

Student Perceptions of Enhancement

Summary

October 2024



This document is
available in English
and Welsh

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Executive summary

This study was carried out to support the developing tertiary approach in Wales and commissioned by HEFCW.¹ Its purpose is to capture how students across further and higher education in Wales understand enhancement and their opportunities to engage with and shape enhancement initiatives in relation to strengthening the learning experience. Putting the learner at the heart of the tertiary system is one of the five strategic priorities of Medr and learner voice is a critical feature of its work. This report collates and summarises the views of a cross-section of students from the post-16 sector in Wales.² It also includes input from the student partnership in quality Scotland (sparqs) Tertiary Quality Student Expert Group (TQSEG). The purpose of the report, together with the recommendations suggested, is to help inform future Medr strategic initiatives in relation to learner voice, including the creation of a Learner Engagement Code,³ and the embedding of a stronger co-created, enhancement-led culture across the tertiary sector in Wales.

In general, the students who participated defined enhancement as '*making things better*'. However, there were mixed views on whether enhancement applied solely to academic experience or other aspects of student life. The need to plan and evaluate enhancement was recognised, although the value of spontaneity in relation to the enhancement agenda was also acknowledged. All recognised that enhancement could occur at any level across a provider, and that small programme or department-focused operational changes were often as important as larger-scale strategic initiatives across a provider. Personal experiences were shared by the students to highlight their thinking; many emphasised the importance of small changes relating to their particular programme, such as timetabling changes. They stressed the significant role played by their lecturers in enabling such changes, thereby enhancing the student experience.

The word 'enhancement' was generally preferred to 'improvement' by all students, when referring to '*making things better*', although they did not use the term very often themselves and a minority felt there was a danger in providers overusing the phrase 'enhancement of the student experience' - resulting in it becoming meaningless. 'Enrichment' was not a term with which most were familiar, although student officers were aware of the term from internal provider documentation.

Overall, students felt they understood and were positive about the range of student-voice mechanisms available to them, and several of these are discussed in detail in this report. The student representative system appears more developed at some providers, but it was good to note that all students in the focus groups stated that they had a student representative for their programme and were confident in raising issues with them. Some, however, did feel that student representatives were not always sufficiently visible, while student representatives also acknowledged the challenges in obtaining sufficient engagement in student-voice mechanisms from other students.

1 This report was commissioned by HEFCW which, on 1 August 2024, was replaced by Medr - the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research - as the new strategic oversight body in Wales. Medr will consider the outcomes and potential next steps arising from this report.

2 The terms 'student' and 'learner' are interchangeable in this report.

3 www.gov.wales/statement-strategic-priorities-tertiary-education-and-research-and-innovation-html

Online feedback initiatives were seen as an excellent way of enabling an inclusive approach to student engagement; however, many students cited a lack of time, rather than a lack of interest, as their reason for not engaging with enhancement opportunities. If the quality of the teaching was 'good' in their opinion, several noted they were keener to engage, thereby helping support their lecturers improve the provision further. This idea of belonging to a particular university or college community featured strongly in the focus group discussions and was seen as a key element in encouraging student engagement. Generally, students felt they were kept well-informed in relation to provider changes made as a result of the learner voice, although student officers felt that sometimes further information and updates could also be shared with the students' unions.

The concept of students as partners - that is, students working closely with their provider to improve the teaching and learning experience of all - was frequently evident at school or department level. However, the general student body, unlike student officers, did not see themselves as working in partnership with their provider at other levels. Variation could be seen too across different programmes, with several part-time students emphasising personal and work commitments, which meant they had less time to become further engaged in university or college life.

The report concludes with a series of potential next steps for the tertiary sector in Wales, which include:

- confirmation and clarification across the HE and FE sector on using the term *enhancement* and associated definitions
- development of consistent and inclusive student-voice mechanisms across the HE and FE sector
- promoting effective practice in student-voice mechanisms
- supporting providers to embed and shape an enhancement-led approach to student voice.



Introduction

The purpose of this study is to increase awareness and understanding of how students across further and higher education in Wales perceive enhancement, and the opportunities they have to engage with enhancement initiatives. Putting the learner at the heart of the tertiary system is one of the five strategic priorities of the newly-formed tertiary body, Medr, which replaces HEFCW and learner voice will play a central role in its work, through initiatives such as a Learner Engagement Code. The key findings and recommendations included in this HEFCW-commissioned report will help inform such developments and assist Medr in the continuous improvement of the learning experience for all students through co-creation and partnership.

Methodology

In terms of identifying and recruiting students to participate in the research, QAA contacted all higher education (HE) and further education (FE) providers in Wales in January 2024 and asked for support identifying students who would be willing to participate in a focus group to discuss their perceptions of enhancement and the student voice. The project was also highlighted, and information distributed at QAA events and liaison meetings with providers and other stakeholders such as ColegauCymru, Y Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol and NUS Wales; as well as through QAA social media channels. Participation was open to students on all levels and modes of study in order to ensure as representative a sample of student voice as possible. Further education colleges were asked to nominate both FE and HE in FE students where applicable. Former students, now in sabbatical roles with a provider, were also able to participate.

Participation was additionally incentivised through an offer of a £25 voucher, together with a certificate of participation.

Between March and June 2024, a series of 12 focus groups, involving 40 participants, took place. These were held online and with participant consent were recorded for transcription purposes. All focus groups lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. Participant availability was a challenge in setting up the focus groups. As a result, to enable discussion, focus groups tended to be small and used a semi-structured conversation approach.

