# sparqs

student participation in quality scotland

**report of the higher education mapping
exercise of student involvement in quality
assurance & enhancement processes**

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# Contents

involvement in quality assurance & enhancement processes

### What is the sparqs Mapping Exercise?

Over the course of the 2004-05 academic year **sparqs** undertook a series of interviews with institutional staff and students in order to chart how students and their representatives were involved in institutional quality assurance and enhancement processes. In doing so, the aim was to provide information to the higher education sector on the strengths and weaknesses, as well as identifying practice which other institutions in the sector may consider adopting.

### What is meant by involvement?

In a study of student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement process in the Scottish higher education sector, it is first necessary to consider what is meant by involvement. It was found helpful in interviews and discussing these results to talk about involvement on three different and ascending levels:

- **Opportunity:** students are presented with the opportunity to attend meetings and events;

- **Attendance:** students take up those opportunities and attend meetings and events;

- **Engagement:** students not only take up the opportunities presented by the institution, but are able to make an effective contribution.

Engagement can be summed up as a state whereby student representatives are more active than passive, able to be proactive rather than simply reactive, and able to use informal channels effectively. It is, in the following report, assumed that this is what is meant when the higher education sector wishes to see student involvement.

### What happens at the institutional level?

Across the 21 higher education institutions surveyed, there appeared to be broad agreement on the type of committee students should sit on. Across the sector, students were less likely to sit on staff development and audit committees. At newer institutions, students were less likely to have students sitting on the majority of Court or Governing Body committees. Generally speaking, students find sitting on, and making a contribution in, Court or Governing Body meetings harder than any other committee they sit on. In terms of attendance and engagement, the survey has found that around a third of institutions have difficulties with representatives that don't attend meetings. A further third of institutions have students that attend but don't engage with the processes. A final third of institutions have student representatives who attend and are engaged in the processes. It is clear that the difficulties in engaging students do not solely lie with the personalities of the student representatives concerned, but are also due to features and practices that institutions themselves have control over.

### What happens at the faculty level?

Across Scottish institutions there appears to be an expectation that students were generally involved in committees at the "faculty-level". In the majority of institutions the extent of this involvement was defined by the faculty and not the institution. The range of committees that students therefore sit on across Scotland varies significantly depending on whether a given faculty sees it as appropriate to only have students on the main Faculty Board or on sub-committees instead or in addition to. Different institutions had different mechanisms for appointing representatives at this level, some relying upon their students' associations, others drawing their representatives from amongst the course representatives within that faculty. It is clear that, at this level, the vast majority of institutions struggle to engage students and, even in the institutions that have student representatives who attend and engage at institutional committees there is less engagement at the faculty level.

### What happens at the departmental level?

Due to the fact that interviews took place with one member (or a small number) of institutional staff then it was not possible to get a fully-accurate picture of student representation at the departmental level. The survey thus relied upon the general picture of what happened at the departmental level. In order to get more accurate picture, individual mapping exercises would be required within institutions – **sparqs** knows of at least one institution doing this at the current time. Generally speaking, students can make

representations at the department level at a staff-student liaison committee, or equivalently named body.  The level in the department at which this takes place varies between, and within, institutions; such committees may in some departments meet at multiple levels within departments.  Staff-student liaison committees might be organised at the programme, year or module level.  Generally speaking there was little representation at departmental committees beyond this liaison or consultative committee, although this was something which many institutions were in the process of re-visiting when our interviews took place.  A minority of institutions stated that they had difficulties in getting students to come forward as representatives.

## The importance of informal links

A key factor in increasing both attendance and engagement at committees are informal links between student representatives and institutional staff and officers.  Engagement in processes is even greater where informal links are initiated by the student officers as well as the institutional staff.  It is notable that students who initiate these informal links are much more aware that the committee structures they participate in are only part of the processes at work within the institution.  At institutions which commented upon the low attendance and engagement of student representatives at the institutional level, it is notable that student representatives see their relationship with senior management as more distance

and in more negative terms than in institutions where there are strong informal links.  Informal links between students' associations and senior management are considerably better than the links between students' associations and middle management at the faculty-level, which is seen as more distant and in more negative terms.

## Internal subject reviews

All institutions with internal subject review procedures have mechanisms for meeting students to discuss learning and teaching matters.  Ten institutions had considered the Funding Council's suggestion that institutions should consider having student members of their review panels positively.  Who this student member is varies significantly between institutions, with some institutions limiting the reviewer to a sabbatical officer, others extending it to include faculty-level representatives and others simply utilising course representatives.  Support and training provided by the institution for this student member is generally limited to a briefing about the procedures used within the institution.  One institution allows students from the department being reviewed to produce their own structured submission.

## Disciplinary, complaints and appeals

It should be noted that the following information relates only to disciplinary, complaints and appeals hearings against students.  Students are not involved as panel members in staff disciplinary hearings at any Scottish higher education institution.  At most

institutions students are present on disciplinary committees – although there appears to be significant difference between institutions in the number of occasions the actual committee meets as opposed to an institutional officer making a disciplinary decision.  Six institutions have student members on complaints panels and four institutions have student members on appeals panels at various levels of the appeals process.  This is a role considered to be delicate even for the institutions that do have student members on complaints and appeals committees: only one institution allows for non-sabbatical officers to be panel members in such hearings.

## Other mechanisms

A number of institutions use other mechanisms to involve students within their quality assurance and enhancement processes.  These include:

- Student attendance at annual away day for University Management Group;
- Focus groups;
- Student forums;
- Senior staff appointments;
- Quality Enhancement Conference;
- Online conferences;
- Use of societies;
- Annual Course Monitoring Exercise.

Further details of how certain institutions involve students in these processes can be found within the main body of the report.  By and large, the institutions that use these

alternative mechanisms of student involvement are disproportionately the newer institutions in Scotland.

## Types of student involved and not

The survey has picked up information on the type of student likely to become a course representative or other student representative within Scottish higher education institutions. This information should be treated with care as it is an anecdote of anecdotes. However, as most institutions acknowledged a similar profile, it seems to be a generality that might hold true. One of the reasons this generalisation appears like it might hold true is that there are structural reasons why some students are not involved: current systems work better at engaging certain types of students.

On the whole, students likely to be involved are undergraduates and full-time campus attendees. They are more likely to be in their honours years than in their first two years of a degree. There appears to be a good balance between men and women. Likewise, there appears to be a good balance between "mature" and "young" students, although there may be more mature students than proportionate to their numbers acting as course representatives in the first and second year of degree programmes. Those least likely to be involved are generally less involved because there are fewer systems and processes to pick up their views and opinions on their teaching and learning. Postgraduates are less likely than undergraduates to be involved, and research postgraduates less likely than taught postgraduate students. Modes of study that are not full-time are likewise less likely to comment on their teaching and learning. There is some evidence that suggests that international students do not, on the whole, become course representatives – although there are some notable exceptions to this, as well as some attempts to encourage international student involvement.

# A Note on Terminology Used

At the various higher education institutions, each with its own history, structure and procedures, there are differences in terminology used denoting roughly the same activity or function.  Where possible – in order to avoid confusion – throughout this report the same expression is used for all institutions. Beneath is a note on the terminology used in this report and what the term is used to cover.

**Course representative**  is used in a generic sense and covers various terms including "programme representative", "class representative", "member of the student parliament" and even "MER representative".

**Department**  the departmental level is recognised as being called the "school" in some institutions and in other institutions as a being a subject unit.

**Faculty**  is used to describe the middle level of institutional management, between the institutional level committees and the subject-disciplines.  It is recognised that at some institutions this level will be called the "college" or the "school" in place of the term "faculty".

**Staff-student liaison committee**  this term covers staff-student consultative committees and variously named equivalents.

**Students' association**  has been used throughout this report as a generic term for the student representative body within an institution.  Of the student representative bodies in Scotland there are 15 students' associations; 2 students' representative councils; 3 students' unions; and a Scottish Committee (belonging to the Open University Students' Union).

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When the Funding Councils initially funded **sparqs**, the service was asked to undertake what was a called a "mapping exercise" of how students were involved within institutional quality assurance and enhancement processes. This report represents the outcome of work undertaken with institutions and student representatives from between May and November 2004. (A more detailed account of the methodology involved can be read opposite.)

This report represents the first attempt to extrapolate strengths and areas for development of how students are involved in quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms across Scottish higher education institutions. In its very nature it represents a generalised snap-shot of student involvement. The focus of the current study is on student involvement at an institutional level, and it is clear from discussions with most of those who were interviewed as part of the exercise that variations between departments or schools within institutions are large. Nevertheless, this report shows some variation between institutions in how they engage students with their quality assurance and enhancement

mechanisms, which many institutions might usefully reflect upon. Equally, this report suggests that, across the higher education sector, institutions struggle in similar areas at involving students within their various mechanisms.

The report contains two main sections. The first aims to give an overview of the places where student representatives can feed in the view of students to an institution's decision-making processes. It attempts to indicate what is working in most institutions and where the sector – as a whole – needs to develop areas of current weakness. We highlight methods of involving students that might be considered unique or rare. The second section gives an account of how students are involved within each further education college in Scotland. It can be found on the **sparqs** website.

It would be misleading and wrong to give the impression that this report can provide any "magic solutions" to some of the difficulties that both institutions and students' associations find to involving students more fully within discussions of the quality of their learning and teaching. It is hoped

that in the future **sparqs** will be able to work with institutions and students' associations across Scotland in various projects to start to redress some of the areas of weakness this report highlights. Equally, it is appreciated that while this report highlights approaches that some institutions have adopted to involving students, it does not dwell in depth on these as case studies. It is planned to produce a further publication before the end of the academic year that deals with these "case studies" in further depth.

In the meantime, it is hoped that the current report will provide institutions and students' associations with material to allow them to reflect upon how they might further improve and refine their systems for involving and engaging students in commenting upon their learning experience.

Finally, the author of this report would like to extend his warm thanks and appreciation to all those who assisted with the task of assembling this report, particularly those individuals from institutions and students' associations who so generously gave of their time in responding to his enquiries.

The findings and conclusions of this report are based upon research that sparqs has conducted into how students are involved with all 21 higher education institutions in Scotland, extending from May until November 2004.

