning and teaching.”*

Another university also cited integration, as opposed to representation, as their first priority.

*“The big issue we have, as does everybody else with international students, is getting them to engage with the Scottish population. Our Chinese person will go home with a French friend, an Indian friend, several Chinese friends - but they won’t really talk to any Scottish people. Academically, we’ve tried to mix groups up, or keep a few groups separate, so you see the difference in cultures – but from a personal level they don’t seem to engage. That is the same throughout the UK – it’s the one complaint that always comes from international students.”*

The institution said that their international students do not “present” differently to domestic students when it comes to learning and teaching issues.

*“We’ve got a number of staff who’ve done some active research work with [international] student groups - either trying mixing the groups or not mixing the groups at various stages during the module... they feedback*

*directly and immediately about what they like and dislike immediately, but it doesn’t come up with the system... they seem content, happy with the response they get.”*

### **b) Methods of determining levels of involvement**

Despite almost universal agreement among associations and institutions that the proportion of international students taking up course representative positions matches or exceeds their overall make-up within the student population, almost no association had the ability to back these assertions up with data, as the course representative details received from universities was limited to name and course.

Associations did give anecdotal examples of how they determined participation levels of international students. One student association said there appeared to be high participation “purely because if I get stopped in the university by a class rep, quite often it will be an international class rep.”

Some associations said they gauged international involvement by the number of students that take part in course representative training sessions or the annual course representative conference. Most associations did not elaborate on whether this method of assessing international participation is misleading, for, as one students’ association said, “more international students come for training, compared to other class reps”.

Because associations are tasked with running their course representative systems, most institutions do not track international student participation in those structures, but did cite anecdotal evidence of participation levels.

One university reported that involvement is healthy because a third of their course representative awards that year were





handed out to international students, and that international students who are course representatives participated heavily in the online class forum.

✦ There was only one example of an association or university tracking international student participation in the class representative system. The university's quality enhancement team worked closely with the association to ensure students' participation in class representative training, a requirement if the student wished to see the position noted on their academic transcript. Although the same details were provided to this association as in the rest of associations in Scotland, the university broke down the numbers of international students who had undergone course representative training – numbers they found to be slightly higher than the overall international student population. The university said that with the implementation of a new student records system in a few years' time, they would be able to drill down even deeper to determine which nationalities were taking up the class representative training. ✦

Only one association, which had hundreds of course representatives, specifically stated they were interested in getting more background information about their course representatives.

### c) Involvement of international students in students' associations

As part of the study, student officers and staff were asked what opportunities exist for international students to engage within the association, and how well international students are represented within these associations. Although some posts such as sports society or commercial services officers will rarely get involved in international learning and teaching issues, it is useful to ascertain what opportunities existed for international students to engage, and to what degree.

The most common engagement opportunity is via international societies and societies for particular nationality groups.

The relationship of the societies and the students' association was highlighted by one of the focus groups. When participants were asked if the international or national societies were part of the students' association, the only student who said "yes" was an International Student Officer.

Associations at larger universities with international student officers cited these posts as the primary opportunities for international students to engage primary as international students, though only one university reported that this position sits on the association's executive board, which takes part in institution-wide committees.

Other institutions reported that their previous international student officer dropped away after getting elected to the position, or that the post often goes unfilled.

Students' associations were not able to give numerical evidence for international student participation in their association, but gave plenty of anecdotal examples, describing international students as being "quite vocal" in council and citing how active their international societies are.

✦ Two universities are currently involved in an NUS project titled "Internationalising students' unions in higher education: A strategic framework and audit toolkit for students' unions". Through the use of a self-audit tool, associations are able to measure and track their progress in engaging with international students through their work on such key areas as democracy and participation, representation and communication. For more information, visit <http://bit.ly/cntWwJ>. ✦

## Summary

In this chapter, associations and universities identified the types of learning and teaching issues raised at course, school and institutional levels specifically related to international students.

At the course level, the issues were primarily found to be the same as they were for domestic students. When specific issues were raised, they included plagiarism, language provision and lack of course integration. Similar issues are also raised at the institutional level; participants said few international student-specific issues are raised at the school level.

A few universities said international student and domestic student issues are not dealt with separately at the institutional level; one association reported that they have picked up on this approach by their university and see it as problematic.

Most associations and institutions perceived that the proportion of international students that are course reps matched or exceeded their proportion of the general student body. The reasons given for this were varied, including observations that international students are "vocal" and "pro-active".

A few study participants said they were unconcerned about monitoring the level of engagement of international students in learning and teaching representation, as they were more focused on issues surrounding integration.

Almost all associations, despite reporting healthy involvement of international students as course representatives, are unable to track these numbers due to a lack of detailed information provided by the institution. Only one association volunteered that they have thought previously about the value of having detailed information about class representatives.

Both associations and institutions assess the level of involvement through anecdotal means, such as involvement in course representative training, interactions with international students or numbers of international students who receive course representation awards.