A series of 14 questions was asked to each group (see Appendix 1). All members of the 12 groups contributed to the discussions. The groups included a mix of Level 3 to Level 7 students, together with a number of sabbatical officers. Part-time, international and mature students were well represented. Details of the 12 providers represented in this study are included in Appendix 2 - these included three FE colleges, seven HE institutions and two alternative providers. All participants were assured anonymity, hence the decision not to include here a detailed breakdown by level, provider or gender of those who contributed. The terms 'student' and 'learner' are interchangeable, regardless of whether the participant is studying an FE or HE programme.

To add an additional comparative element to the study, the questions were shared with the sparqs' (student partnerships in quality Scotland) Tertiary Quality Student Expert Group (TQSEG). The TQSEG discussed the 14 questions and shared a written response with QAA. Where applicable, their reflections have been incorporated under the various key themes outlined below.

Key findings

For the purposes of this summary document, the students' responses to the focus group questions have been discussed under five key themes, namely:

student perceptions of enhancement

student enhancement terminology

student enhancement opportunities

student engagement with enhancement

students as partners

Student perceptions of enhancement

In general, all students who participated in the focus groups, felt enhancement meant '*making things better*'. Similarly, the TQSEG saw enhancement as '*making something better than it is*'. Some of the focus group participants felt the term applied solely to their learning experience, while others felt enhancement was also applicable to all elements of the student experience:

‘ It’s making our life, the student’s life, that bit better, or making it as good as it can potentially be. And I suppose it’s not just looking at the academic side, but also the kind of student life side and what else is on offer outside of the classroom. It’s the overall student experience, both academic and socially, I would say. ’

‘ So maybe we all subconsciously have a sort of basic lower limit that we expect from an institution. You know, the sort of things that we would as a minimum, expect them to deliver and then enhancement might be them delivering a lot more than you might expect. ’

All students recognised that enhancement could involve the whole provider or be at programme or departmental level. Enhancement was often interpreted as '*adding value*' or '*going the extra mile*'.

Evidence-based

For the purpose of its reviews in Wales, QAA defines enhancement as 'using evidence to plan, implement and evaluate deliberate steps intended to improve the student learning experience.' (QER handbook, 2023). While this definition was deliberately not shared with students in the focus groups, so as not to influence their thinking, several students identified the need to ensure enhancement, if it is to be effective, is both planned and evidence-based, and that any changes are fully evaluated. A number of students felt enhancement activities often needed to evolve and grow and they believed spontaneity and creativity were also important in that respect. All felt strongly that small changes or developments were often just as significant and impactful as larger enhancement initiatives, and it was recognised that small changes can often contribute to more extensive developments. It was acknowledged by several that large-scale institutional change can often be hard to implement:


“ So, like, it's identifying a problem, listening to the people who say that they found the problem and doing the utmost, to deal with it in any way possible. So, institutions need to look at big and small in that sense. So, they can plan it, but I think they shouldn't feel the need to stick to the plan. They should be brave and kind of go, ok, let's challenge this, let's improve this, that kind of thing. ”

The TQSEG expressed similar sentiments. While the Group considered enhancement as something that involved deliberate behaviours, they felt it could include more spontaneous and organic developments once the culture of enhancement is embedded. They similarly were of the opinion that there should not be a distinction between large-scale and small-scale changes, in that something that may appear a minor change, could have a major impact on a student's experience.




Programme-based examples of enhancement

Students in the focus groups provided several examples from their own experience to highlight their vision and experience of enhancement. Inclusivity was seen as an essential element of any enhancement activity, as was effective communication. Many of the examples cited related to programme flexible learning opportunities - for example, both FE and HE students referred to timetable changes and the addition of blended learning opportunities, which had enabled them to study at times which were more convenient to them due to other pressures and commitments. Frequently, additional resources and programme-related placement opportunities were also evidenced as examples of enhancement which they, as individuals, had found particularly beneficial:



‘ We’ve got a digital technical library, which is basically like, if you are not sure how to put a zip in or how to do a button, we can just go on and there’s videos there just ready to watch. So we can go back at any time. A couple of staff have taken time out of their lives personally to build that and make that for us. ’

Programme-level enhancement initiatives, driven by their lecturers, were particularly important to the majority of those who attended the focus groups, and such initiatives epitomised the true meaning of enhancement to many of the participants:



‘ Enhancement is all about the people, the staff, and it’s the small things that the staff do to support us. So, it’s our tutors, how they listen to us, how approachable they are, how they’re all really flexible when we come up with ways that they could improve things. ’

Institutional examples of enhancement

Examples of impactful wider institutional strategic developments to enhance the student experience were far more limited. Several students in the focus groups did, however, comment positively on the central student support mechanisms in place at their provider and detailed how they had been able to access these services with staff support. A small number of international students felt that their student experience had been enhanced as a result of recent more equitable fee-paying arrangements, brought about through lobbying by their students' union officers.


This example regarding parity in relation to fee-paying mechanisms, echoes the thoughts of the TQSEG in their written response. The TQSEG stated that for institutional change to take place, it needs to be due to '*big issues*' about which students across the provider feel strongly. For changes to be made in terms of such issues, they suggested strong student leadership is required, such as a proactive students' union officer driving the change.

Student enhancement terminology

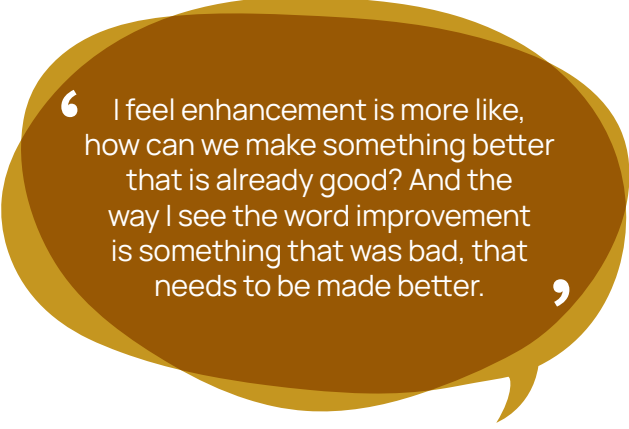
When discussing their definitions of enhancement, the focus groups also considered what words were generally used by their provider to describe '*making things better*'.

