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## Report of focus group research on 'Responding to Students Needs'

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## **Enhancement Themes: Responding to Student Needs**

### **Report of Focus Group Research by CHERI, May 2004**

#### **FORWARD by Professor John Harper, Chair, Steering Committee for Responding to Student Needs**

The last twenty years have seen steady expansion in student numbers, and an increasing diversity of students undertaking HE programmes, many entering from non-traditional routes, with non-standard qualifications. Whilst embracing widening participation, the HE sector in the UK is facing a major challenge to adapt traditional styles of course delivery and learner support to mass higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In Scotland we are rightly proud that our participation rate approaches 50%, but this is a profound change which, is driving us to develop styles of delivery and support systems, which will be more responsive to student needs, and enable them better to progress and develop their full potential. Through the Enhancement Themes we are taking a sector-wide strategic approach to innovation and development, in order to maximise the potential of the Scottish HE sector to learn from current national and international good practice, and to adapt these models to suit institutional needs.

The CHERI Report provides an account of the outcomes of Focus Group research undertaken in Scottish HEI's in late 2003, on the themes 'Student Support in the First Year of Study', and 'Student Evaluation of and Feedback on Their Learning Experience'. The diversity of views contained in the report reflects the rich diversity of the sector, but the report also demonstrates a strong consensus that many current systems and methods, are no longer as effective in supporting the greater diversity and more complex needs of students today. This is in no way to diminish or understate the considerable levels of local development currently being undertaken. With regard to 'Student Support in the First year of Study', four key topics have been identified for further research: induction, student support systems, coordination and integration of academic and student support, and models for first year learning. Similarly, a need has been identified to develop more sophisticated methods of student evaluation and feedback on their learning experience, such as to allow students to contribute more productively, and benefit from a more effective engagement.

The enhancement agenda represents an exciting opportunity to develop innovative and varied solutions to these problems, which institutions can utilise to enhance current practices, and maintain the quality which is a hallmark of the Scottish HE sector. Two development projects are now underway, addressing these different strands of work. The Conference on Responding to Student Needs on 8 June will afford the Project Teams an excellent opportunity to discuss the issues with practitioners, in the break-out sessions, and shape their ongoing work accordingly. I look forward with anticipation to the outcomes of these projects.

Professor John Harper  
31 May 2003

## **Enhancement Themes: Responding to Student Needs**

### **1. Introduction to the enhancement themes**

One of the two SHEFC/QAA Quality Enhancement Themes for 2003–2004 was 'Responding to Student Needs'<sup>1</sup>. The Steering Committee for this theme decided to pursue two sector-wide projects, one in relation to *student support in the first year of study* and the other in relation to *student evaluation of and feedback on their learning experience*. The aim of the enhancement theme was to gain an overall picture of issues facing institutions, practitioners and students in relation to student needs and student feedback, and to ensure that the development work carried out by the Steering Committee reflected the needs of the sector.

The aim of the Student Support project was to investigate student needs in Scottish higher education institutions (HEIs), and to identify the areas to be targeted for improved student support.

The aim of the Student Feedback project was to determine the main issues and barriers to improving practice in collecting and using student evaluation of and feedback on their learning experience, and the extent to which the findings of a recent Higher Education Funding Council for England study were reflected in the current practice and experience of Scottish HEIs.

Both projects were undertaken through a consultation process using focus groups of staff and students in each HEI. These were supported by an Enhancement Project Interview Team drawn from senior administrators in Scottish HEIs. The members of this team were responsible for running the focus groups and writing up the reports. These were then analysed by researchers from the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) at the Open University.

The method adopted for the project permitted a quite wide range of inputs from across Scottish higher education. But it did not allow the follow-up of particular ideas or developments in any detail. And while the project found a high degree of consensus about the importance of the issues of first year support and student feedback, it found relatively little consensus about how these issues should best be tackled. Thus, this report records a wide range of experiences and approaches within Scottish HEIs. The differences between them reflect differences in institutional contexts, experiences and preferences. The project did not provide a basis for choosing between the different approaches. To do so would require more detailed evidence about contexts, methods and effectiveness. It would also require that institutional experiences be set within the broader context of teaching and learning research.

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<sup>1</sup> The other theme for 2003-04 was Assessment.

## Quality Enhancement Themes- Steering Committee for Responding to Student Needs

### 2. Executive summary

#### Introduction and background

The SHEFC/QAA Steering Committee for Responding to Student Needs commissioned two projects during 2003-04: one on *student support in the first year of study* and the other on *student evaluation of and feedback on their learning experiences*. The projects were undertaken using a consultation process of student and staff focus groups in Scottish higher education institutions. The conclusions and recommendations arising from the analysis of the focus group reports are outlined below.

#### Student support in the first year of study

The need to support a diverse student body in Scottish higher education is not new. It is clear from the analysis of the focus group reports, especially the senior staff groups, that many institutions have years of experience of supporting a very diverse student body. Many have well established strategies and practices, and have dedicated staff to provide a range of academic support and support services. Many institutions hold open days and induction events, and others have developed special courses to help 'non-traditional' students before they enrol in higher education; a number have invested in designing curricula which embed academic support and learning skills development.