In light of the low levels of responses from institutions to a scoping survey in September 2003, it was decided to conduct the majority of the research on a face-to-face basis with individuals from across the sector. These interviews fell into three phases of work:

- a series of semi-structured interviews held with staff of institutions;

- a questionnaire to the staff of students' associations;

- a survey (either conducted in person or by phone) of student representatives.

The first series of semi-structured interviews were held with staff (or groups of staff) in all 21 higher education institutions. These interviews were held between May and July 2004. This work forms the basis of institutional profiles found in Part 2 of this report. The issues which were raised with these contacts were agreed with members of the sparqs Steering Group, and were shared with the individuals concerned before the interview (see Annex A.1). Although the focus of these interviews was on the nature of the processes used within the institution, questions were also asked about the perceptions of the institution of its student representatives in general.

In early September 2004 sparqs held a briefing day for the staff of students' associations. This opportunity was used to brief attendees as to the interim results and distribute a questionnaire to the staff to garner their opinions of student engagement in their institution's quality assurance and enhancement procedures. It is disappointing to note that out of a possible 15 responses only five responses were returned despite repeated reminders. A copy of the questionnaire used can be found in Annex A.2.

Between October and November 2004, a survey of student representatives was undertaken. The survey itself was based around issues that had been raised in the interviews with staff from the institution, and on the basis of a workshop with seven student officers held at the NUS Scotland Higher Education Day at the start of October 2004. On all but two occasions, this was conducted with the sabbatical officer from each students' association who had responsibility for representation of student views to the institution. A number of factual questions were asked about the structure of the students' association, and the answers have informed the second section of each of the institutional profiles contained in Part 2 of this report. The remainder of the survey was treated confidentially and aimed at exploring student representatives' perception of their engagement with the institution, its staff and its processes. This report draws on 17 completed surveys out of a possible 23, representing 17 students' associations from 21 institutions.[1] For information, a copy of the survey used with student representatives can be found at Annex A.3.

For an organisation that has a remit to support student participation in quality assurance and enhancement activities, it might seem odd that we conducted the institutional interviews before we conducted the interviews with student representatives. The research was conducted in that order as it was the institutions' processes that were being discussed. We delayed conducting the survey of student representatives until late October and November so that we would be interviewing student representatives with a broadly similar length of office who had probably all experienced one full cycle of committee meetings.

Information presented in this report has been supplemented by a brief literature search focusing on student representation, and institutions' and students' associations' websites. In addition some reference has been made to QAA institution audit and review reports. It is worthy of noting that the literature search showed up very little information on the topic of student representation with higher education.

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[1] This difference in the numbers of institutions and students' associations (21 and 23 respectively) is caused by the fact that the Scottish Agricultural College does not have a single student representative body, but rather three separate students' representative councils for its three campuses.

## What is meant by involvement?[2]

When this report was initially commissioned, one of its aims was to highlight student involvement. The word involvement is, however, potentially misleading and does not sufficiently distinguish between what happens on paper and what happens in practice. Students may be involved in institutional processes because they have the *opportunity* to participate; they may even be involved through *attendance* at various meetings or events; but surely a better measure of involvement is *engagement* in the processes. During the course of our interviews with institutional staff, it assisted us to approach the idea of involvement as threefold:

- **Opportunity** (students are presented with the opportunity to attend meetings and events);

- **Attendance** (students take up those opportunities and attend the meetings and events); and

- **Engagement** (students not only take up the opportunities presented by the institution, but are able to make an effective contribution).

How then is *engagement* to be recognised? How does anyone measure what an *effective* student representative is? It may be helpful to determine whether the student representative is:

- **more active than passive**; i.e. volunteers an opinion on items rather than waiting to be called upon or waiting until it is suggested that it might be appropriate to have a student viewpoint;

- **able to be proactive rather than simply reactive**; i.e. do the student representatives raise issues not on the agenda or even submit items, with or without papers, to committees; and

- **able to use informal channels** as well as the "formal" committee meetings (this is a discussion that will follow later).

Given the methodology of this report, it is not possible to chart the precise nature of student involvement in any institution. Is there a student representative who would not see themselves as an engaged and effective representative? How does an institution know whether its students are engaged and effective when it has limited experience of student representatives from other institutions?

The threefold conception of involvement as opportunity, attendance and engagement is one to which this report continually returns. It is sensible to make this clear from the outset of the findings. It may be that individual readers – familiar with individual institutions – will find these categories of assistance in making sense of this report's findings and useful in relating them to their own institution.

## Student representation on and at institutional committees

Every institution has student representation on the most important of its institutional committees: Senate and Court (or their equivalents). Broadly speaking there appears to be near universal agreement on the types of committees of Senate and Court that students should be represented upon.

### Who does the representation on institutional committees?

All but three institutions have sabbatical officers; in the vast majority of cases, the main representative at institutional committees is a sabbatical President. In some cases the President could rely upon a Vice President who sat on some of the institutional committees, although this individual often also had other responsibilities, for example the students' association welfare activities or oversight of societies. It should be noted that a growing number of students' associations now have a specific Vice President to deal solely with representation of what could be termed learning and teaching or quality assurance and enhancement activities.[3] This has led to this sabbatical Vice President in some respects assuming membership of many of the committees that at other institutions would be within the

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2   With thanks to the participants of a workshop run by sparqs at the 2004 Stadia Conference held at Liverpool (22nd-24th November) for pushing the author to be more precise in his thinking.

3   These Vice Presidents are variously titled from Vice President (Academic Affairs); Vice President (Education); Vice President (Education & Careers); and Director of Representation.

President's remit. In the academic year 2003-04 two institutions (the University of Glasgow and the University of St Andrews) had such a position and from 2004-05 another three institutions have such a position (the University of Edinburgh, the University of Aberdeen and the University of Dundee). In two out of five of these instances, this was a new position which had resulted from extra funding from the university. In the remaining students' associations, the "new" position had resulted from a redistribution of duties between the sabbatical officers. At the institutions that do not have such a Vice Presidential position there was generally broad support for such a position at most institutions – the exceptions tended to be the smallest institutions.

At most institutions students other than sabbatical officers sat on institutional committees. Generally speaking, the number of committees which had this non-sabbatical student membership was relatively small compared with the number of committees that sabbaticals sat on. In eight students' associations there was a non-sabbatical officer – generally an individual who sat on the students' association executive committee – who had responsibilities over "Education" or "Academic Affairs". Sometimes this individual was a non-sabbatical Vice President, in other places a convener or officer. Frequently these individuals sat on institutional committees, varying from just one to just short of ten committees. At a further four students' associations there were designated faculty representatives who were officers of the students' association who sat on institutional committees – this group was joined by two of the associations who had non-sabbatical officers who also had faculty representatives sitting on institutional committees. At the remaining institutions where there were non-sabbatical members of institutional committees, these were either appointed from interested volunteers from the students' association council or from amongst the course representatives. Rarely were these individuals seen as important in terms of wider student representation at institutional level by either institutional staff or student sabbatical officers, being hardly mentioned in discussions. It is clear, however, that at a couple of institutions individuals in these roles had made a significant impact on the committees and, in some cases, this had provided a spring board to engagement and effective representation where these individuals then became sabbatical officers. These cases seemed to be the exception rather than the rule, although some institutions commented that it was often helpful to have more than one representative attending committee meetings as this meant they were more likely to engage and that a plurality of opinion would be represented.

### How effective and engaged are student representatives?

How then are these opportunities taken up by student representatives? We have previously noted the problems inherent in applying judgements on how engaged and effective representatives are. However, it should be recognised that the institutional staff spoken to were often willing to make comments on attendance and engagement of representatives at institutional committees.

At the level of the institutional committees, the sector divided into three (roughly equal) groups which could characterise the involvement of students at these committees:

- representatives who provided engaged and informed contributions and felt able to raise issues, submit papers if they felt the occasion merited it, and volunteer an opinion regarding the items on the agenda;

- representatives who had to be encouraged by a variety of devices to give the student perspective;

- representatives who did not attend committee meetings, and where the representative was nominated by the students' association, no name was given to the institution.

These groups in no way corresponded with different types of institution within the sector – whether ancient, old, former-polytechnics or even more recent HEI creations. Although, generally speaking, ancient and old universities dominate the first group, the remaining two groups contain a genuine mixture of institutions. It was clear in the minds of the institutional staff interviewed that the level of involvement depended upon the individuals and their

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personalities.  However, it was equally clear that institutional staff could produce a general picture of student involvement which fitted into the three groups above.  This second finding, true across the sector,  suggests that involvement is not defined entirely by the individual, but by something linked to the institution itself, whether that be the institution's management or its cohort of students.

### Student representatives' experience of sitting on University Court

During some scoping work on the types of questions it would be useful to ask student representatives, it became clear that some students experienced difficulties in representing students on the University Court – or equivalent – and sometimes its committees.  With this in mind, during our survey of student representatives we asked a question regarding the experience of sitting on the University Court. In some cases the individual who sat on the University Court was the President and not the sabbatical officer that we spoke to as part of the survey.  Out of those we surveyed who sat on the University Court, a small majority said that they found the experience of sitting on the Court different to sitting on other committees.  Students often commented that on Court there was less discussion of the issues than at other committees. Some student representatives – generally those that sat on fewer Court committees than others – commented that they found the atmosphere of Court daunting and that they had little opportunity

to comment on, or assist in, formulating proposals.

### Committees that student representatives do not sit on

The Staff Development Committee, the Audit Committee and the Nominations Committee were the committees least likely to have student representatives sitting on them.  On the whole, students were represented on a balance of "Academic/Senate" and "Non-academic/Court" committees.  At five institutions was there a tendency for student representatives not to be present at some of the largest and most important Court committees, for example the Planning and/or General Purposes Committee.

This "footnote" to student involvement at the institutional level raises an issue regarding how it is agreed how student representatives should be involved within institutional structures.  As part of an update on the quality enhancement framework, the Funding Council sent out a circular letter in January 2003, which included an Annex consisting of "Guidance to institutions on student representation in quality processes".[4]  Within this guidance it is stated that where it is decided that student representatives should not be involved in particular decision-making "the institution should have a clear rationale as to why student representation is not appropriate".  It is not clear that individuals working within the

institution were always certain what the rationale was for excluding student representatives.  This guidance note also made clear the Council's expectation that institutions should "have a clear policy for student involvement in quality processes, including regular meetings between institutional management and the student representatives to review this". When asked, the individuals we spoke to from each institution were generally uncertain as to how this expectation had been addressed within their institution. This pattern was repeated by the student representatives we surveyed.  It should be noted that this response was not necessarily reflective of the institution's policy.  It could highlight a lack of awareness of an approach by individuals.