Opportunities for international students to engage with students' associations specifically around international issues are available through cultural and international societies, and through International Student Officer posts. Associations gave anecdotal evidence of international student involvement in their structures, but cited problems in filling and retaining students in these posts.

Focus group participants said they did not see these nationality or international societies as part of the wider students' association.





# Chapter Five

## Barriers

In order to further the understanding of learning and teaching engagement opportunities for international students, mapping project participants were asked what obstacles exist for these students to engage in representative structures, and whether they know enough about how the representative structure works.

The obstacles cited were categorised as language difficulties and cultural difference, expectations about the role of the association in student life and time pressures.

Universities and associations were also asked if particular groups of international students were less engaged than others. They reported that Chinese students and, to a smaller degree Indian students, were less engaged than their international counterparts. Study participants, when asked why they believed this to be the case, cited cultural and educational differences, and resistance to participation in democratic structures.

When asked what was being done to overcome these obstacles to engagement, institutions and associations found that “evangelising” to international students about the benefits of engaging in learning and teaching representation was the most effective way to increase participation.

### Barriers to involvement for general international population

#### a) Language difficulties and cultural differences

Many students’ associations and universities cited international students’ lack of confidence in their English skills as a reason they did not take up roles as course representatives. One HEI pointed to research that indicated international students deferred to native English speakers, “even if the native

speaker is less able and less gifted and has less personality or charisma”.

A focus group participant agreed with this assessment: “Your first barrier when you get here is your language. After you can say something, you can use the language to deal with communication.”

The difficulties international students faced in speaking English, and the barrier this presents to becoming a course representative, was linked to the issue of self-confidence.

One university said that some international students with poor English language skills were unlikely to feel confident enough to represent the views of their classmates, a confidence their domestic classmates might exhibit.

““ Would a group of native speakers select a non-native speaker to be their representative if they felt unsafe about that potential representative’s linguistic ability to express the group view? ””

This view was shared by two focus group participants. One felt that the lack of integration with the domestic student population affects international students’ opportunities to become course representatives.

““ I think [international students] are afraid that, even if they volunteer, it is very hard to get votes from the home students. For the three months I’ve been here, I don’t see the international students mingle with the Scottish students, I see cliques. One group is international students hanging around together, and the other clique is Scottish, so they don’t interact. ””

Another focus group participant echoed these concerns.



““ When you compare international students to Scottish people, you find that it’s easy for Scottish people to make friends with other Scottish people. But for international students, you kind of find it harder to make friends with them. So maybe during voting for class reps, you get a majority of people voting for Scottish people than the international students. ””

Study participants often made a linkage between language skills and confidence in working within the representative system. The issues, according to one student association representative, were “separate but come hand-in-hand.”

““ You can have perfect English and still not have the cultural background – you can have the cultural background and not have good enough English.

If we can get them to the point where they understand that the structure allows them to question, and the language then allows them to be confident [in] the way they will get their point across – because even with fluent English speakers, the thought of not making the right question or the question being wrong is often a deterrent in engaging with any process. ””

This student association officer came from an institution where the proportion of international course representatives was perceived to be high. Around half the course representatives were described as international students at this institution, while only a third of the student population was international.

But the officer found that participation in the course representation structure is not an accurate means of evaluating the engagement of international students in learning and teaching, particular in terms of

“training and participation”. The officer gave an example of a talk she gave to international students on why they should become learning and teaching representatives.

““ It took an hour of explaining that they could be part of the process, half an hour of explaining about the process, and 15 minutes to convince them they had the time to do it. The structure isn’t set up to allow international students to feel confident enough that when they engage, they’ll be spending their time wisely, and they’ll not be targeted, and it will not come back on them. ””

Another students’ association officer acknowledged the difficulty in explaining the representation system at Scottish universities.

““ Our biggest challenge is communicating what a class rep is, and what it does... I think we have to tell international students that they can actually change their learning.

International students are very engaged with working hard and studying hard – that’s why they’ve come here - and our big challenge is to say to them, you have a stake in your learning, and you can be a part of the change process. Getting the right message across – that’s our big challenge. Showing them what they can achieve as a class rep, and why being involved with the students’ association will make their time here better. ””

#### b) Expectations of the students’ association

International students’ expectations of what associations should provide was another perceived barrier to international student involvement. To illustrate this point, one institutional staff member cited the kind of activities a student union in India took part in.





“ At Calcutta University the students organised a demonstration... they were pushing for a pay rise for the teachers, because they felt that the teachers had to get a second job which had an impact on the overall teaching and learning experience. ”

A student association selected an example much closer than India.

“ French students are used to student politics being very radical – some are frustrated that ours aren’t like that, and some are pleased. In France, involvement with teaching and learning matters might not be very direct for students. They don’t understand what the students’ association does here, they don’t understand the fact that we have one national union.

In Germany, likewise. There is less of a student life in terms of societies and they don’t understand about the students’ association because it’s not normal in Germany to have many students’ societies. ”

Another student association found that students coming from backgrounds where participation was encouraged played a role in whether all students, international or domestic, engaged in representation.