Enhancement and improvement

HE students in general were familiar with the term 'enhancement' but did not tend to use it very often themselves. Those in FE, however, were far more familiar with the word 'improvement' in this context, although several commented that they preferred the word enhancement:



“ I would say that enhancement sounds a bit more positive than improvement, even though they both mean the same thing. Improvement kind of sounds a bit more negative. ”



“ I feel enhancement is more like, how can we make something better that is already good? And the way I see the word improvement is something that was bad, that needs to be made better. ”

These student observations concur with Williams (2016) who notes:

“ The use of the words “enhancement” and “improvement” are often interchangeable, as they are in the Oxford English Dictionary, but the terms are often used in subtly different ways. Improvement is often used to refer to a process of bringing an activity up to standard whereas enhancement is about raising to a higher degree, intensifying, or magnifying it. ”

When considering standardisation of terms, under a new more integrated tertiary sector, one FE student made an interesting observation:

“ I think maybe enhancement is a difficult word for some young people coming into college straight from school. I'm not sure they would actually know exactly what you're getting at when you used it. So, it probably is the better word, but I think it's more open to interpretation by younger students. ”


A minority of HE students also recognised this, with one individual considering enhancement ‘a slippery term’, while another felt ‘it was a buzz word’. Several were of the opinion that overuse of the phrase ‘enhancement of the student experience’, sometimes tended to lead to it becoming ‘a bit gimmicky and meaningless’.



Enrichment

Several student officers in the focus groups, noted their familiarity with the term 'enrichment', although they recognised it was not widely used in student-facing documents. A minority considered it to mean the same as enhancement, although most considered it to mean the strengthening of the student experience through different activities rather than purely academic aspects alone. FE students were, in general, more familiar with the term than HE students and cited examples, such as trips to historic buildings and guest speakers from industry.


Other students in the focus groups were not familiar with the term enrichment and neither were the members of the TQSEG who had not heard it used by their lecturers or any other staff members at their universities in Scotland. They discussed what it *could* mean, and they generally felt that it referred to activities outside of the curriculum and the academic experience. One HE focus group participant made the following observation:



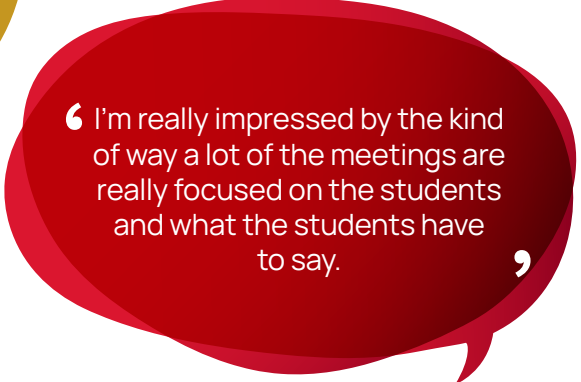
“ I think it would be really useful if definitions of these terms were clearer, sort of advertised a bit more so that we know exactly what an institution means when they use these terms. ”

Student enhancement opportunities

All students in the focus groups were very positive about the range of opportunities available to them to contribute towards enhancing their provision and generally felt that the providers were keen to listen to what they had to say, particularly at school or department level, so any issues they had could hopefully be resolved.



“ I think, in terms of enhancement, the university is very open to hearing feedback, which I think is very important because the only way enhancement can happen is if people in higher positions are willing to hear. And if they think there is something that is required by the university, the staff will do everything in their power to try and implement that change. ”



“ I'm really impressed by the kind of way a lot of the meetings are really focused on the students and what the students have to say. ”

A number of student-voice mechanisms were raised by the groups, including:

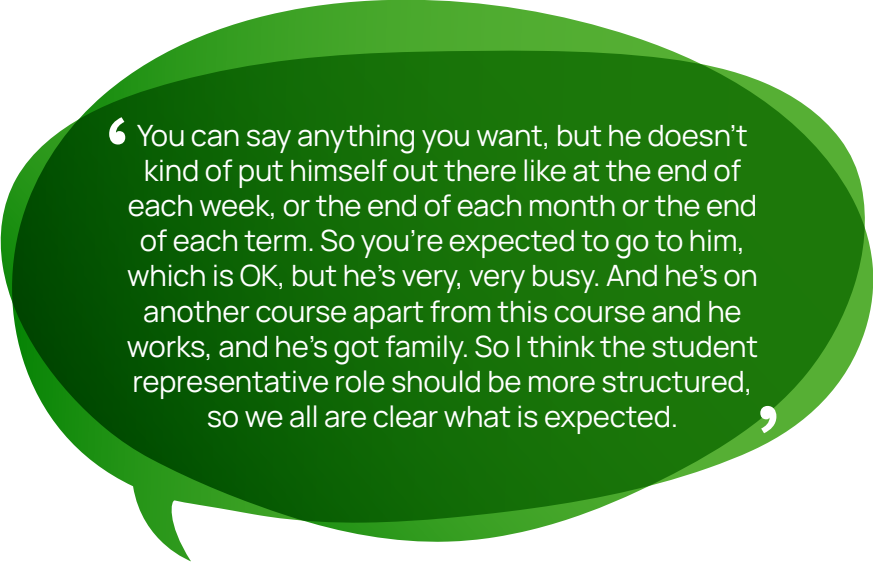
- programme/school representatives
- informal discussions and dialogue with staff
- anonymous online feedback
- module questionnaires.