*Question:* What can institutions do to encourage their cohort of students to become involved in representing the views of their fellow students to the university management?

*Question:* What can institutions change about their own procedures to encourage student representatives to engage further with the business of institutional committees?

*Question:* How can institutions ensure that students on the Court or governing body of the institution feel more comfortable about their position?

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[4]  SHEFC, Circular Letter HE/04/03: An enhancement-led approach to quality assurance: progress report, Annex C (23rd January 2003).

## Student representation on and at faculty-level committees

At the faculty level students generally have opportunities to contribute in some place with the faculty committee structure. Involvement varies from full membership of all the main committees within faculties, to membership on one committee (either the main Faculty Board or Learning and Teaching Committee, or their equivalents). At this level it is much harder to make meaningful comparisons between institutions, as in many institutions the extent of student representation varies between faculties within the same institution.

One way to distinguish between institutions is to examine how student representatives are selected to sit on such faculty committees. There are interesting differences:

- some institutions asked their students' associations to nominate an individual to be a member of the committee;

- other institutions drew upon the representatives from amongst the class representatives from the units within the faculty;

- a couple of institutions combined both the approaches above.

Where institutions asked their students' associations to provide the members of faculty committees, often this person was either directly or indirectly elected to some office that had responsibility for representation within that faculty area. In three institutions representation at the faculty level was broadly linked with representation at Senate. Almost unanimously institutions reported that it was a struggle to engage students effectively at the faculty level. Where representation was provided by the students' association this was less of an issue.

In considering student involvement in terms of opportunity, attendance and engagement, it must be acknowledged one individual, or even a group of individuals, working at the centre of an institution is unlikely to be able to make authoritative comment. It was clear that a number of institutions could make reasonably authoritative comment on how effective and engaged student contributions to the faculty level were. However, in four institutions the institutional contact referred the author of this report to other individuals within the faculties.

Significantly, all institutions commented that faculty level engagement by students was lower than that at institutional and departmental unit level. A clear majority of institutions found it hard to engage students, and attendance by students was generally low. A variety of reasons were identified for this. Some respondents suggested that there might be little to report at this middle level that would interest student representatives. A couple of individuals went so far as to suggest that academics on these committees often had difficulty engaging. From some of the students spoken to it would appear that students sitting on faculty committees need a perspective of the different departments or programmes running within the faculty *as well as* knowledge of the institution's policy and direction. Some institutions (University of Paisley, Glasgow Caledonian University and the Robert Gordon University) have attempted to address this issue by placing on the agenda an item entitled "Student Issues". This was a place students could raise issues and where staff looking for a student perspective could place items. The student item was placed early in the agenda as it allowed students to leave afterward if they so wished. It would appear that this had resulted in increased engagement by students at this level.

## Student engagement at the departmental or programme level

Representation at the departmental level of institutions was generally through a staff-student liaison committee. Although every institution reported that it had some form of statute that ensured every department had at least one staff-student liaison committee, only a handful of institutions had detailed guidelines. Of those who offered an opinion on whether it was a good idea to have detailed guidelines or not, half saw it as a strength and half saw it as a weakness. Those who felt detailed guidelines were a weakness said that not having them allowed for departmental autonomy which meant departments could structure a system that best met their needs. Those who felt detailed guidelines could be a strength were concerned that without them course representatives might potentially be doing very different things resulting in confusion as to the role of the representative and the purpose of the staff-student liaison committee.

This large degree of autonomy given to individual departments makes any attempt to analyse the structures of these committees across the sector meaningless.

Autonomy meant that sometimes there were staff-student liaison committees at the department level, the subject level (if different), the programme, the year level (sometimes as honours and non-honours or with separate undergraduate and postgraduate committees), or even single module level. Indeed it was reported that a number of departments at some institutions might have a hierarchy of staff-student liaison committees.

### Structures to involve "non-traditional" student groups

It is clear that some institutions endeavour to include all different modes of study within their staff-student liaison committees and course representative systems. A couple of institutions reported that they covered travel expenses so that students on placement could attend staff-student liaison committee meetings. A small number stated that they made attempts to hold staff-student liaison committees for their distance learning programmes when, and if, there was a residential element on the course. There was one course which had separate representatives for home and international students, where the students in each group were of equal numbers, as the programme leaders had discovered that these different groups of students had had different experiences of the course.[5] A couple of institutions mentioned that departments within their institution had held on-line staff-student liaison committees or used video-conferencing facilities

so that students studying at remote campuses could engage in the process. The Open University in Scotland, in particular, used on-line conferences, sometimes organised by the students' association, to gather general student opinion on courses.

### The role of the course representative

At all institutions apart from one, the course representatives were elected each year (generally where representation was organised around the programme) or even every half session or term (where representation was organised around the module). Only at one institution – the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama – did the course representative remain in post for the duration of the programme (generally four years). This was due to the recognition of the greater experience that the representative could gain through successive years reviewing and commenting upon the learning and teaching they engaged with. Under this arrangement there was a mechanism by which students could replace their representative if they were dissatisfied with their performance. It was clear from discussions that the role of individual course representatives could vary considerably between institution and even within departments. At most institutions it was up to departments whether students chaired or took minutes at staff-student liaison committees, and only one institution (Queen

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[5]   Anecdotal information from a break-out group at the Responding to Student Needs conference held in Glasgow on 8th June 2004.

Margaret University College) expected students to chair meetings of the liaison committee – although they could opt out of this role if they wished. At another two institutions, student representatives commented that in the majority of cases students chair the committee meetings within their departments. At five institutions the students' associations' council is made up of all the course representatives and therefore an additional role of representatives at these institutions is to attend students' association meetings. Only four institutions had a clear remit for a course representative and these tended to be at institutions which also produced their own course representative handbook.

### How effective and engaged are course representatives?

In assessing how effective and engaged course representatives are, it must be borne in mind that most interviews within institutions took place with individuals who had institutional-wide responsibilities. Given this, many reports about the take up of opportunities at the departmental level are anecdotal and the respondents readily acknowledged this fact.

Generally speaking, representative systems appear to work reasonably well for full-time on-campus undergraduate students. Some institutions reported no problems in getting mature students to come forward as representatives; others reported that this was an under-represented group. Again, patterns of involvement by international students varied between institutions – although

most institutions suggested that this was a group that tended not to become course representatives. At the majority of institutions it was admitted that distance-learning students, part-time students and postgraduate students are not well represented by the traditional course representative system. Over the last few decades the numbers of students from these groups has been increasing and it would appear that both institutions and students' associations struggle with finding individuals who will give a representative voice to these groups.

### Communication with "non traditional" student groups

As part of the survey of student representatives, students' associations were asked to rate their ability to communicate with various groups of students. They were reminded that communication was to denote a two-way exchange of information. Student representatives were asked to rate their ability on a sliding scale from one to five; where one represented badly and five represented excellently. The results were as follows:

These figures tend to suggest that students' associations also have difficulties in engaging with the less traditional students on campus and, indeed, are well aware of the fact. If anything, these figures may overestimate the ability of students' associations to communicate with these groups. In fact, the student representatives were also asked to explain why they had rated themselves as they did. These answers suggested that although the question was framed so that the communication was to be two-way, the majority of responses were based on the ability of the students' association to communicate to students in these groups and not necessarily to receive information from them. Significantly, the Dearing Report's sole recommendation to students' unions[6] was to include these groups within their structures and to represent better their opinions to university staff. Although in the two years following the publication of the Dearing Report, a number of projects were embarked upon to help students' associations to tackle this perceived weakness, this issue still presents itself as a significant problem for students'

| Group of students | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ability to communicate with part-time course representatives | 5 | 3 | 5 | 1 | – |
| Ability to communicate with postgraduate course representatives | 2 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| Ability to communicate with mature students in general | 1 | 3 | 3 | 7 | – |
| Ability to communicate with distance-learning students in general | 6 | 7 | 1 | – | – |
| Ability to communicate with students on placement in general | 3 | 6 | 1 | 4 | – |

6   In England, students' associations are commonly referred to as students' unions.

associations and – through them – for their parent institutions.

### Are certain subjects more likely to engage students within their systems?

Institutions were asked whether there were any correlations between the subject studied and involvement within student representative structures. Most institutions said that they were unaware of, or unable to suggest, any correlations: in most subject areas the staff-student liaison committee worked. A minority of staff at institutions commented that students from certain types of subjects did involve themselves in representational structures more than others. Two institutions commented that they noticed that arts and social science subjects rather than science subjects appear to have an easier time finding representatives. Two small institutions commented that it was easier to find representatives from the cohort of students that were studying more "traditionally academic" subjects than from those studying more vocational subjects. Four institutions stated that they found students from their professional or traditional courses more ready to come forward as representatives. Student representatives were asked whether they knew of any areas where there were difficulties in getting students to come forward, and without exception they all said that they were unaware of any in their institution. Staff at NUS Scotland and at some students' associations commented that over the years they have seen more arts and social science sabbaticals

and officers than officers from the science subjects, a fact that they attribute to science students having more contact hours and therefore being unlikely to utilise the students' association for lengthy periods during the day.

### Mechanisms beyond the staff-student liaison committee to utilise course representatives

A number of institutions provided other structured opportunities for course representatives to engage in feedback. At a small number of institutions (the Robert Gordon University, Queen Margaret University College, University of Paisley and Glasgow Caledonian University) every year a number of course representatives are invited to an event with the Principal or with a deputy with responsibility for learning and teaching. In a couple of institutions (the University of Paisley and the Robert Gordon University) this is replicated at faculty level at more frequent intervals. These meetings are held without agenda and are usually social occasions with cheese and wine or lunch available. In a similar manner, Edinburgh College of Art have a Principal's Committee for Student Affairs that consists of their SRC President and a select group of course representatives. These can be forums where issues outwith the usual purvey of a staff-student liaison committee could be raised, for example accommodation for overseas students, late night study areas and recycling at the institutions. One of the reasons for these additional forums is to allow the focus of attention at staff-student liaison committees to be directed more towards learning and

teaching issues. Institutions report varying degrees of success on achieving this aim.