“ If the student body are also encouraged that they can change things and their opinion is valid, then they are going to get involved. If there is a tradition where engaging in students’ unions is a bad thing, then they don’t get involved. ”

Two of the international students who took part in the focus group spoke about the role expectations played in the decision to engage. One participant said that their view of the association was the union bar. It is “a place to have a party. In China we don’t have that. We feel unfamiliar... we have a

different student association. Here is more independent. It hasn’t been shown to us, to let us know how to be a member of the student association.”

Another Chinese participant commented on the differences in the role of associations in China and the UK.

“ We don’t raise problems to some reps... We focus more on our relationship... If we mention [the] problem to our [lecturer], they will change their style to teaching us. It’s very informal. We will recommend what we want, and they will deal with us. We will get faster results.

But here there is a hierarchy. We need to know rules, how do things work here, and get used to here and take time to understand how they work. ”

However, course representative systems were not uniformly unfamiliar to international students. Focus group participants from Botswana, Poland and Malaysia all related previous experiences of course representation, whether in earlier university study or high school.

### c) Time and work pressures

The lack of time available due to study or work pressures also was presented as a barrier international student involvement in representation systems.

One institutional staff member said international post-graduate students would be “less likely to get involved because they’re only here for a year and they’ve got to focus on getting their Masters.” Another referred to their own experiences to explain why post-graduates did not engage: “They’re here on a very short time-frame, with a very specific task in mind... When I did my own post-graduate year, I was there to get a

Masters – it was a very focused year. You didn’t do very much else... except ensure that you got it.”

The pressures financial hardship placed on international students was also cited as a barrier. One institution weighed this barrier against the reward of engagement:

“ A lot [of international students] are under pressure of work, and it’s this business about bang for the buck – if I do representation, what’s in it for me? We thought about doing accreditation, giving extra points – or certificates – but I don’t think the students see enough in it for them.

That’s part of our problem – and post-credit crunch, when employment is going to be even more difficult, it will tend to make students think they have to work part-time, and they won’t have enough time to do these other things like representation. ”

A focus group participant said that, although the need to work outweighed the benefits of becoming a course rep, international students who were at university for a longer period of time would be more likely to get involved.

“ Most other students here are doing their undergraduate but students like me who are doing their Masters have one year to be in university. And even for the one year they have two or three days a week to do at university. Then they have to go back home or to a hostel, they have to work for their accommodation, they have a lot of things to be concentrating on.

If they have more time to stay in university, if not in the first year, than in the second or third year, they can, like other people... get involved. ”

This view - that length of study overcame cultural barriers - was repeated by another

focus group participant who was studying for a full four-year degree.

“ People get used to things. I was very focused on my course, my essays, and exams, trying to do the best academically. I had language difficulties. That was the transition period. After that I could open up and do something more than this, but it took me one year. ”

One focus group participant questioned the barrier that time pressures placed on being a course representative. The student believed that part-time work impacts on international students’ abilities to take part in other association activities, such as societies, but work commitments do not place undue time pressure on becoming a representative “because we have meetings once a month”.

The focus group participant added that international students should not “restrict education to just studies and academics only. Education is what you learn from your experiences and what’s happening in your environment.”

### Barriers to involvement of specific groups of international students in the representative system

When asked about particular groups of students, there was broad agreement among associations and universities that Chinese students were not engaging with representative structures relative to their numbers on campus. Similar but less frequent concerns were raised over the participation of Indian students.

### a) Cultural and educational differences

When asked why Chinese students at their institutions did not engage as learning





and teaching representatives, one large institution's representative suggested that the "Chinese mindset" did not lend itself to be critical of others in open forums.

*“ You want a good effective student representation committee... you want the students to be quite robust and say: ‘the learning and teaching could be better if you did this or that’... culturally they couldn't bring themselves to do that. ”*

The institutional representative believed Indian students had a similar aversion to this kind of criticism.

Another institutional representative said Chinese students were “a bit more reserved” and “a bit more reluctant to be vocal than other groups.”

*“ They keep their opinions a bit more to themselves and they don't necessarily want to influence anybody with their opinions... The Chinese students tend to not be terribly positive or terribly negative and they are not keen to hugely recommend [the institution] because they put comments on: ‘it's not up to me whether somebody chooses here or not, it's up to them how they spend their money’. ”*

The institutional staff member did not link this attitude to Indian students, however, describing them as “more likely to be glowing and very positive but give you constructive feedback as well.”

One association highlighted what it saw as unwillingness by Chinese and Indian students at their university to express criticism about learning and teaching. The association gave an example of a large cohort of Indian students complaining to the institution about their course, but only after they graduated and via an unsigned letter, rather than addressing their concerns to their course representative during their course.