Discussions focused on the effectiveness of these mechanisms, including whether or not students felt they were made aware of any changes or enhancements as result of any input by them. Some HE students also noted that they were represented on key university committees, although there appeared to be a slight variation between providers in terms of what committees included a student representative. Both those in the focus groups and the TQSEG were of the opinion that official committees of this nature generally drove enhancement on a provider level, while programme representatives actively supported enhancement at faculty level.

Programme/school representatives


All students who took part in the focus groups had an individual who represented their programme in meetings at school or departmental level. That said, the student representative system appeared more developed and structured in certain providers, with one group of FE students noting that this was their first year of having formal class representatives, which was a development from more informal class discussions in previous years. An HE student in another group stated that they felt the system at their provider was '*a bit haphazard*', and that there was inconsistency in representation across programmes.

Student-voice reporting mechanisms naturally varied slightly across providers, with some individuals referring to both programme representatives and school representatives, while another institution also had a student champion scheme, whereby students had the opportunity to undertake a paid student-voice role for a small number of hours per month. HE in FE was in all instances supported by a specific student representative and several students commented positively on this. A minority of students across more than one provider were of the opinion that programme or school representatives sometimes were not visible enough, which meant they did not know who to turn to with particular concerns. It was also suggested by individuals from one college, that a clearer indication of the time commitment and expectations of the role would help formalise the role:



“ You can say anything you want, but he doesn't kind of put himself out there like at the end of each week, or the end of each month or the end of each term. So you're expected to go to him, which is OK, but he's very, very busy. And he's on another course apart from this course and he works, and he's got family. So I think the student representative role should be more structured, so we all are clear what is expected. ”

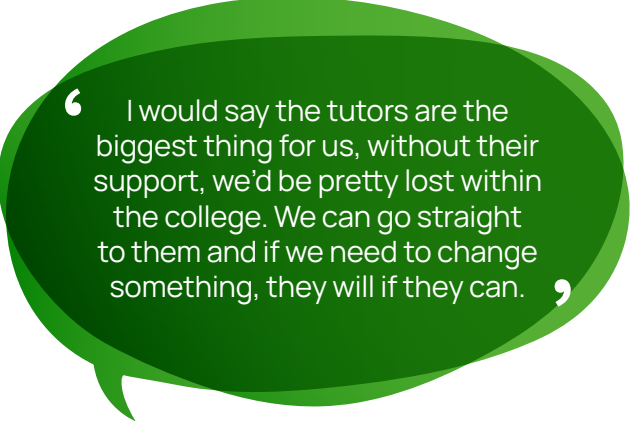
Several of those who took part in the groups were themselves student representatives and they outlined why they undertook the role and how they collected feedback. They appeared highly motivated, and they saw the role as a positive and effective means of bringing about enhancement and change on a programme level, as well as enabling personal development opportunities. Several did acknowledge, however, that getting feedback from other students could often be challenging, as did the TQSEG in their written response. A number of programme/school representatives from providers in Wales, stated they had created WhatsApp groups, or specific Microsoft Teams channels, as a means of obtaining feedback, while others, depending on the cohort size, chose to speak directly with their peers on a programme. Another student commented on the success of focus groups as a means of obtaining feedback quickly, thereby enabling prompt action:



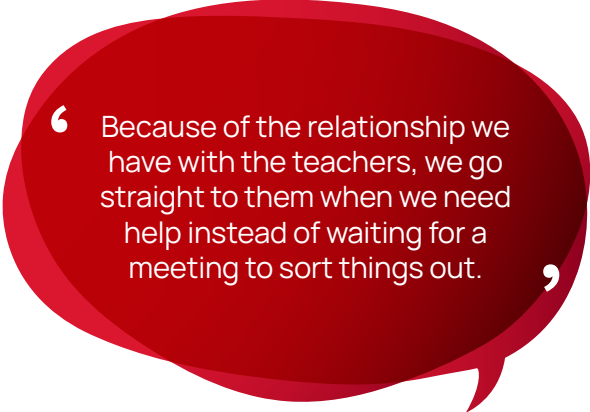
“ Focus groups have been really effective through my work as a student champion. You can have a very diverse range of students from lots of different courses and backgrounds representing different social groups, and we can get lots of perspectives on one issue or one area all in one go. And I think it's just a more comfortable setting compared to a meeting. ”

Informal discussions and dialogue with staff

While several students stated that they felt comfortable taking any concerns or suggestions for improvement to a student programme or school representative, those at FE level particularly, emphasised their relationship with their tutors and the benefit of informal dialogue. They saw their tutor as the first point of call when seeking to improve their learning experience or resolve a particular issue, with their tutor being the prime instigator of change:



“ I would say the tutors are the biggest thing for us, without their support, we'd be pretty lost within the college. We can go straight to them and if we need to change something, they will if they can. ”



“ Because of the relationship we have with the teachers, we go straight to them when we need help instead of waiting for a meeting to sort things out. ”