### How do institutions know whether the system is working at a departmental level?

Staff were asked how the institution knew how effectively mechanisms of student feedback were working at a departmental level. Nearly every respondent said that the annual monitoring mechanisms were a device for faculty or institutional oversight of the staff-student liaison committee system. Roughly half of the respondents pointed to their internal review mechanisms which would highlight – admittedly only once every six years – how effectively the department sought and dealt with student feedback.

Other institutions commented that they had more detailed arrangements in place, or had used in the past mechanisms to assess how effective student contributions were at the departmental level. As part of its annual monitoring exercise, Heriot Watt University asks programmes to comment on how they encourage feedback from different groups of students, for example distance-learning students, part-time students or international students. The University of Paisley collects information centrally on how each of its schools involves students within its processes, from staff-student liaison committees to focus groups, and whether or not there have been any surveys or other mechanisms used. The results are then circulated to all schools with the intention that School Boards discuss and

implement practices they think suitable. The Robert Gordon University's Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee conduct an audit of each of its departments' arrangements relating to staff-student liaison committees every three years. Glasgow Caledonian University recently undertook an audit of staff-student liaison committees which looked at a sample of minutes and an audit trail including how issues raised, where dealt with, and how information regarding outcomes was fed back to students.

> *Question:* Can institutions and students' associations make the role and remit of course representative clearer to all connected with the system?

> *Question:* How can institutions and students' associations involve distance-learning students, international students, postgraduate students and part-time students more effectively within their student representative structures?

> *Question:* How can institutions and students' associations encourage students to communicate with their representatives and representatives to better communicate with each other?

> *Question:* How can institutions and students' associations use the resource held in their course representatives in other ways to feed back information on the wider student experience?

> *Question:* How can institutions and students' associations find out how effective the course representative system actually is across departments?

## Informal links between student representatives and institutional staff

It is clear that there is a link between the level of attendance and engagement in representative systems on the part of students and good informal links between staff and students. Most staff of institutions and student representatives stated that the course representative system generally works and commented that it did so usually because of good relationships between staff and students at the departmental level.

Before further consideration of this issue, it would be helpful to attempt to define the difference between "formal" and "informal". "Formal links" are taken to be regular committee meetings and other structured engagements or annual events; "informal links", on the other hand, include any communication, be it meetings, phone calls or the exchange of e-mails between student representatives and institutional staff, outside of these structured events.

### Institutions' views on informal contact with student representatives

Clearly, where informal links exist (particularly between those responsible for learning and teaching issues and the registry functions), attendance and engagement at formal or structured events such as institutional committees tends to be greater. Where these informal links are initiated not only by the institutional staff, but by student representatives themselves, attendance and engagement is greater still. It appears that informal links allow student representatives to understand more about the institution's priorities and individual committee members' agendas and, therefore, operate more effectively within the committee themselves.

### Student representatives' views on informal contact with the institution

Generally speaking, student representatives appear to think they engage more often than institutional staff through informal mechanisms. This in itself is not surprising: an individual would only be fully aware of their own informal contact and perhaps of the fact that it was happening with others. Due to the nature of informal contact, no individual would be able to comment with any authority about frequency or constructiveness. Nevertheless, when asked to give concrete examples of informal contact, student representatives gave few that were immediately classifiable as learning and teaching or quality assurance and enhancement issues. Issues taken up with institution management tended to be about wider issues, such as strategy, estates issues, support services, or issues concerning the students' association itself.

Earlier in this report student representatives' involvement

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in institutional committees was broken into three groups: those that did not attend; those that attended but did not engage; and those that attended and engaged. Comparing the institutions in each of these categories it is clear that those in the attended and engaged category were generally the institutions whose student representatives cited examples of informal contact based around learning and teaching issues. Those institutions where there were problems in getting the student representatives to attend were generally the institutions where students' associations had little informal contact with the institution or wanted more of it.

As part of the survey of student representatives, the students were given a list of words and asked to choose which best described their dealings with institutional staff. In most cases student representatives distinguished between words that described their interaction between institutional management and faculties and departments.

As can be seen from the table opposite, student representatives largely choose positive rather than negative words to describe their relationship with the senior institutional management. This finding however does not prevent our noticing that, at a small number of institutions, student representatives viewed their relationship with the senior management in largely – or solely – negative terms. In a number of instances during the survey of there were sometimes significant differences between

| Words highlighted to described interaction with senior management | Senior Institutional Management | Deans of Faculties & Heads of Departments |
|---|---|---|
| Useful | 8 | 2 |
| Worthwhile | 7 | 1 |
| Participative | 7 | |
| Valuable | 7 | 2 |
| Partnership | 6 | 1 |
| Intelligent | 5 | 1 |
| Engaging | 5 | |
| Equal | 5 | 1 |
| Full of potential | 4 | |
| Objective | 4 | 1 |
| Practical | 4 | |
| Enthusiastic | 4 | |
| Hard Work | 4 | 1 |
| Fun | 3 | 1 |
| Attentive | 2 | |
| Stimulating | 2 | |
| One-sided | 2 | 1 |
| Well-meaning | 2 | 1 |
| Too short/basic | 2 | 2 |
| Patronising | 2 | 2 |
| Challenging | 2 | 3 |
| Tense | 1 | 1 |
| Indifferent | 1 | 1 |
| Satisfactory | 1 | 1 |
| Ineffective | 1 | 2 |
| Frustrating | 1 | 3 |
| Disorganised | 1 | 3 |
| Strained | | 3 |
| Radical | | 1 |
| Intimidating | | |

how student representatives viewed their relationship with senior management and the deans of faculties/ heads of departments. Where this difference was mentioned by the student representatives themselves, they were asked to indicate the words that describe their relationship with deans of faculty/heads of department. For this reason, the two columns cannot be directly compared with one another, but they do indicate that the relationship of sabbatical officers with the "middle management" of institutions is seen more negatively than that of the senior management.

*Question:* How can institutions encourage informal contact from their student representatives, particularly at institutional level?

*Question:* How can students' associations encourage informal contact with institutional management?

*Question:* How can informal contact between students' associations and management at the faculty level be made more meaningful?

*Question:* How can informal contacts and working relationships be embedded so that they continue when student representatives or institutional managers are replaced?

## Student involvement outside the committee structures

### Engagement in internal subject review

All institutions under the procedures currently involve students in their internal review processes, usually through meetings held as part of the review. There would appear to be considerable variation between institutions in the time spent meeting student groups. A couple of institutions organise surveys of students to provide the review panel with additional information on the student learning experience in the area reviewed. One institution is currently exploring ways in which students might be further engaged in the process of internal review.

In the Funding Council's circular letter to institutions regarding internal review, institutions were asked to consider whether it would be appropriate to have student members of internal review panels.[7] At the time of writing, 10 institutions out of 21 currently have student members. In one institution the internal review procedures have a wide remit to cover issues beyond learning and teaching matters, and the student member is invited to attend the learning and teaching elements only. At one institution when the issue of a student member was discussed, the student representative present felt that it would be inappropriate for a student member to attend review panels at their institution. Institutions are given a degree of autonomy in how they conduct

their reviews and therefore the nature and the level at which the review takes place varies between faculty, department, subject or programme depending on the institution. Analysis of this dimension of internal review is beyond the scope of this report: suffice to say that the level of the review appears to have no bearing on whether or not students are involved as members of review panels.

At three institutions the student review panel member is expected to be one of the sabbatical officers. At a further four it is a student nominated by the students' association and so can be either a sabbatical or non-sabbatical student officer. Three institutions select the student reviewer from volunteer course representatives. Four of the institutions pay the student member for the work they undertake, usually at the same rate as the external member of the review panel; one of these is an institution where the sabbatical officer is expected to undertake the role of student member. One institution – one of the four that pays student reviewers – expects the student member to write a short section of the report.

Borrowing a technique from the English review model, the University of Stirling allows the student members of the staff-student consultative committee of the department under review to produce a written submission, following suggested guidelines and with assistance from an

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7   SHEFC, Circular Letter HE/04/03: An enhancement-led approach to quality assurance: progress report, Annex B (23rd January 2003).

administrative officer within the Registry.

### Engagement in disciplinary, complaints and appeals committees and panels

At every Scottish based higher education institution students are on the Disciplinary Committees, although there is a large variation in how frequently these panels meet and whether they act as committees, or function in practice as appeals committees. One students' association reported that they were aware that their institution was holding Disciplinary Committees without the student members being informed of its meetings.

At the majority of institutions the involvement of students in the complaints and appeals extends to student officers or staff of students' associations assisting in the preparation of complaints or appeals statements and representing students at the subsequent hearings.

Beyond this traditional representational involvement in the working of appeals and complaints panels, six institutions have students as members of panels at some point in the process. Two (Glasgow Caledonian University and Napier University) only have students on their complaints panels. Four institutions have students sitting as members on their academic appeals committees in addition to their complaints panels. Both the University of Aberdeen and the University of St Andrews have student members on their senate and court appeals

committees. At Glasgow the faculty appeals committee has no student members, but the senate appeals committee has a student observer and the court appeals committee has a student member. At the University of Stirling, a different position applies: students do not sit on the faculty appeals panels, but do on the senate appeals panels. In addition there is a University Appeals Committee responsible for setting policy relating to appeals within the institution, and this committee has a student member. At all except one institution – the University of Aberdeen – the student member of the appeals or complaints panel is one of the sabbatical officers of the students' association, generally the President.

### Engagement in "miscellaneous" mechanisms

A number of institutions have other ways in which they engage their students in what could be broadly termed quality assurance and enhancement procedures. A word of caution: this report is based upon interviews with members of staff who, in all likelihood, are not aware of all the mechanisms used in their institution. This selection of examples does not therefore amount to an exhaustive list. However, it may be taken as an illustrative one.