*“ They were concerned that, in some way, putting their name to it might be held as a criticism of the school in future. They didn't even make the rep that aware of how unhappy they were. The basis of it was that they were culturally unwilling to stand up and say they were unhappy, because they were concerned that they'd be making their criticisms felt to the people who'd be marking their work. ”*

The same association said that Chinese students were also reluctant to be critical of their lecturers, citing an example of UK students and staff who had met with incoming Chinese students:

*“ They introduce them to methodologies and things to do with coming to study here. One of the things they talk about is student representation. I've heard that they find it almost impossible to explain to students that criticising those who are teaching you is a desirable and necessary part of what they will do here – it's a completely alien concept to Chinese students in their late teens or early twenties – it's outwith their experienced up to that point. ”*

This unwillingness to be critical of lecturers by Chinese students was considered by one institution to extend to students from the Middle East as well: “If there is some kind of open forum to which students are invited, “come along and give your views”, they wouldn't go. They would regard that as improper or not their place or, not exactly disrespectful, but it just wouldn't be their thing.”

The institution said that the lack of a feedback culture back home was partly the reason for this reluctance to be critical, but also highlighted the difference in learning culture for East Asian students.

*“ What this research is establishing is that they have very different notions of what it means to learn well and what it means to teach and that we must understand those in different ways. ”*

So what you discover within this is, for example, there are certain notions about the notion of the respect that young people and children and expected to show towards their elders. In this respect a teacher is a father like figure... the piety of a son towards a father in a very traditional context of 1000 years ago. You're supposed to show this to teachers too and this means you behave very differently to teachers, and so challenging them in certain ways is really not the done thing.

*But this is not within a culture that says you can never challenge, it's just when you do it and how you do it. That tends to mean that you would interact with a teacher outside of the class or after the class rather than publically within the context of the class. ”*

#### **b) Issues with democratic methods**

Institutions and associations also felt that the absence of a democratic culture in China contributed to their underrepresentation. One institution put this in the context of what value Chinese students put on the representation experience:

*“ There is a huge pressure on them and the fear of failure is paramount. Their focus is: ‘I must get a good degree, good grades, because that's affecting my employment,’ and I don't think they don't buy into a democratic principle of the value of contributing to the community as being a plus point that an employer would see. ”*

At another university, the student association officer spoke to Chinese students who were not taking part in elections, who responded that they did not understand why they were

voting, as they did not view their education as something they could shape.

*“ Quite a few Chinese students said, ‘no, we're here to be provided a service by the university, to learn and to leave – so why would these people would be any different from our lecturers, the porters... we don't understand – why is this not an interview process? ”*

The students' association officer added that Indian students held a similar view.

Another institution agreed that the lack of a democratic culture at home meant poorer participation in such structures when they studied abroad. The association said they did engage in volunteer opportunities, but they were not engaging with the students' association.

#### **Boosting international student involvement**

When asked what was being done to boost involvement of international students, the most commonly expressed action was the evangelising efforts by students' associations.

Universities commonly reported that their associations promoted the course representation system. The evangelist approach taken by one association was described as officers going “round the students and saying in an informal way, get involved, be a class rep, I'll support you – the support network is there and it's worth getting involved in.”

Another association said that research indicated that going out and talking to people was one of the biggest ways to spread the word about engagement opportunities.

One university recognised the effort their association made in engaging international





students, and added that students were better suited to get other students to engage.

*“I think they can do it ten times better than us, so we’d rather support and give them some contribution. They really drove that, from their point of view, to make sure there was representation from international students this year. Long may it continue.”*

Door-knocking was given as the most common example of how to effectively evangelise to students. One association said they visited student housing for the first few weeks of every semester because of the high concentration of international students living there. This association put particular emphasis on the need for their international student activists to take part.

*“It’s quite good that we’ve already got people who are international students when you knock on doors, just to let [them] know what we’re here for – we’re fighting to lower your rents, or to make sure they don’t go any higher. So having international students there is quite important – it shows they can get involved in things that people who aren’t from the UK originally have got involved in. Personal contact seems to matter.”*

Another student association officer backed this up: “The fact that I’m an international student makes them realise that they can engage with student politics.”

✈ One association used the word “world” instead of “international” to make domestic students feel events were not aimed solely at non-UK students. ✈

The officers of this same student association also attended social events such as a bar’s “International Café”. They reported more success at engaging and recruiting international students to take part in

association activities at these events than during formal induction sessions.

Other associations said they attempted to overcome barriers to international student involvement by working closely with international student advisors and support services. At one institution, this involved attending training events for international students who acted as university ambassadors and pushing course representation and school leader opportunities: “But it’s not a specific target for class reps, it’s a holistic association target of trying to get more international students engaged.”

✈ Institutions also offered ways of overcoming disengagement, such as providing better training for international class representatives and making class representation more attractive by stressing its effect on future employability, a suggestion endorsed by some focus group participants.

Some institutions and students are making efforts to address under-representation of specific groups of international students as well. For one institution, this involves training lecturers who have a large numbers of Chinese students about cultural differences in education structures. ✈

Another association said a Nigerian and Chinese student conducted separate research projects on how their association could better attract students from their own communities.