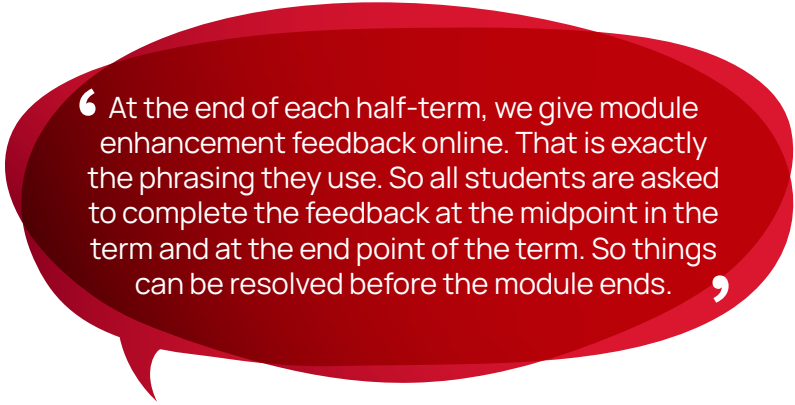
Anonymous electronic feedback

Several students, particularly those in HE, noted that they could provide electronic feedback through a range of apps such as Padlet. One student representative explained how part of their role is to ensure any online feedback is then escalated to the appropriate individual or office. Another provider has QR codes located in a wide range of locations including the library and the cafés, and these are often highlighted at the start of lectures. Many students commented positively on the inclusive nature of anonymous online feedback, as any student could submit observations, concerns and suggestions at any time. A minority, however, did feel that they would have appreciated greater guidance and support in relation to how to use the various online feedback opportunities available through their provider.


Module questionnaires

Many FE and HE students spoke in detail about their regular module questionnaires. They felt that these were often effective, in that issues at school or programme level raised here, were generally resolved very quickly.

Some felt more comfortable providing feedback online as they felt they could be more honest and open through such an anonymous mechanism. It was acknowledged, however, that engagement with online module questionnaires was often disappointing, and some could recognise the benefit of classroom-based questionnaires from a provider perspective.




“ At the end of each half-term, we give module enhancement feedback online. That is exactly the phrasing they use. So all students are asked to complete the feedback at the midpoint in the term and at the end point of the term. So things can be resolved before the module ends. ”



“ They are very, very hot on getting feedback at the end of an individual module, they hand out questionnaires in the class, which you do before you leave. And they do encourage you to be open and honest about what went well. They ask what you think they could improve on, and what did you enjoy or what did you least enjoy. ”

Closing the loop

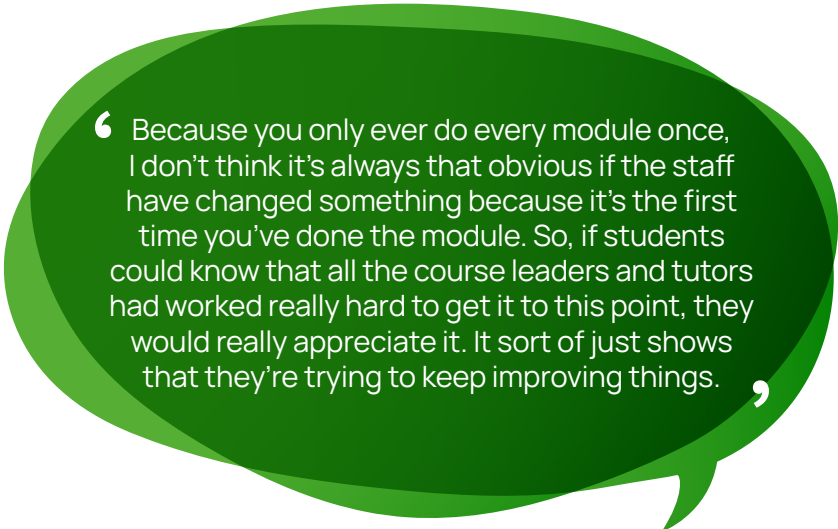
The majority of those who attended the focus groups felt that their school or department effectively communicated any enhancements actioned as a result of student feedback, as well as explaining why certain points raised could not be taken forward:



‘ They send out weekly letters through e-mail just giving us updates on what’s happened, any changes that have been made, even if it’s for a completely different campus. They’re really good at telling us what’s going on and keeping us in the loop. ’

Email is a popular mode of communication, although several students also stated that the university or college VLE is also used to provide updates. Most providers have termly staff-student consultative committees or similar and the formal minutes of these are similarly placed on the provider’s VLE. Several student representatives acknowledged that not all students would necessarily know where to look for school or departmental updates of this nature, or read their emails in detail, and therefore as part of their role as student representatives, they also disseminate any feedback as a means of enhancing and strengthening the feedback process. A minority of student officers from more than one provider, however, did feel that the students’ union was not always made aware of how school or departmental concerns had been acted upon, and they felt that this element in the feedback loop could be strengthened.

One student also suggested that more could be made in the teaching sessions themselves about how the learner voice had impacted positively on their academic experience:



‘ Because you only ever do every module once, I don’t think it’s always that obvious if the staff have changed something because it’s the first time you’ve done the module. So, if students could know that all the course leaders and tutors had worked really hard to get it to this point, they would really appreciate it. It sort of just shows that they’re trying to keep improving things. ’

Student engagement with enhancement

As noted in the previous section, student representatives found that getting other students to engage with internal student-voice initiatives was often difficult, although financial incentives were considered a definite attraction in relation to major developmental initiatives including programme validations, along with other external enhancement opportunities. The TQSEG similarly felt students should be paid for significant time given to enhancement work, although they noted that financial motivations are only one reason why students choose to take part in such activities. There was general consensus among the focus groups that a lack of time, rather than a lack of interest, was often the main barrier to participation in student-voice mechanisms, despite the varied and flexible feedback opportunities in place at most providers:

‘ Once students leave campus on Thursday, they’re back on the treadmill again, trying to make sure they can get everything done. And trying to fit even like an hour in is sometimes just impossible. So, it’s just the burdens of life really, rather than people not wanting to do it. ’