The following are ways in which institutions were giving an opportunity to student representatives:

- **Annual away day for University Management Group** (University of Abertay, Dundee): although not a

member of the University Management Group, the President of the students' association is invited each year to the group's annual away day. Interestingly, this was one of the examples mentioned by a student representative from another institution as exactly the type of activity that it was inappropriate for student representatives to engage in. The student representative concerned was not aware that this took place when they made their comment.[8]

- **Focus Groups** (Bell College of Technology): as part of the internal audit mechanisms checking for compliance and effectiveness of policies and procedures, focus groups of students are held in subject or programme areas. These focus groups run alongside the traditional staff-student liaison committees and are conducted by individuals from outwith the school the students belong to. The college finds that often this mechanism provides richer information on the student experience than the staff-student liaison committees. Equally it finds students keener to participate than to become course representatives. Other institutions have a less formalised system of focus groups often involving the course leader using one of the timetabled sessions to review the course with students.

- **Student Forums** (Edinburgh College of Art and the Scottish Agricultural College): one of the

advantages of being a small institution is the possibility of holding open meetings of students at which the Principal and senior staff speak about developments in the institution and respond to questions from students, usually every term. In the case of the Scottish Agricultural College this takes place on a campus by campus basis.

- **Senior Staff Appointments** (Glasgow School of Art and the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama): a number of the ancient and old universities include a student in the interview panel that selects a new Principal and Vice Chancellor.  At both Glasgow School of Art and the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, when senior appointments are made within the various schools, undergraduate students are present when staff make presentations and their feedback is collected.

- **Quality Enhancement Conference** (UHI Millennium Institute): the institute holds a quality enhancement conference every September, and, in addition to a student being a member of the organising panel, a student will be asked to give a presentation on students' views on one of the enhancement themes.  In preparation for this a detailed survey is undertaken by the students' association with students on their experience of assessment within the institute.

- **Online Conferences** (the Open University in Scotland): the Open University, and sometimes its students' union, organises online conferences through the e-mail system where students can discuss thematic issues or students on a given course can discuss matters specific to the course.

- **Use of societies** (the Open University in Scotland and University of Dundee): a couple of institutions pointed to the role that subject-specific societies could play in the curriculum.  At the Open University, new courses to fill gaps in coverage had been suggested by student societies and acted upon by the institution.  At the University of Dundee, some subject societies provided representatives to departmental or faculty committees.

- **Annual Course Monitoring Exercise** (University of St Andrews): as part of the annual course monitoring exercise the university holds interviews with the head of each school and its director of learning and teaching, based on the previous years' reports.  The small interviewing group includes the President or the Director of Representation of the students' association.  It looks at what action the school has taken to redress any issues highlighted.

*Question:* What are the benefits of student involvement in internal subject reviews, disciplinary, appeals and complaints committees?

*Question:* Are there further means by which students can be involved in internal subject reviews, disciplinary, appeals and complaints committees?

*Question:* Are the "miscellaneous" mechanisms for generating student involvement at some institutions transferable to other institutions?

*Question:* How do these "miscellaneous" mechanisms relate to existing student representative structures?

## Mechanisms in place to respond to student views

Bearing in mind the rich resource that institutions have in countless staff-student liaison committees across the range of their provision, it is valid to ask whether institutions are able to capitalise upon this wealth.  A number of questions were asked during our interviews with staff at institutions to find out how institutions used this resource.  The results indicate that almost universally the information gained through staff-student liaison committee meetings was not merely primarily, but almost exclusively, for the individual department's use.  The following considers how the institution centrally uses the information from these committees.

Through systems of annual course monitoring, institutions had mechanisms allowing concerns from the staff-student liaison committee to be addressed by either faculty or institutional

committees. While major concerns would therefore present themselves through annual course monitoring, minor concerns addressed locally might not. Given this, many institutions acknowledged that it may not be possible to see whether students from different departments or different faculties are raising similar issues. Further, as the staff-student liaison committee is based around the department, it is almost never used to collect information on specific issues of concern to institutional management or committees. This type of information was usually assembled through additional questionnaires and by convening separate focus groups. Generally, this was greeted with a feeling that students were expected to complete too many questionnaires and that convening focus groups was a laborious task, which resulted in few students turning up to participate.

One concern expressed by many individuals was that staff-student liaison committees often discuss *teaching* to the exclusion of *learning* or student needs. Because staff-student liaison committees are departmental they are concerned with the delivery of teaching and learning within that department or on a given programme or module. Perhaps an area for development at many institutions might be the lack of involvement of individuals from various academic support units, such as the library, the computing centre, the careers service or learning support. In no institution

is it standard practice for contacts from these sorts of centrally provided services to come to staff-student liaison committee, although in some departments in some institutions this does happen.

Institutions appear to have well-developed systems that give departments feedback on the teaching within a department. Information collected by the centre of the institutions tends to be for quality assurance purposes: if there are major concerns then they will be the focus of attention by institutional management or committees. Few staff-student liaison committees appear to be used as a resource to systematically find information desired by senior management or to feed back information on academic support services.

> *Question:* How can we encourage staff-student liaison committees to discuss *learning* as well as *teaching*?

> *Question:* How can institutions better report back to students on how they have responded to student feedback and comment at staff-student liaison committee meetings?

> *Question:* Should staff-student liaison committees discuss broader issues of academic success, for example the impact of support services on the teaching and learning within a department or programme?

> *Question:* Do staff-student liaison committees have a wider role in feeding back information about the student experience to institutional and academic management at the centre of the institution?

## Views and opinions expressed about student representation

While individuals from institutions were not asked specific questions regarding how they considered student representation *per se*, during the course of interviews it became clear there were common themes arising in many institutions. This section explores some of those themes, and while it concentrates on some of the reservations of the representative system, these remarks should be set in the wide context to which they belong. Almost universally respondents commented that they welcomed student involvement in their mechanisms, whether directed at providing feedback or participating in decision making, and that both of these functions would be less rich without student involvement. Nevertheless there were clearly issues which made institutions and their staff wonder whether the representative system is working effectively.

### *Are student representatives representative or not?*

One of the major concerns of those interviewed was whether student representatives were themselves representative of their peer group. This issue was mentioned in some two-thirds of the interviews. In all cases but two

it was mentioned as problem. In these two cases it was commented that, generally speaking, they had confidence that mechanisms were in place to ensure that student representatives were well briefed to represent their peer group. In these two institutions it was clear that systems were in place so that student representatives on institutional – and even faculty level – committees met with course representatives from across the institution, or they completed surveys by e-mail for the students' association as a basic for representation. Similar arrangements existed in other institutions – including where the institution questioned whether the representatives were representative of the wider student body – and are detailed in greater depth below.

Compounding this confusion, particularly at an institutional level, was the issue of whether or not it was appropriate or effective for most of the committees to have the same student representative or two or three representatives. Where this was raised as an issue, respondents divided neatly into two. The first group felt that reliance on one individual placed a greater strain on that individual to attend often a greater number of committees – and that there was a chance that the plurality of the student voice was in danger of being reduced to one or a handful of individuals. The second group felt that there was a strength in having one student sit on the majority of committees, as this often meant the student gained more experience of the institution and improved their performance at the committees. Particularly in

the larger institutions, respondents also commented that often the student representative would sit on more committees than staff of the institution and were able to get a greater feel for the institution's activities and co-ordinate the students' associations' response more effectively. Generally speaking, institutions that saw it as an advantage to have the same group of students involved in institutional committees came from the places where student representatives attended and were engaged in the processes. Those institutions that identified having the same group of students on all of the committees largely came from those institutions which had problems getting students to attend meetings.

### Are representatives at the course level representative or not?

This question is probably largely unanswerable. Yet in discussions held during the break-out groups at the Responding to Student Needs conference it is clearly a concern even at the departmental level. One of the reasons cited for thinking that course representatives were unrepresentative of their fellow class mates was the fact that staff-student liaison committees often dwelt on negative points, which clearly did not reflect the more positive appraisal given courses by more informal feedback, or indeed by measuring the course by achievement.

Our interviews with the institutional staff covered the issue of what information was provided to

students regarding the course representative system. It was clear that information was often very sparse: departmental or course handbooks may have a small section on the system. Smaller institutions tended to produce student handbooks which gave more lengthy information on representative structures. Often information would be available through freshers' week, whether through oral presentations or handbooks produced by the students' associations. During induction on individual programmes the system might be mentioned, and later explained when students elected their course representatives. Information on the course representative system was therefore presented at a time of information overload, something which has been recently discussed within the Scottish higher education sector elsewhere.[9] The limited effectiveness of this information might be suggested by the fact that when sparqs undertakes training of course representatives it is clear that many newly elected course representatives have no clear idea of what they are supposed to do.

One complaint of many lecturing staff, as mentioned above, is that staff-student liaison committees tend to concentrate on negative rather than positive experiences of the course. A review of materials available to students regarding the course representative system provided by institutions and a number of students' associations suggests that the system is explained in largely negative terms.

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[9]  One of the published outcomes of the Responding to Student Needs will be a report on induction, where this issue, amongst others, is addressed.

Thus, course representatives are individuals to refer to if students wish to report problems about the course; the staff-student liaison committee is a place where difficulties can be resolved. Students are not encouraged to speak to their course representative about their positive experiences, and, having identified problems with courses, students and their representatives are not challenged or encouraged to come up with solutions. In seeing the course representative system through a prism of negativity it is no doubt also abundantly clear that many problems of a serious nature can (and should) be more appropriately dealt with through channels other than the course representative. This no doubt produces a situation where course representatives are themselves unsure about their role. It must also assist in producing course representatives who hear largely about problems when they hear anything from their peers and then, naturally enough, tend to concentrate on these issues.

### "Annual regime change": problem or opportunity?

Another perceived problem concerning the representative system was the fact that more often than not, in the words of one respondent, there was "annual regime change", referring particularly to sabbatical officers involved in institutional processes. Almost universally respondents commented independently of one another that it took around six months to get used to the role of being a student representative on a given committee and then the year was almost over. Where

it was constitutionally possible institutional staff said that they would prefer representatives to continue in post for more than one year because the knowledge gained through experience was immense. It should be noted that this continuity as a representative might not mean being a sabbatical officer for two years. It might meant that before becoming a sabbatical the individual has had experience of being a representative on institutional committees. The major problem cited by staff concerning this annual change of representatives was that, not infrequently, new officers were opposed to plans which the previous year's officers had supported and vice versa. These incidents tended to increase the feelings that representatives were acting from individual perspectives rather than collective ones, as explored in the above section.