The two Chinese focus group participants said that older Chinese students acting as mentors would help them feel more engaged: “People should know how the same experience can give good advice for international students. They understand what happened to themselves.”

## Summary

In this chapter, the mapping project examined the obstacles that international students generally and specific groups in particular faced in engaging with learning and teaching representation structures.

The most common examples of barriers to the general international student population were language difficulties, cultural differences, expectations about the role of students’ associations and time pressures.

When asked if particular groups of students were less engaged than others, there was broad agreement among associations and universities that Chinese students did not engage with representative structures relative to their numbers on campus. The reason cited were primarily cultural and educational differences and issues over democratic participation.

Similar but less frequent concerns were raised over the participation of Indian students.

The most frequently mentioned method for overcoming barriers to engagement was though face-to-face contact, which was attempted through door knocking at international student halls, attending international student events and working closely with international student advisors. Institutions also cited these activities by associations as the most effective way in getting international students to engage in all types of activities.





# Chapter Six

## Feedback

International students' opportunities to engage in learning and teaching enhancement are not limited to becoming a course representative or sitting on institutional committees. Engagement opportunities present themselves to international students daily through conversations, filling out surveys, participating in focus groups or through informal conversation with lecturers, course leaders, sabbaticals, principals and support staff.

This final research section explores the methods by which international students give feedback which enhances their learning and teaching experience. The research examined the opportunities for international students to be heard through the above methods and others, while also looking at ways that institutions and associations report back the results of the feedback to international students.

### Formal methods for students to give feedback

#### a) Surveys

The most common opportunity for students to give feedback was through surveys, and this applied to both domestic and international students. Indeed questionnaires were believed to be such a common method of collecting data - "survey-mania", as one student association described it - that institutions and associations said students are facing survey exhaustion.

One small students' association described the demand for survey responses as "buzzing - you can't go into the library without getting asked for feedback. I know it's a good thing compared to a situation where students are never asked about anything, but when the quality of what we're getting back isn't necessarily that much worth using."

The same students' association said this exhaustion was also partly due to the same questions being asked over and over again, year after year. The responses were the same every year, but so was the funding available, so nothing ever changed.

One institution was working to avoid questionnaire overload by strictly controlling which outside organisations collected data and by co-ordinating what data was collected by on-campus staff, so surveys were not conducted too close together.

Another concern expressed about surveys was whether those answering the questions were ever told what the results were, and what was done to address their concerns.

*“They never get to know what it all meant. What did it all add up to? What happened with it? The worse thing you can do is conduct a survey and then not tell people exactly what you did with that information and what was the outcome.”*

Only one students' association officer said that they attempt to obtain learning and teaching information via surveys. The students' association ask a series of questions to their course representatives and post-graduate students through their virtual learning environment: "They're all based on teaching and learning issues. That's because I run them - if someone else ran them, it would be something else. We do tend to have a tick box if you're an international student to get in good demographic..."

#### b) Generic course evaluations

Students at HEIs are asked to fill out a course evaluation at least once a year. Although international students do fill out generic course evaluations, none were asked to

indicate if they were an international student.

One institution said that anonymous feedback was collected, electronically scanned and sent back to the schools:

The course co-ordinators are asked to comment on them - the heads of school then have to comment on them - they then go to the academic standards committees. You cannot tell, from those results, who is international and who is not - but nevertheless, the feedback is there.

Institutions reported that there was no direct way of separating international student feedback from domestic student feedback, as there was no tickbox or other indicator on the form asking if the student was an international student.

This inability to drill down into questionnaire data was seen as problematic for one institution, which recommended the schools adopt methods of "capturing the diversity of your students."

Alternately, one focus group participant said that general evaluation forms were not problematic.

*“It is great to have some things just for international students, but what they are doing on our course is just having general evaluation forms, it's a great thing because it encourages us international students to know that you are part of this whole thing.”*

Although most institutions did not explain why they did not have a way of indentifying international students on these forms, one university said that among certain courses the number of international students is low enough that a tickbox would make anonymity impossible.

Another institution that recently set up

touchscreen kiosks to record feedback from students was open to the idea of recording international data:

*“Having a touch-screen is a bit like an ATM, but free-standing, wireless-networked, and you can put on any questions you want. There's no reason why we shouldn't have some area specifically for international students: 'are you an international student - yes' - well, you get a whole set of questions about you.”*

Although international student opinion was not often directly sought via course evaluations, many institutions reported being able to gauge such opinion using indirect methods.

A few institutions commented that when undergraduate or postgraduate courses were dominated by international students, it was possible to ascertain feedback on learning and teaching issues specific to international students. Another institution said international feedback could also be derived from reading comments that appear on course evaluations, some of which would raise issues from an anonymous but clearly international perspective.

#### c) International student barometer

One large institution said they conducted a number of surveys, though they did not break down the data on international students. "That's why we went for the International Student Barometer."