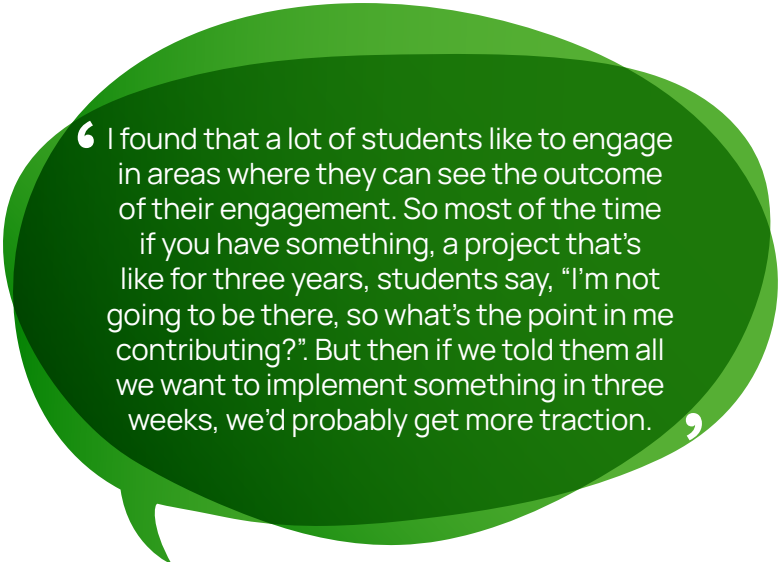
‘ I think people are just busy and you get a small number of students who are constantly moaning about everything and not really bringing up solutions. ’

Several focus group participants commented on the impact the quality of the learning experience had on their motivation to engage in enhancement. Several felt that if the quality of the teaching was ‘good,’ then this encouraged them to engage, because they wanted to help their lecturers ‘*make things even better*’. This feeling of belonging, and enhancing their community through working with their lecturers, came across in several groups, regardless of the level of the provision. In general, students felt more detached from their school or department if the quality of the provision was ‘*disappointing*’ or ‘*disorganised*’. A minority of HE students were of the opinion that more could be made of the personal tutor system as a means of encouraging engagement with enhancement and nurturing a sense of belonging – particularly in subject areas with fewer group activities, such as field trips or laboratory work, which can help nurture a feeling of togetherness and community.



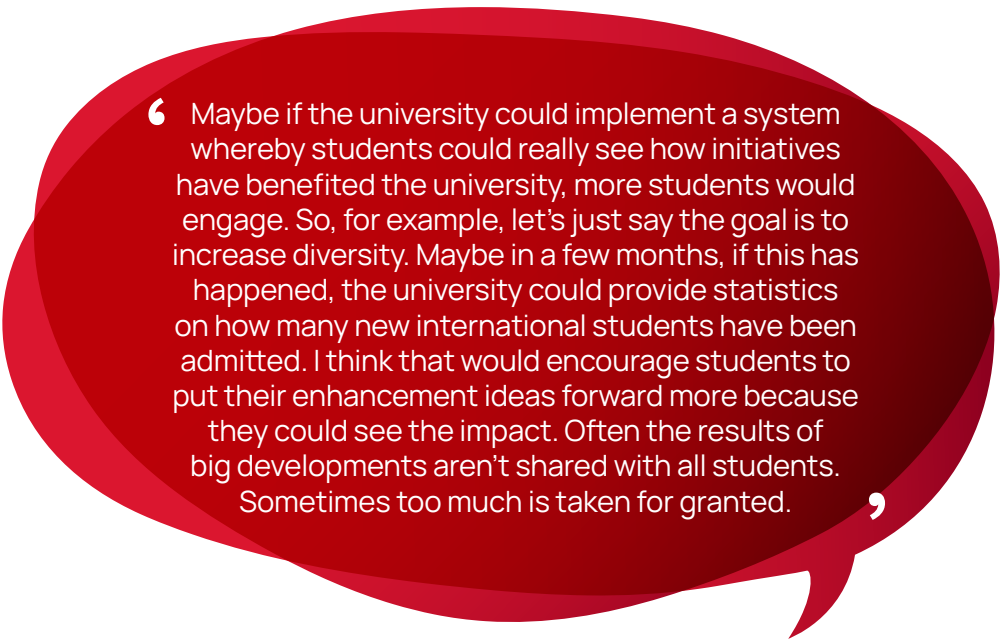
Student officers

While students tended to focus on engagement at programme or discipline level, student officers naturally emphasised impact and outcomes linked to larger strategic initiatives, due to their strategic involvement in such activities. Their observations were similar to those raised by the TQSEG who noted that students will not engage unless they see the value of doing so. The observation on the right from one student officer, summarises the opinions of other officers who participated in the focus groups.



“ I found that a lot of students like to engage in areas where they can see the outcome of their engagement. So most of the time if you have something, a project that’s like for three years, students say, “I’m not going to be there, so what’s the point in me contributing?”. But then if we told them all we want to implement something in three weeks, we’d probably get more traction. ”

Student officers also felt more needed to be done to make wider groups of students aware of the impact of larger strategic initiatives undertaken in providers, as this would hopefully encourage greater involvement in future enhancement activities.



“ Maybe if the university could implement a system whereby students could really see how initiatives have benefited the university, more students would engage. So, for example, let’s just say the goal is to increase diversity. Maybe in a few months, if this has happened, the university could provide statistics on how many new international students have been admitted. I think that would encourage students to put their enhancement ideas forward more because they could see the impact. Often the results of big developments aren’t shared with all students. Sometimes too much is taken for granted. ”


Students as partners

Students and staff working together in partnership 'appears to be a key component in successfully enhancing the learning experience' (Millard et al, 2013). This came across strongly in the TQSEG's written response. A partnership model implies that the views of all have value and are given appropriate consideration. As stressed by Gravett et al (2019), a partnership implies treating students 'as more than customers'.