The interviews with the staff of institutions was conducted around the late part of the summer term and the early part of the summer holidays. This was the period where current student officers were coming to the end of their term, just before new officers took up office. This meant that while discussing matters relating to attendance and engagement at an institutional level, the thoughts of respondents frequently drifted to how they thought the levels of involvement would change with a new set of officers. A number of institutions commented upon how they had hopes that this year one – or more – of the officers would "hit the ground running" (an expression used by a number of interviewees).

In some cases, this idea of hitting the ground running was based around the fact that an incoming officer had previous experience of institutional representation and therefore possessed that crucial element of experience already. In other cases it was based on value judgements related to the individual's election campaign, which showed him to be more "sensible" or "interested" than the current officer(s). While there were those who were optimistic about how incoming officers would engage, others were more pessimistic: feeling that incoming officers would not be as effective as current or previous ones, or would be as ineffective as the current officers. In those institutions where respondents thought that officers would not be as engaged as previous ones, there was a real concern that this would have an effect on institutional processes and decision-making and that an important part of the process would be diminished as a result.

Institutional staff appeared to perceive this annual change as destabilising and as something over which they had little control or influence. Institutions with this annual changeover of officers tended to be where the students' association had specialist staff who were dedicated to supporting students represent their opinions to institutional structures. The issue of how to support officers during their handover period over the summer holidays will be explored in the section entitled "Support and training provided to student representatives".

> *Question:* How do we encourage communication between student representatives to strengthen the positions and contribution of student representatives sitting on institutional committees?

> *Question:* How can we encourage student representatives to emphasise the positive learning experiences as well as the negative?

> *Question:* How might we raise awareness of the whole student body about the course representative system?

> *Question:* What ways are there to ensure that the "change-over" of both sabbatical and non-sabbatical student officers has a minimal effect on effective student involvement?

## Support and training provided to course representatives

During both interviews with staff and student representatives we asked questions regarding the support and training provided to course representatives. It was clear that in most institutions this was something which had, and is, left to the institution's students' association. We therefore asked more detailed questions of the students' associations regarding their support and training, particularly speaking to staff members of students' associations as they often had responsibilities (usually amongst other responsibilities) to train and/or support course representatives.

### The role of the institution in supporting course representatives

At all but four institutions the students' association is expected to take the lead in supporting course representatives. In four institutions support for course representatives is provided through the production of a course representative handbook or handouts. In one of these institutions training of course representatives was conducted by both the institution and the students' association. At another there was clearly tension between the institution and the students' association as to who was responsible for offering what support to course representatives. The students' association at the University of Paisley commented extremely positively on the decision of the School of Computing to appoint a Student Support Officer, one of whose tasks was to encourage student participation in the course representative system. The students' association commented that this had already, in its first year of operations, resulted in better recruitment of course representatives within this School, and it hoped that the position would result in future developments of the course representative system within the School.

### The role of students' associations in supporting course representatives

Most students' associations saw their primary roles in supporting course representatives through providing training and producing a handbook, or in co-ordinating these from sparqs. A number of other students' associations supported their course representatives by other means: chief amongst them regular meetings with groups of course representatives (see sub-section beneath on "structures to communicate with course representatives"). One students' association had written guidelines for the election of course representatives; two students' associations provided course leaders with an information pack on the course representative system. A number had developed message boards used by course representatives to exchange notes; a couple of others had sections of their own websites devoted to information and briefings for course representatives. One of these students' associations produced a regular newsletter which was distributed to all course representatives keeping them in touch with developments in the institution. A few had plans to develop such websites over the next academic year. At Queen Margaret University College the students' association provides one-to-one training for students who undertake the task of chairing staff-student liaison committees.

### How institutions support students' associations in their role

The student representatives surveys suggested that the institutions often supported the course representative system more than they appeared to give themselves credit for. Only one student representative responded

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with a direct "nothing really". The remaining representatives all recognised that their institution was doing something to support the operation of the course representative system. Some of the most common supports were providing rooms to hold meetings between the students' association and course representatives, providing guidelines for the operation of the whole system particularly in getting academic staff to hold elections, and providing the students' association with names of course representatives. It appeared that over the last few academic years, institutions had been getting better at providing students' associations with the names of course representatives. Several commented that having an identifiable staff contact or contacts assisted them in finding out the details of course representatives.

One way in which several institutions were able to offer significant assistance to their students' associations was leadership. Representatives from four students' associations mentioned the role that senior managers could play in promoting the course representative system by giving it and the students' association vocal support throughout the institution. In at least one case this was signalled as instrumental in allowing for more student representation from course representatives and students' association representatives at the faculty level. In other cases this strong message from the centre was perceived to have had an effect on departments getting lists of course representatives to

students' associations so that the right individuals were then offered the training and support provided by the students' association.

The students' association at the University of Dundee stated that the university had supported its attempts to communicate with, and encourage communication between, course representatives through developing the Course Rep Central system. This system – which has now been handed over to the students' association to maintain – was developed out of the university's preferred virtual learning environment, Blackboard. All course representatives from different courses can access it and communicate with other course representatives from the same department to see if there are issues, positive or negative, that courses have in common. The system also allows students to e-mail their course representative. Within the environment there are places for information from the students' association as well as support documentation and training in the form of downloaded video presentations.

At Glasgow Caledonian University the students' association commented that the university had provided half the funding for a new staff position to – in part – develop training and support materials for course representatives. Without these the students' association said that it would be unable to offer much in the way of assistance to course representatives at its institution, and would find it much harder to communicate with course representatives and

therefore represent student views at institutional committees.

### Structures to communicate with course representatives

Only half of students' associations had mechanisms or fora with which to meet the course representatives in their institution. In seven students' associations this was done through the fact that the course representatives were automatically members of the students' association council (Glasgow Caledonian University; University of Paisley; University of Abertay, Dundee; Glasgow School of Art; Bell College of Technology; Napier University; and Queen Margaret University College). These students' associations reported varying success at engaging their course representatives within their council structures, with a couple commenting that sometimes course representatives did not realise their wider role meant being on the students' association council.

Four other students' associations reported holding informal fora for class representatives. At the University of Glasgow this was done through the faculty conveners e-mailing regularly and holding meetings with course representatives within their faculty. At the University of Edinburgh each school council has a convener who can report matters to the relevant committee and officer of the students' association. Fora along college and faculty lines are in the process of being established at the University of Aberdeen and the University of Stirling respectively.

A slightly different situation exists at two students' associations where, rather than expecting all the course representatives to congregate with the students' association, the students' association goes out and visits the course representatives instead. At the University of St Andrews the students' association's Education Convener is able to attend all staff-student liaison committee meetings. At Heriot Watt University the school officers are required to attend all the staff-student liaison committee meetings as part of their remits.

Most students' associations – whatever structures of communications they had with course representatives – readily acknowledged that this was an area they wished to improve and develop over coming years.

> *Question:* What systems of support are necessary to assist course representatives to discharge their responsibilities more effectively?

> *Question:* How can institutions and students' associations work together to support course representatives?

> *Question:* What responsibilities for supporting course representatives belong to the institution and which belong to the students' association?

> *Question:* How might students' associations communicate with course representatives more effectively?

## Support and training provided to other student representatives

There appeared to be three major areas of training and/or support for student representatives sitting on institutional committees, particularly if they were sabbatical officers. These areas were the institution; previous officer or staff of students' associations; and the National Union of Students, if the students' association was affiliated to NUS. Clearly not all of this support and training was directed at areas relating to quality assurance and enhancement. For example, induction at many institutions was by the senior management and provided a general overview of the institution. Only a minority of institutions provided any induction themselves into their approaches to quality assurance or enhancement, and this was generally left to individuals within the students' association to provide. As noted in a later section on the engagement of students in national quality mechanisms many student representatives themselves do not feel appropriately briefed on the national quality enhancement framework and how it relates to their own situation at their "home" institution. There was no doubt that both staff of the institution and student representatives themselves saw the best induction to student involvement as being through the act of involvement itself – through attendance at committee meetings or at whatever other opportunity was provided.

Support for non-sabbatical officers sitting on institutional committees or faculty-level committees was considerably weaker. The same provisions existed, but due to other commitments (most notably study) they were taken up more infrequently. Notable examples of support included a two-day training and briefing session for School Officers at Edinburgh University Students' Association and the training provided to the Academic Affairs Committee (consisting of a variety of student representatives including the equivalent of faculty-level representatives) at Aberdeen University Students' Association. The level of support that can be provided by any students' association is often dependent upon the level of staffing within the students' association. An increasing number of students' associations now have staff members who deal with supporting their student representatives. In the vast majority of cases these staff members also have other significant responsibilities, for example, for student development, societies, all the students' associations' training requirements, or welfare services. In four cases there is dedicated staff support within students' associations. At some institutions the support provided by the staff of the students' associations could be very significant. At four institutions the specialist staff sat on institutional committees usually alongside student representatives "in attendance", but in a number of cases as full members of the committee. In a number of institutions the staff member provided specific support for the student member of internal subject review panels.

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It also worthy of note that in the last couple of years as the opportunities for student involvement have increased, for example, in internal subject review or appeals panels, the training and support provided for the student representatives has not always necessarily kept developing.

> *Question:* Do student representatives sitting on institutional committees need to be better briefed on the national quality enhancement framework or about individual institutions' quality assurance policies and practices?

> *Question:* How can faculty representatives be better trained and supported in their role?

> *Question:* Do student representatives require particular training and support for undertaking particular roles, for example internal subject reviews? If so, what support and training is required?

## Incentives and recognition for student representatives

Unanimously, institutional respondents agreed that there needed to be more incentives for student representatives. Respondents were asked what they thought might act as an incentive; they were not given prompts or suggestions. When asked what they thought was needed, respondents suggested the following ideas which had been discussed, usually informally, within their institutions:

| Suggestion for incentive / recognition | No of respondents[10] |
| --- | --- |
| Personal Development Planning | 7 |
| Academic Credit | 7 |
| Payment | 3 |
| Gift in kind (i.e. food, drink, book tokens) | 3 |
| Other form of recognition (e.g. certification) | 3 |
| Ability to use experience on C.V. | 1 |

Although, as the above table shows, many individuals saw that the advent of personal development planning might act as an incentive or give some form of recognition or accreditation for the work of student representatives, no institution had implemented a programme that was actually doing this with class representatives. Many institutions were already offering incentives such as hospitality for attending training as class representatives, and many institutions reported that some (or indeed, in a few institutions, all) of their department's staff-student liaison committees occurred over a lunchtime, with the lunch provided by the department. Smaller institutions tended to report that student representatives could generally get a reference in relation to their work as a representative from an individual within the institution, if they wanted. This form of recognition is probably in operation in many departments in larger institutions. At the current time only one institution offers academic credit for a course which its programme representatives are eligible to take (see below for further details). Payment of student representatives (beyond sabbatical officers) was generally mentioned in relation to student involvement in internal subject review (see section above). One institution, however, remarked that, from the 2004-05 academic year, it was planning to pay its student representatives on faculty and departmental committees an attendance allowance.