I-Graduate's International Student Barometer (ISB) was reported by participants as the primary method by which universities surveyed their international students. The ISB tracks different areas of international students' academic, learning, living and support experiences year-on-year within







the institution and against the UK and international benchmarks.

One university said it broke down the data by school and fed it back to different courses in order to determine if there was cause for concern about their international students' experience.

Institutions that commented on the ISB were generally positive about its usefulness. One institution said that they spent time "thinking of actions that arise from it," while another said it "had the dual benefit of giving us not only the issue but rank[ing] it so that we can begin to do a bit of prioritisation."

Two institutional representatives raised concerns about the usefulness of the barometer. One institution said the ISB was "not useful":

*"We get this glossy report which tells you that you're better than everybody else or not as good as everybody else, when the statistics show only 1% difference. As an example - our sports facilities were rated quite highly - but we don't have sports facilities. There was a complaint about our visa advice - and when we went into the data, 80% of the people who complained were Germans, who don't need visas - they shouldn't come for advice."*

*It's difficult for students - it's their opinion, but they're not sure what they're giving their opinion on."*

Another institution also reported problems with the ISB as returning results from international students who were not subject to visa restrictions complaining about visas. The institution responded to this by "having staff reflect on how the information they are seeing in the ISB actually compares with what they're seeing in the feedback that they're getting."

#### d) International student surveys

Only one institution sends out specific learning and teaching surveys to their international students. The institution conducts an online survey which asks questions on issues such as language support and essay-writing skills.

More common are general international students' surveys, which include learning and teaching issues questions as part of wider survey on the entire international student experience. One small university conducted a survey of international students in late winter which covered a number of topics, including learning and teaching issues. Another institution said they sent surveys to their international students at the end of the school year.

International student feedback on learning and teaching issues is also received via other non-learning and teaching surveys, such as induction and student services questionnaires.

#### e) Focus groups

Study participants said focus groups are another common method for eliciting international student feedback on learning and teaching issues. One institution said that the use of focus groups for obtaining information about "various aspects of student experience" is increasing.

Although focus groups were described by most universities as being held on an institutional level or involving the international office, one university said focus groups at the course level are a way to make sure the students from a particular nationality could be open and their views are represented. "We can pursue things and get some sense of where they are being a bit too reticent or a bit to shy and explore some of those issues."

#### f) Open forums

Institutions and students' associations said international student opinion on learning and teaching issues was also taken in by international student forums. A similar postgraduate student forum at the institution also obtained learning and teaching feedback from international students, as there are a large proportion of non-domestic students at this university taking post-graduate courses.

✈ One institution took the idea of the international student forum further, shaping it into regular but more formal groups which involve the university's senior management.

According to the students' association at this university, the result was that international student complaints were taken more seriously: "It's a bit easier on us, because if we put out a report, it sometimes gets second-guessed, but when the senior management of the university are listening, the students are saying exactly the same things to them as they did to us." ✈

#### Informal methods of gathering feedback

In addition to more formal, organised methods, informal feedback was cited as a major factor in obtaining information from international students.

One institution said the following about less formal methods:

*"[We received] feedback from students coming directly to speak to us here in the office, or other staff members, or the effective learning service. Students informally will speak to academic staff. Alongside that you're monitoring, across the board, student*

*retention, withdrawal, completion rates. You often have to tease out information to see if it's affecting a particular group of students... if it's an international student issue or if it's a general cohort of students."*

At the postgraduate level, informal feedback to lecturers was given as a primary example of how international students can give feedback about learning and teaching issues, as "there is more of a tutorial relationship."

*"If I am doing doctoral supervision I don't really have to check out whether the students have understood the feedback I've given them on the chapter draft because three weeks later that chapter draft comes back with revision, so if they did not understand what I said or couldn't respond to it then that's very clear and we can pick that up again."*

A focus group participant said that their lecturer asks questions about the students' progress every few weeks: "That is quite helpful if you are having a problem you can discuss it with her."

Other examples given of less formal feedback mechanisms are students' interaction on language courses and with international support staff, which is fed back through informal conversation between departments. Institutions said that the representatives at alumni events or who handled airport pick-ups would informally feed back questions and comments they received, while two other universities said feedback was also returned from recruiting officers when they returned from trips abroad.

Associations said they receive international student feedback through less formal methods as well, such as conversations at society meetings or course representative training.





## Institutions closing the feedback loop

Participants were also asked how international students were able to determine the impact of their feedback. It was broadly reported that responding to feedback was not done as well as it could have been, and was a barrier for students to take further action in giving feedback on their learning experience, but there were some examples cited in how the feedback loop was closed.

The most common method was through schemes such as 'You Said, We Did', where institutions would highlight in posters, emails, student newspapers articles and online what feedback was received, and how it was acted upon.

Another method of closing the loop took place within an institution's school forum which is not part of the association but is set up by the director of academic courses.