The students who took part in the focus groups had mixed opinions regarding the concept of students as partners, with opinions varying slightly among different cohorts of individuals depending on their experiences.

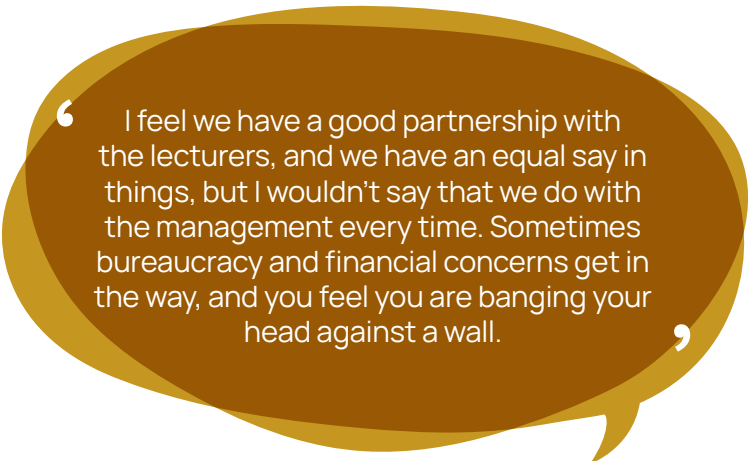
Student officers and programme representatives

Student officers and programme or school representatives in the HEIs - due to their wider involvement in the enhancement of the student experience through official committees and other mechanisms - generally felt strongly that students were seen as equal partners. However, as previously indicated, they were also very aware of the broader challenge of student engagement that sometimes hindered joint-working, both at school and provider level.



“ We're partners because we're treated as equals in any conversation. And quite often there will be, you know, a fair balance between the number of academics present in a meeting and the number of students. It's also made visible to the whole university community that they value students as equals to academics. ”

Some, however, felt that this partnership model was primarily with the teaching staff:



“ I feel we have a good partnership with the lecturers, and we have an equal say in things, but I wouldn't say that we do with the management every time. Sometimes bureaucracy and financial concerns get in the way, and you feel you are banging your head against a wall. ”

The wider student body

Many FE and HE students, without specific student-voice roles, stated that they were treated as 'equals', and that their provider '*had their best interests at heart*'. That said, most were less sure of the meaning and validity of the phrase 'students as partners', with a minority of individuals feeling that high fees supported the idea of students as clients or customers:

The size of the programme cohort in some instances influenced students' perceptions of their relationship with their provider. Several who had experience of more than one programme or school, stated that smaller cohorts meant they got to know their lecturers better and therefore, they often felt '*more equal*' as a result. The nature of the programme also influenced thinking, as indicated by the following quotation from a mature student on a part-time programme:

“ Because students are paying so much, they're a bit more demanding. I think students and staff cooperate with each other, but obviously their roles are very different. Obviously, they want feedback from us because they want us to do well, but also they want their institution to do well. So, I think there's cooperation there, but I don't think I would use the word partnership. ”

“ I don't feel it's a partnership, not because of anything that the college is doing or isn't doing. I just feel that there's just no time, you know, we attend one day a week, we just come, we do and we go. I think it's just the way the course is, and it's a different experience. I think that is what it is. It's not a partnership. ”


There was notably greater variation in the responses here, than in relation to the other key themes addressed. This variation, together with other significant points arising from the focus groups, is considered further under the next section.



Discussion and conclusions

The focus groups, evidenced above, proved a fruitful mechanism for capturing views from individuals undertaking a range of full-time and part-time programmes in HE and FE in Wales, supported by a small sample in Scotland. Many of their definitions of enhancement were similar to each other, as indicated by the various personal examples of enhancement given, which focused primarily on the students' learning experiences. That said, the fact that some felt enhancement related solely to their academic experience, while others interpreted enhancement more broadly, indicates the scope in developing further a culture of continuous improvement across the tertiary sector - which supports a clear interpretation and vision of enhancement and is identifiable by all. In this context, the evidence from the focus groups also suggests consideration should be given to the terminology surrounding enhancement, thereby ensuring a consistent and relatable approach across both FE and HE.

Evidence suggests that all providers have a wide and accessible range of student-voice mechanisms in place, and it was encouraging to hear that all participants in this project felt that they had a number of varied opportunities to submit their thoughts and suggestions to their provider. Their responses concur with the latest National Student Survey (NSS) results (2024), based on the responses of final-year undergraduates in higher education. These results show Wales to be above the UK average positivity measure of 74% for Student Voice, and the strongest of the four nations with 75.8%. Some of the providers in Wales appear to have more established mechanisms in place than others, but it is hoped that with the growing focus on collaboration across the sector, moving forward, there will be increased opportunities for the sharing of good practice and ideas regarding learner-voice and student engagement, thereby strengthening further the Wales NSS result. There remains the potential for a more consistent and inclusive student-voice approach, while also recognising the individual nature and focus of the various tertiary sector providers, and the breadth of learning provision available. Proactive programme representatives, for example, often do a great deal to support the enhancement agenda, but there may be opportunities to support their involvement further in some providers, while also encouraging recruitment and defining expectations, through the provision of clear role descriptors. As noted by the TQSEG:



“ Lots of students do a great deal in the rep role but they don't have 'evidence' or 'proof' of this. Certification is a good way to give evidence of engagement, as well as supporting students to talk about the rep role when they are applying for jobs. ”

One point that came across clearly from the focus groups and was also raised in some meetings with stakeholders, such as NUS Wales, is that students often do not feel they have the time to engage in enhancement initiatives, due to personal and/or work commitments. Their studies are often simply one element of their busy lives. The nature of the evolving student community and the growth of non-traditional part-time or intensive models needs to be considered carefully when developing feedback mechanisms and enhancement initiatives which are driving quality at provider level.