From the 2004-05 academic year the UHI Millennium Institute started paying its student representatives on its institutional and departmental committees (although not course representatives on its staff-student liaison committee meetings). Students receive £20 for every meeting they attend, which is in part to cover expenses and offset any inconvenience caused through attending the meeting, and in part to emphasise the important role student representatives have. In this way the Institute hopes to engage greater numbers of part-time or block release students, as well as recognise that the physical distance between students and colleges can mean significant transport costs are incurred in attending committee meetings. The payment comes from a specially created budget within the

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[10] Respondents were given the opportunity to identify more than one incentive, and therefore the total equals more than 21.

Academic Registry. Although it is too early to tell whether payment of representatives has made a difference, initially it appears to have had the effect of encouraging representatives to come forward and stand for positions that in the past have been left unfilled. It is suggested that as staff also know that the student representative is receiving payment, they are more likely to use the student as a resource, in turning meaning that students don't merely attend the meeting, but they are more likely to be engaged. Napier University allot the students' association an amount of money per course representative to buy some form of gift at the end of each year – which in the 2004-05 academic year was a whiskey miniature. The University of Abertay, Dundee, are planning to introduce a form of certification for course representatives who attend at least 70% of staff-student liaison committee meetings and SRC meetings.

| Factors that encourage student involvement | No of respondents |
|---|---|
| Wanting to make a difference | 10 |
| Something for the C.V: or for skills | 7 |
| People can see the institution and/or students' association changing things | 4 |
| General involvement in politics | 3 |
| Gift in kind (e.g. food or drink) | 2 |
| Good use of talent – I can do better | 1 |
| Involved in some level and moved up | 1 |
| Personal Development Planning scheme | 1 |

| Factors that hinder student involvement | No of respondents |
|---|---|
| Time and engagement in other commitments | 9 |
| Perception it takes time, is difficult to engage with, or is tokenistic | 4 |
| Lack of awareness about role & importance | 4 |
| Don't care attitude | 2 |
| Lack of incentives | 1 |
| Stereotype of what a representative is | 1 |
| Students from certain backgrounds less willing to engage | 1 |

Student representatives were not asked about incentives directly, but they were asked to think about what they believed encouraged and hindered students in representing the views of their fellow students to university staff. Again, no suggestions were made as to the answers, and student representatives were allowed to suggest more than one factor in each case. The following are their suggestions:

Student representatives feel that the greatest hindrance to students getting involved in representing the views and opinions of their fellow students is time, because they are engaged in part-time work or other extra-curricular activities. It might then be argued that institutions are responding appropriately in thinking that academic recognition, whether through personal development planning or academic credit, raises the profile of student representatives and, therefore, combats issues that students don't have enough time. Given the fact that many of them had to have jobs, it would seem that payment of representatives might present an answer. However, as a number of

student representatives and staff of institutions commented, this may have no effect on the *engagement* of the representative.

Significant numbers of student officers believe that lack of awareness of the role of representatives and the difficulty of engagement should not be overlooked, but none of the suggestions of incentives offered by institutions addresses these concerns. Student representatives see the fact that being a representative can make a welcome addition to any curriculum vitae. Therefore, some form of personal development planning around that activity may assist in

encouraging students to participate in representation. What most student representatives believed encouraged involvement was the idea of making a difference and helping others (either on their course or students in subsequent years). In this case the incentive is not necessarily any of the suggestions proffered by staff of institutions but whether or not the student representative *feels effective.*

*Question:* What are the appropriate incentives for student representatives – how do we get the balance right between incentives and recognition?

*Question:* How can institutions and students' associations encourage those who want to make a difference to become proactive representatives?

*Question:* How can institutions and students' associations assist student representatives to articulate the skills they have developed through their representative functions?

*Question:* Is it appropriate to accredit the role of student representatives with academic credit?

## Engagement of students in national quality mechanisms

During the course of our interviews we asked institutional staff about what briefings they provided to student representatives on the Quality Enhancement Framework. The majority of institutions acknowledged that this was something they did not do, although knowledge of the framework would clearly assist representatives who sat on institutional committees. A handful of institutions – those with students' associations that were big enough to have specialist staff – pointed to the fact that this would be something their students' association staff would undertake.

### Knowledge of the Quality Enhancement Framework

In asking student representatives about their knowledge of the Quality Enhancement Framework, it was clear that students' knowledge was limited to middling – although most student representatives spoken to recognised the term. Some acknowledged that while they understood the various parts, they were unsure how these fitted together. Around half of the respondents clearly did not see a framework but rather the part of it they had been most involved in, for example the Enhancement Themes, or ELIR or the QAA Annual Visit. Where information had been picked up by student representatives, they were asked to state where they had found out about this knowledge. This divided roughly equally among three sources: the parent institution itself; the QAA website; and **sparqs** training. Only one student representative questioned whether students sitting on institutional committees needed to have knowledge of the framework, arguing that the framework was less important than the student perspective and that detailed knowledge of the framework would lead to the student representative being disassociated from the student mindset that they were supposed to represent.

### Engagement with the enhancement themes

As part of our meeting with institutional staff we asked interviewees what involvement their student body had had with the enhancement themes.[11] At a couple of institutions it was pointed out that students from the institution were members of various theme Steering Committees. Four institutions were aware that student representatives had attended various enhancement themes events. One institution has provided a budget to allow staff and student representatives to attend enhancement theme events. Another institution held a thematic review on one of the enhancement themes and as part of the review hosted a discussion with students around the subject. Two institutions have used the enhancement themes as topics for their learning and teaching conferences at which there has been student involvement.

Most student representatives stated that their involvement with the enhancement themes was limited. Seven respondents quoted the launch conference as the major way in which they had engaged in the themes. It was

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[11]  What follows – from an institutional perspective – is therefore based on information relating to the first year of the enhancement themes.

clear that a number of student officers or students' associations had particular interests in one or two of the enhancement themes.[12] The most common enhancement theme to be mentioned by name by student representatives was the employability theme – largely as student officers were serving on working groups established by their institution. Despite this involvement, the majority of student officers stated that they were not more involved nationally in the enhancement themes because of time pressures and constraints of work. A significant minority of student officers felt that they had never had the enhancement themes sufficiently explained to them, or that the information that came to them on each of the themes was too much or too complex. This was particularly the case with the flexible delivery theme.

### Enhancement-led institutional Review

For half of the institutions interviewed as part of this report it was too early to answer how students would be involved in the drawing up of the Reflective Analysis that institutions submit to the review panel before the review itself. Six institutions were gaining student involvement in the writing of the Reflective Analysis through student membership of the committee that was overseeing its drafting. Another four institutions had student involvement in their groups writing the Reflective Analysis, but had devised other mechanisms for involving students in the process. In three institutions there had been focus groups of students held with the explicit aim

of better understanding the student experience at the institution, sometimes utilising course representatives and, on other occasions, general students from all modes of study. One institution had run a mock review the previous year, the panel of which contained a student from another institution. Another institution had hired a consultant risk analyst who had met with groups of students. On balance, the older the institution the less likely it was to engage students in ways additional to having student membership of their ELIR group.

The introduction of the Enhancement-led Institutional Review process – and its greater emphasis on the student experience and student involvement – appears to have given students' associations an extra tool. Evidence suggests that a number of the more engaged students' associations are using the process as a means of increasing student involvement. Several students' associations whose institutions have undergone, or are about to undergo, the process have commented that a number of perennial issues, such as the issue of getting contact details of course representatives, are in the process of being resolved. It was clear through the survey of student representatives that where this was noted, there was an explicit link between the institution's actions and the ELIR process.

While some students' associations may have found ways of using the process as a means of convincing

the institution to do something, there is significantly less enthusiasm for using the actual review itself as an opportunity to make clear to the review panel any issues the students' association may have with the institution's approaches. Student representatives were asked whether they would be entirely honest with the review panel on what they considered the institution's weaknesses to be; or whether they would "hedge their bets" and tone down criticism so that they could work with their institution more effectively on these issues. Student representatives divided neatly into two camps on this issue, between those that would be entirely honest and those that would "hedge". Perhaps more significantly, all students' associations of institutions undergoing review in 2004-05 stated that they would be honest, but only up to a point, in many cases preferring to work with their institution on matters instead.

*Question:* How can we encourage more student representatives to engage with national quality structures?

*Question:* How do student representatives benefit from engagement with national quality structures?

*Question:* Should we be encouraging more student representatives to be honest at their meetings with ELIR panels, and if so how?

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[12] The survey of student representatives took place at a time when four enhancement themes were active: assessment; responding to student needs; employability; and flexible delivery.

# Conclusions

## Strengths, weaknesses and areas for development

Generally, the systems of student representation employed in most higher education institutions appear to provide useful feedback for the institution. A picture emerges across the higher education sector of student representatives being encouraged to participate in decision-making at all levels of the institution.

This survey has focused on a three-tiered model of student involvement, where opportunity can lead to attendance, which in turn can lead to engagement. It would appear that, at the time of the survey, different institutions were at different points on this continuum. This should not hide the fact that, depending on the level of involvement being examined, the point at which an institution lies on that continuum might vary. This is particularly notable in the case of faculty-level representation, which appears to be particularly poor at nearly all institutions. Equally, it should be acknowledged that this survey provides only a snap-shot of student involvement and often the level of involvement by student representatives – particularly at the institutional level – can vary due to individual personalities and factors.

The survey has deliberately concentrated on this three-tiered model of student involvement because the role of sparqs, and more pertinently the ideal of student involvement in institutional decision-making, is to encourage engagement and not merely opportunity. It would appear at an institutional level

engagement is encouraged by fostered informal contacts between institutional staff and student representatives. It is also noted that a greater understanding of the national quality framework has enhanced engagement by student representatives in institutional decision-making.