These forums were described by the institution as:

*“...an opportunity for students to actually say what their bit is, rather than having any particular axe to grind or political furrow to make. If they have a issue with library opening hours or the book stock or whatever, they can raise it there, and they will try to resolve it or if they cant resolve it they will have a good reason or rationale about why something can't be done.”*

One university said they highlight what changes were made due to past feedback when they contact international students to take part in future surveys.

The inability for students to see the effect their feedback has was the primary reason universities reported difficulty in getting further feedback. One institution said

students would not be as unwilling to fill our surveys if they knew what happened to the results:

*“The worse thing you can do is conduct a survey and then not tell people exactly what you did with that information and what was the outcome of it. I suspect that students feel what's the point in doing this because it's not going to improve anything.”*

The other major barrier to eliciting feedback from international students was the fear of reprisal. One student association said that “students feel the university will look badly on them if they are open about their views about the academic side of things, so they don't want to be identified or be too vocal about a specific academic issue because they think their marks might suffer as a result.

## Summary

Outside of taking on roles as course representatives, the ability for international students to engage in their learning and teaching experience relies largely on the feedback they provide.

Universities and associations revealed that the most common opportunities for international students to give feedback are through surveys. This feedback method was considered by some institutions and associations to be overused, leading to complaints by associations and the staff of one institution managing which outside organisations could survey their student population.

The most frequently mentioned method of obtaining international student opinion via surveys was through I-Graduate's International Student Barometer. Institutions generally reported positively about the results they received from the ISB, though a few institutions found the data to be unreliable.

Other methods of obtaining international student feedback was through the use of focus groups, open forums and informal methods, including student conversations with lecturers, tutors and international support staff.

Institutions generally reported that although getting the results of feedback communicated to international students could be done better, they did make efforts through “You Said, We Did” campaigns and speaking at student forums.

The inability to communicate what was done with the feedback taken from international students and fear of reprisal were cited as the primary reasons why international students did not give feedback.



# Chapter Seven

## Recommendations



The next step of the project is to take the findings and look at ways to overcome the barriers identified to learning and teaching engagement of international students. Although the research has focused on higher education in Scotland, there are a number of areas where colleges could usefully take on the recommendations as well.

Given the diversity of higher education in Scotland, there are few one-size-fits-all solutions. Universities and associations are encouraged to find opportunities to take the findings of this research project forward and apply it to their local circumstances.

Some recommendations that can be made to HE and FE institutions include better collaboration by students' associations and universities in sharing good practice, and better linking of international student societies to the work of associations and amongst each other.

Creating a network of international societies, with the help of NUS Scotland's Students Without Borders project worker, would provide an opportunity for international students to share good practice of their own, while building stronger peer networks to help incoming students from abroad and international students already on the ground.

### 1. Improve course representative information

Students' associations reported delays in receiving course representative details. Associations and universities should discuss ways to ensure this information is passed on quickly and the data received is comprehensive. This could also lead to discussions on what information lecturers and course leaders need from associations to quickly and accurately explain the course representative system to their students.

Students' associations should also have methods to track international students involvement in the course representative system to ensure participation is in line with their numbers. Equal opportunities monitoring of the course representative system could be one way to deal with this, and have the added effect of providing institutions and associations with a better idea of who is and is not engaging across the entire student body.

### 2. Communicate better during pre-induction and induction phases

The research found that institutions were generally opposed to sending out information about course representative systems to international students prior to induction for fear of creating information overload. Furthermore, associations said they had few opportunities to send information about the system abroad even if they wished, and students said were unlikely to feel comfortable learning about the representative system until they understood it.

During the induction phase, there was again fear of information overload from universities, and while associations often spoke about the course representative system, it was unclear whether this information translated into engagement by international students.

To address all of these concerns, associations and institutions should examine ways to make information about representative structures brief but clear. The use of non-traditional methods of communications should be encouraged, such as producing podcasts and YouTube videos aimed at incoming international students which include concise and clear explanations of the role students can play in shaping their education. These efforts would have maximum effect if they were tailored to incoming students'

nationality/region and presented by a student from that nationality/region who is already at the institution, preferably one who is also a course representative.

The importance placed on evangelising by associations was a consistent thread throughout the research. Students found it the most effective way to spread the word about all kinds of association activities, and institutions recognised that the student voice was more effective than their own in engaging students. When more association officers leave the office and speak to students, more students engage with the association.

From the moment international students first arrive in Scotland, to when they go through induction, register for classes and go to their first day of class and beyond, associations representatives should be a visible and ongoing presence in international students' lives.

### 3. Evaluate associations' engagement with international students

Students' associations should take part in the NUS Internationalising Your Student Union Audit project (<http://bit.ly/cntWwJ>), and look into other ways of ensuring international student involvement in their activities outside of the international societies. Better connection with these societies by students' association officers would also address the findings that international students who are involved in these societies do not see themselves as involved in the association, an issue that may have wider implications if further research found members of all societies expressed similar views.

There is also the potential for more research on the links students feel with their associations though their participation in societies and with the course representative system.