However, the focus groups identified a range of issues where current provision is insufficient to support the greater diversity and more complex needs of students today. Student support systems, administrative infrastructure, application of technology, and staff development all need to be further developed, if these issues are to be addressed.

#### *Preparing students and their parents/families*

1. The student groups held mixed views about whether they felt prepared, both academically and socially, for the 'whole university' experience. Reasons for feeling ill-prepared included lack of information and insufficient or inadequate preparatory events. Staff groups tended to feel that many students and their parents/families had unrealistic expectations about higher education, both in respect of the institutional environment and the expected learning styles. Staff accepted that better ways of preparing students needed to be found.

**Action:** The Scottish higher education sector may wish to consider looking at ways to improve the preparation of students and their parents/families before they enter higher education. They might also consider reviewing the first year learning experience and explore ways of further embedding the development of learning skills and an ethos of support. A sector-wide approach might consider identifying existing good practice, both nationally and internationally, and disseminating it to the sector.

#### *Liaison with schools and further education colleges*

2. The message from the staff groups, especially senior staff, was that good links between schools or further education colleges (FECs) and HEIs are essential. Most staff groups mentioned the work their institutions were already doing with schools and FECs - and the majority felt that this work was important in helping to prepare students and their parents/families. However, both staff groups also

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recognised that their institutions could do more to counter the mismatch of expectations. But should they? Some of the groups questioned where that responsibility should lie – should it be the responsibility of schools, FECs, HEIs, or should it be a shared responsibility?

Many links have already been successfully established between HEIs, schools and FECs.

**Action:** a sector-wide approach to gathering and disseminating good practice should be considered. It will also be important to establish greater clarity and agreement across the sectors about where responsibilities lie for the preparation of students for HE study/experience.

### *Staff induction and development*

3. Not all staff are sufficiently aware of student needs and require help to identify them with particular students. This was the view of the staff groups, especially senior staff, when asked whether additional staff induction and development was needed – at the *pre-entry phase*. Some groups felt it should be available to all staff, not just those that were new to the institution. A number of the mixed staff groups pointed to the problems of making time and resources available and dealing with conflicting priorities. Staff groups were also in favour of additional forms of induction and development at the *on-course phase*, although similar issues were raised as for the pre-entry phase. A few groups did discuss whether this induction and development should be targeted at all staff or focused on staff in centrally provided support services, although the views expressed were mixed.

**Action:** The Scottish higher education sector may wish to consider whether staff development (and induction of new staff) arrangements are taking sufficient account of the current diversity of student intakes. This should be undertaken in conjunction with the proposed action in 6 below.

### *Publicising services*

4. The 'new' students groups were less positive than the groups of 'experienced' students when asked about the extent to which they were aware of the central support services and academic support provision available to them. The new students felt they had to seek it out. A number of the student groups felt that awareness and accessibility could be improved using both online/electronic methods as well as hard copy.

Better publicity of services was also mentioned by a number of the staff groups. This would seem to be especially important given that the majority of senior staff and a significant minority of mixed staff focus groups felt that specific types of students should not be identified and targeted pre-entry or on-course, but that students should be encouraged to 'buy-in' to a service. If this is to avoid 'missing' the students most in need of support, such an approach needs to ensure that *all* students are at least aware of and are able to access the relevant support services.

**Action:** The Scottish higher education sector should investigate with representatives of student organisations how services might be more efficiently and effectively publicised, and especially how new technology might be used.

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### *When to publicise*

5. Induction is not a good time to tell students about support services. This was the view of the majority of student groups. Instead a continuous or gradual dissemination of information was recommended (i.e., before entry, at entry and during the higher education experience). This view was echoed by the majority of mixed staff groups. Suggestions about how to improve the publicity of services, including the use of new technology, were made by a number of the student groups. The importance of new technology was endorsed by the senior manager groups and a number of groups felt that the full potential of IT had yet to be exploited.

**Action:** In combination with 4 above, the Scottish higher education sector might wish to investigate with students what information is needed and at what time.

### *Coordination between the centre and academic departments*

6. The majority of staff groups agreed that there was a need for greater coordination between centrally provided services and those provided by academic departments. A number of HEIs have recognised that coordination problems exist and are reviewing current practice. Factors relevant to achieving good coordination included: the importance of good communications, the need to understand the different roles/services available at different locations, and the benefits of team work. Other staff groups, while recognising the need for greater coordination, pointed to the tensions between central and academic units regarding resource allocations, the problems of staff turnover and demarcation of roles.

While the need for improvement was generally shared among the staff groups, there was little discussion about who should have responsibility for what i.e., what should be coordinated and delivered at the centre and what should be the responsibility of academic departments. As highlighted above, a few groups touched upon the issue by highlighting the lack of clarity between the 'tutor' and the 'specialist/central' roles – where does one start and the other finish? Again, the circumstances of different departments need to be taken into account regarding, for example, staff/student ratios and curricular organisation.