This survey indicates that both institutions and students' associations use a great variety of approaches to encouraging students to comment on their teaching and learning. It was found that there was a slight tendency for the newer institutions to use a greater variety of approaches of including course representatives in commenting on quality than the older institutions.

At the departmental or programme level the course representative system appears to fulfil the needs of staff and students in discussing quality issues, for full-time undergraduates. Systems for collecting feedback and representation of other students, for example part-time students, distance learners, postgraduates and international students, are patchier between and within institutions. This area for development is reflected in students' associations' structures for communicating with students from these groups. It was clear that the major issue that students' associations had with the course representative system within their institution was the issue of communication with course representatives. This in turn might lead to circumstances in some institutions where staff question the

"representative-ness" of the student representatives on institutional fora. It might be suggested that the "resource" of course representatives could be harnessed by institutions and students' associations more effectively to provide feedback and information on the wider student learning experience, as opposed to focusing on the learning and teaching in an individual department.

It is clear that one area of student representation and involvement that is receiving a great deal of thought and attention at the current time is how to incentivise and recognise student representatives. It should be noted that this was the area where there were significant differences of opinion between institutional staff and student representatives on what acted as an incentive or barrier to involvement, and what might be appropriate in terms of recognition.

Many institutions and students' associations appear to have given significant thought and effort over a number of years to how they might train and support their course representatives. Generally, there appears to have been less thought on how to induct student representatives at the institutional level to the institution's policies and practices. With regard to the training and support of faculty level representatives, those institutions providing little vastly out-number those where some is provided. As institutions increase the ways in which students are involved in decision-making processes, for example through being members of internal subject review

panels, institutions and students' associations will need to ensure that their training and support continues to be tailored to the specifics of the role that student representatives play within the institution. It may be that there is a wider need for support in terms of providing clear information to students on the purpose of student involvement and representation to all students at the institution.

This survey has highlighted the fact that within higher education generally structures of student involvement and representation are working well. It has hopefully indicated practice at some institutions that others will find helpful and useful to their own situations. It is hoped that, in the future, development work of sparqs can be directed towards assisting institutions and students'

associations to address some of the weaknesses pointed to in this report in order to enable student representatives to be further engaged in commenting on their learning experience.

*Student representation on and at institutional committees*

> *Question:* What can institutions do to encourage their cohort of students to become involved in representing the views of their fellow students to the university management?
>
> *Question:* What can institutions change about their own procedures to encourage student representatives to engage further with the business of institutional committees?
>
> *Question:* How can institutions ensure that students on the Court or Governing Body of the institution feel more comfortable about their position?
>
> *Question:* Is there clear agreement between institutions and between management and student representatives on the type of institution committees that it is inappropriate for students to sit on?

*Student representation on and at faculty-level committees*

> *Question:* How can institutions improve the attendance of student representatives at faculty-level committees?
>
> *Question:* Should faculty representatives be chosen from amongst the course representatives or through the students' association?
>
> *Question:* Is there agreement on the type of faculty-level committee that it is appropriate and inappropriate for student representatives to sit on?
>
> *Question:* Can the format and/or business of faculty-level committees be amended so as to encourage student representatives to make a better informed and more useful contribution to such committees?

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*Student engagement at the departmental or programme level*

> *Question:* Can institutions and students' associations make the role and remit of course representative clearer to all connected with the system?
>
> *Question:* How can institutions and students' associations involve distance-learning students, international students, postgraduate students and part-time students more effectively within their student representative structures?
>
> *Question:* How can institutions and students' associations encourage students to communicate with their representatives and representatives to better communicate with each other?
>
> *Question:* How can institutions and students' associations use the resource held in their course representatives in other ways to feed back information on the wider student experience?
>
> *Question:* How can institutions and students' associations find out how effective the course representative system actually is across various departments?

*Informal links between student representatives and institutional staff*

> *Question:* How can institutions encourage informal contact from their student representatives, particularly at institutional level?
>
> *Question:* How can students' associations encourage informal contact with institutional management?
>
> *Question:* How can informal contact between students' associations and management at the faculty level be made more meaningful?
>
> *Question:* How can informal contacts and working relationships be embedded so that they continue when student representatives or institutional managers are replaced?

### Student involvement outside the committee structures

*Question:* What are the benefits of student involvement in internal subject reviews, disciplinary, appeals and complaints committees?

*Question:* Are there further means by which students can be involved in internal subject reviews, disciplinary, appeals and complaints committees?

*Question:* Are the "miscellaneous" mechanisms for generating student involvement at some institutions transferable to other institutions?

*Question:* How do these "miscellaneous" mechanisms relate to existing student representative structures?

### Mechanisms in place to respond to student views

*Question:* How can we encourage staff-student liaison committees to discuss *learning* as well as *teaching*?

*Question:* How can institutions better report back to students on how they have responded to student feedback and comment at staff-student liaison committee meetings?

*Question:* Should staff-student liaison committees discuss broader issues of academic success, for example the impact of support services on the teaching and learning within a department or programme?

*Question:* Do staff-student liaison committees have a wider role in feeding back information about the student experience to institutional and academic management at the centre of the institution?

### Views and opinions expressed about student representation

*Question:* How do we encourage communication between student representatives to strengthen the positions and contribution of student representatives sitting on institutional committees?

*Question:* How can we encourage student representatives to emphasise the positive learning experiences as well as the negative?

*Question:* How might we raise awareness of the whole student body about the course representative system?

*Question:* What ways are there to ensure that the "change-over" of both sabbatical and non-sabbatical student officers has a minimal effect on effective student involvement?

### Support and training provided to course representation

*Question:* What systems of support are necessary to assist course representatives to discharge their responsibilities more effectively?

*Question:* How can institutions and students' associations work together to support course representatives?

*Question:* What responsibilities for supporting course representatives belong to the institution and which belong to the students' association?

*Question:* How might students' associations communicate with course representatives more effectively?

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> *Question:* How can institutions and students' associations encourage those who want to make a difference to become proactive representatives?
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>
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## Engagement of students in national quality mechanisms

> *Question:* How can we encourage more student representatives to engage with national quality structures?
>
> *Question:* How do student representatives benefit from engagement with national quality structures?
>
> *Question:* Should we be encouraging more student representatives to be honest at their meetings with ELIR panels, and if so how?

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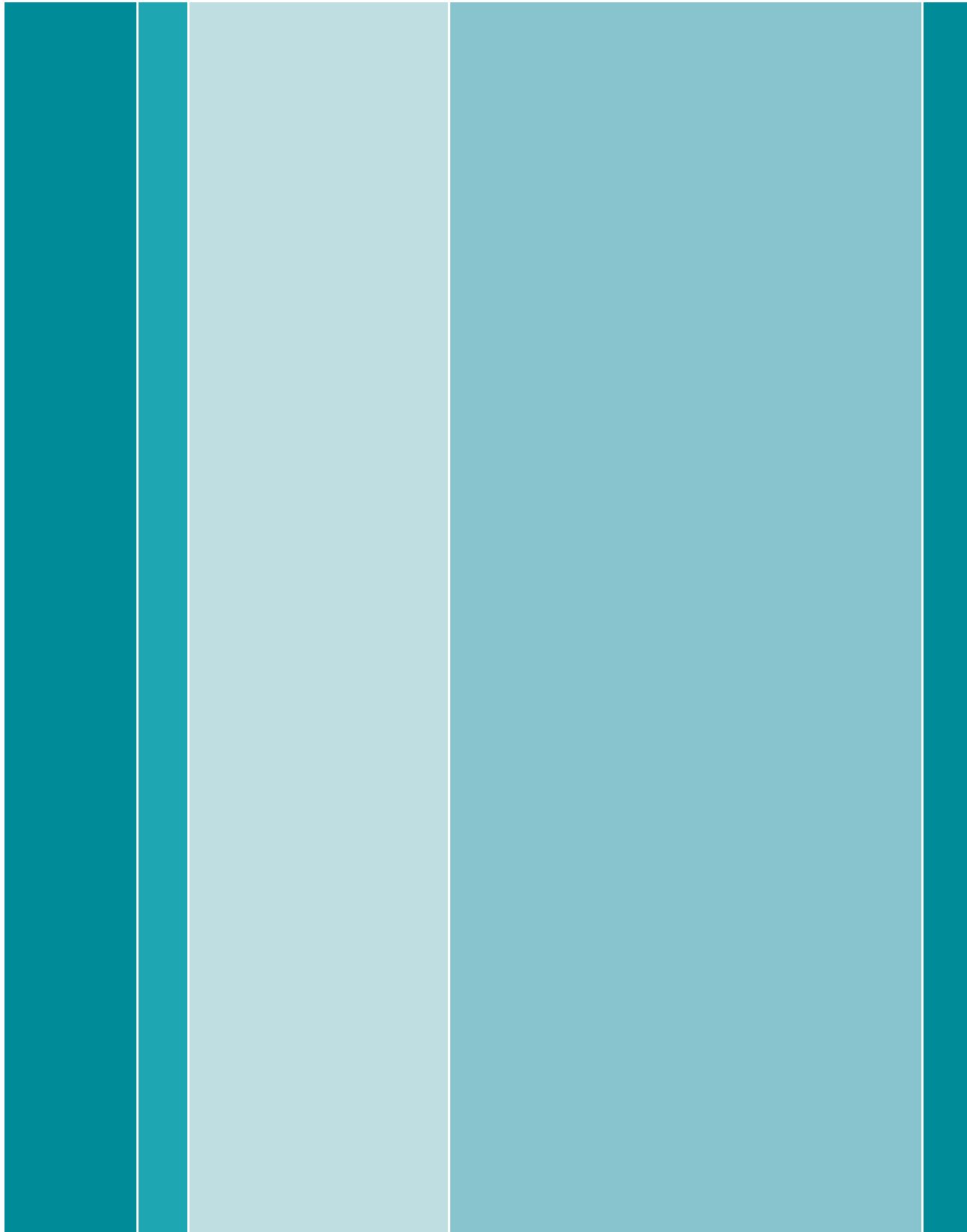Al Wilson, President, Stirling University SA (2004-05)

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