### 4. Work to overcome barriers to involvement

The research identified barriers to international student involvement, both generally and specifically for certain nationalities. Universities and associations must develop ways to address these barriers, whether it is better explaining the structures and the role of the association.

Ideas for addressing these concerns could include providing incentives for international students become course representatives, whether it be better integration with the domestic student population, modular credit, or financial incentives (which raises further questions about new immigration restrictions that might limit or prevent such incentives).

As associations and universities both agree that Chinese students do not engage as much as their international peers, further research should be undertaken to better understand the barriers to Chinese, and other specific international groups, student engagement identified in the research and how they can be addressed. This could include a re-evaluation of the training methods sparqs provides regarding constructive engagement and individual criticism in regards to different international methods of learning.

Work to provide better support for international students who wish to get involved in the student representation structures should be prioritised, and ideas to boost confidence among international students – for example through peer support from existing international student representatives – should be explored.

### 5. Further develop feedback mechanisms

Informal methods of learning and teaching engagement was highlighted as a primary





# STUDENTS WITHOUT BORDERS

way for international students to engage with learning and teaching enhancement outside of the course representative system, including international student forums.

The Students Without Borders project officer will explore developing these forums throughout Scotland, as they have been identified by universities and associations an excellent opportunity to hear the concerns of international students outside formal structures. Similar effort should be made into exploring ways of closing the feedback loop for international students on short study assignments.

## 6. Adopt sparqs International Student Consultancy service

sparqs is initiating a consultancy service to universities and colleges in Scotland to

encourage best practice in the engagement of international students in quality assurance processes, based on the outcomes of the research project. sparqs will deliver a consultancy to higher and further education institutions and associations. The consultancy will be individually tailored to the needs of the association and institution concerned. Resources may be developed as part of the consultancy which will support other institutions and students' associations to enhance participation for international students.

We believe universities and colleges should be encouraged to take up the international student consultancy service to work with student representatives to ensure best practice for the integration of international students into Scottish institutions.

## Summary

There are many findings in this report that are applicable not just to international students but the domestic student population as well, particularly in terms of feedback overload, confusion over representative structures and how representative roles are promoted and supported.

Addressing these concerns at a wider level may not be necessary in some institutions; in others, they could reshape how the entire student body engages with their educational experience.



# Appendix

## Interview Questions

### Introduction (students' associations)

- Describe the work of the student officer, representative or staff member/ who deals specifically with student representation in quality processes.

### Introduction (institutional staff)

- Explain the role of the university staff person specifically tasked to work with student representatives regarding quality processes.

### What exists at institutional level?

- What committees, such as university, court, etc, do students sit on at the institutional level?
- How are students selected to sit on these committees, reviews, etc?
- What kind of issues related to international students are brought up in these committees?
- What is the level of participation of international students in these committees?
- What committees at this level don't include students?

### What exists at school level?

- Describe the setup of the student representative system at the school level?
- How are students recruited to take part in committees at this level?
- What issues are addressed in these committees?
- What is the level of participation of international students in these committees?
- Are international students sought out to sit on committees?

- What kind of issues related to international students are brought up in these committees?

### What exists at course level?

- Describe the setup of the student representative system at the course level
- What issues are addressed in these committees?
- How are students recruited to take part in committees at this level?
- Are international students sought out to sit on committees?
- Are there any issues brought up specifically related to international students?
- What is the level of participation of international students in these committees? Are there courses of just international students?
- How much connection is there between the students on those committees and the student association?

### Feedback

- What is the level of involvement of international students overall in your institution's feedback processes?
- How does the university get feedback about learning and teaching issues from international students?

### Barriers

- What obstacles exist for international students to get involved in representation structures?
- What are the largest obstacles in receiving feedback from students?



### Good practice

- What new initiatives involving improving student representation on learning and teaching are in the works?

### Pre-induction

- What information is provided to international students about representative structures during the recruitment phase? In what format?

### Induction

- Does the international office provide information to students after they have arrived about representative structures?

### General

- Where do international students with learning and teaching enquires go?
- Do you believe international students are informed enough about how the representative structure works?
- What role do international student societies play in providing information about learning and teaching feedback opportunities?

### Students' association questions

- What does the student association do to encourage participation in feedback structures?
- Describe the level of involvement of international students within the student association. Is there an international officer/committee? How many reps are international students? What is proportion of reps that are international students versus total?
- Do you think student association does enough to ensure international students are involved in quality processes?

- Do you think the student association has the capacity to take to be more involved in quality processes for international students? (Follow-up: What addition resources would you need?)

### Focus group questions

- Describe how you first were approached to become involved as a course representative or within the student association? Was this approach the reason you became involved?
- Why did you become a course rep or get involved with the SRC?
- What are the main difficulties in getting international students voices heard on classroom issues? (language, culture, etc)
- How does your institution get feedback about international issues?
- What reasons do your international students that you know give for not taking part as a course representative or in the student association?
- What role did the educational system you grew up in before arriving in Scotland affect your decision to get involved?

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