Along with time restraints, impact featured strongly in the focus group discussions on engagement, as has been suggested by some of the earlier student quotations. Student-voice feedback, particularly at school or department level, sometimes naturally focuses on short or mid-term outcomes. However, several students felt it would be valuable if providers raised greater awareness among the student body of the longer-term impact of successful, student-driven enhancement initiatives - regardless of whether they are strategic or operational in nature. Some providers may wish to consider this further as a means of strengthening learner engagement, particularly in relation to recruitment to enhancement-focused student roles. As noted by the TQSEG, other students are also more likely to engage if they can see individuals 'like them' in key roles.

Finally, one aspect which did produce a number of differing opinions was the question of 'students as partners'. While the majority in the focus groups felt they were treated as equals, the general student population, as opposed to the student officers, were less likely to consider the relationship with their provider in terms of a partnership, as indicated previously. This is to be expected to a certain extent due to their lesser involvement on a strategic level. Nevertheless, it would be good to see the feeling of community and belonging, expressed by several FE and HE students in relation to their school or department, extend more widely across their provider, as this has been shown to have a positive impact on retention (Tinto, 2017). With one of the strategic principles of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education 2024 being engaging students as partners, and the planned development of a Learner Engagement Code by Medr, further dialogue around the partnership model may be timely. Such a dialogue could focus on strengthening the inclusive nature of such a model, thereby ensuring all students feel they have the opportunity to be active participants in the enhancement of student-facing policies and practices.

Despite the general recognition of the importance of students in developing a quality enhancement agenda, limited research has been undertaken directly on student perceptions of enhancement and how they feel they contribute to the shaping of the student learning experience. It is hoped, therefore, that this project will lead to further development work in this field, and the embedding of an even stronger co-created enhancement culture across the tertiary sector in Wales.

Potential next steps

1. Confirmation and clarification across the HE and FE sector on using the term *enhancement* and associated definitions.

Aim: Clarity and consistency of terms for staff and students and therefore ability to further develop the concept of students as partners.

Suggested method: Focus groups with providers, annual liaison meetings with QAA, consideration of these terms in the development of Medr's learner engagement mechanisms (for example, Learner Engagement Code).

2. Development of consistent and inclusive student-voice mechanisms across the HE and FE sector.

Aim: Student-voice mechanisms are reflective of the student and provider context, and consistently applied and developed effectively across the sector.

Suggested method: A student-voice symposium, co-ordinated by Medr and led by students, to consider alternative ways of encouraging student engagement, particularly from part-time and work-based students. This activity would also support the development of the Learner Engagement Code by Medr and help generate ideas to enable all students to actively participate in decision-making within their provider. A short publication on the theme of student voice, summarising the symposium outcomes, would support long-term impact from the event.

3. Promoting effective practice in student-voice mechanisms.

Aim: Promotion of sector enhancement on effective methods of promoting student voice and engagement mechanisms across all modes and ranges of study.

Suggested method: A symposium event to highlight the good practice in this report, and further afield, would share practices across the HE and FE sector. The criteria for case studies/ contributions should include creating a representative sample across different parts of HE and FE, modes of study and student context. Following the event, case studies should be published to promote further engagement and enhancement. This would also build on the OB3 Research undertaken in 2019 and published in 2020, bringing new and more recent case studies to light.

4. Supporting providers to embed and shape an enhancement-led approach to student voice.

Aim: Student-voice mechanisms are embedded within the provider, with clear and effective structures.

Suggested method: A QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project to consider effective practice in organisational structures in student representation across a range of HE and FE providers and their integration with quality mechanisms. This study could consider examples outside of Wales that operate within an enhancement-led approach to quality within a tertiary system, such as Scotland and New Zealand.

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Annex 1: Focus group questions

1. What does the term 'enhancement' / 'improvement' mean to you in the context of your experience as a student?
2. Is 'enhancement' / 'improvement' something spontaneous or a planned, deliberate development?
3. Do you see it as a major change, or could it be something small?
4. Can you give me examples of 'enhancement' / 'improvement' from your university/college experience?
5. Do you prefer 'enhancement' or 'improvement' when referring to the student learning experience or are both words fine and their meaning clear?
6. Are you familiar with the word 'enrichment' in relation to your academic experience and does it mean something different to you to 'enhancement' / 'improvement'?
7. Do you feel you have the opportunity to make your programme better and a role in any decision-making?
8. What makes students want to engage in student-voice mechanisms?
9. What works well in terms of student-voice mechanisms in your university/college?
10. Is there anything that doesn't work so well in your opinion?
11. How do you get to know what enhancements have been made as a result of student feedback?
12. What could be done do you think to help strengthen student involvement in enhancement activities in your university/college?
13. Do you think your university/college works in partnership with the student community to bring about change and, if so, do see yourselves as equal partners?
14. Is there anything else you would like to add in relation to how you see 'enhancement' / 'improvement'?

Annex 2: Project contributors

QAA would like to thank students and student officers from the following providers for their willingness to contribute to this project, together with members of sparqs' Tertiary Quality Student Expert Group:

- Aberystwyth University
- Bangor University
- Cardiff University
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