**Action:** The Scottish higher education sector might wish to consider ways of improving the organisation and coordination of support services. A sector-wide approach might consider identifying good practice, both nationally and internationally, and the findings disseminated to the sector.

## **Student evaluation of and feedback on their learning experiences**

The majority of students did not seem to know why their institutions collected student feedback and what happened to it. But they wanted to know. Students valued being asked their opinions and wanted to be treated as full partners in the process. Overall, it was clear from the responses made by the focus groups that current approaches to collecting and using student feedback need to be improved, and students need to be more engaged in the process. Half the senior staff groups felt that their institution's objectives with regard to the collection and use of student feedback were only being achieved partially.

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The main points to come out of the analysis of the staff and student focus groups are as follows.

### *Transparency of purpose and use*

1. The majority of students were not told why their institutions wanted to find out what they thought about their studies. (This may be because teaching staff are not clear themselves about why it was being collected – although this hypothesis was not tested out in the focus groups.) Those students that were told why it was collected reported that they were informed by their tutors or that the purpose was printed on the questionnaire. Some were told it would benefit future students, although one group felt that in doing so they were being treated 'like guinea pigs'.

A key point for clarification is 'what need or problem is student feedback meant to address'? Staff and student groups identified a range of purposes (which might be indicative of confusion over purpose) in the collection and use of student feedback but often these purposes were couched in very general or vague terms. For example, 'to improve teaching and learning' was identified by both staff and student groups to varying extents, but it is not clear from the focus group reports (or the questions asked) whether the collection of student feedback was in fact helping to improve teaching and learning. Different aspects of teaching and learning might require different approaches to feedback. For example, an approach that is intended to result in actions by an individual teacher to improve his/her performance might be different from the approach taken by a programme team to improve the content of the curriculum, or that by an institution to improve the accessibility of the library. An institution might be effective in resolving issues at some levels but not at others. A related point, therefore, is 'are the mechanisms that are being used to collect student feedback achieving their intended purpose'?

One of the main findings of the HEFCE study<sup>2</sup> was that clarity of purpose is key and that all involved in the collection and use of student feedback, including students, need to be clear about the purposes and intended uses of the data. Furthermore, it also concluded that use of a range of feedback mechanisms will be more effective than reliance on a single one, for example questionnaires. This conclusion appears to be fully consistent with the Scottish experience.

**Action:** The Scottish higher education sector might wish to give further consideration to the purposes of student feedback at all the levels within institutions at which feedback is collected and used, and ensure that the mechanisms used are appropriate for the intended purpose. They should also explore ways of ensuring that information about 'purpose' is disseminated effectively to students as well as staff.

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<sup>2</sup> Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (Open University), NOP Research Group and SQW Ltd (2003), *Collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in HE*. Bristol: HEFCE ([www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2003/rd08\\_03/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2003/rd08_03/))

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### *The value of informal feedback*

2. All institutions were operating a range of mechanisms to collect student feedback. However, when asked about the effectiveness of the mechanisms in use (which ones students most engaged with? which worked best?), the most common mechanism identified by the student groups was informal/face-to-face feedback. This was echoed by the 'mixed' staff groups.

However, it was not clear from the focus group reports *why* face-to-face feedback was so useful and what it achieved. Given the value placed on it, should institutions rely on it more? Would it be safe to do so, given differences in staff student ratios and curricular organisation and the implications these have for relationships between students and staff? There is a further issue of whether face-to-face feedback can provide an institution (rather than an individual teacher) with sufficiently robust evidence to provide a basis for action.

Resource constraints and staff student ratios do not allow institutions to rely completely on face-to-face feedback through traditional tutorial arrangements.

**Action:** a sector-wide approach should be considered to identifying and exploring alternative ways for institutions to provide some opportunities for face-to-face feedback for all students.

### *The role of the student representative*

3. The majority of the senior staff groups reported that their institutions provided institutional and student union support for student representatives. Students and staff valued the role of the student representative and the staff student liaison committees (SSLCs). Some of the student focus groups cited the student representative and the SSLC as ways in which their institutions ensured that student feedback was taken seriously by students. They were also cited by students and staff as the most effective mechanisms and the most useful aspect of student feedback after informal/face-to-face feedback. At the same time, there was recognition that student representation was often not very effective. Some students reported that the student representative system was not well known, that recruiting students was a problem and that training needed to be extended or improved. While staff appeared supportive of the student representative role, there was a feeling that recruitment, the representativeness of those elected/selected, and the training provided for them, all needed to be improved.

Improving the student representation system was also a recommendation made by the HEFCE study. In particular that study concluded that the importance of the role of student representatives should be recognised by staff at all levels and by students, that student unions should be more involved in awareness raising and training in the role, that where training is provided by the student union full co-operation should be provided by staff at all levels, and that time should be made available to student representatives to allow them to gather and feed back issues to the student body.

**Action:** The Scottish higher education sector might similarly wish to consider the student representative role by in collaboration with representatives of student organisations and SPARQS (Student Participation in Quality in Scotland).

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### *Improving communication about results and actions*

4. The majority of student focus groups reported that there was little or no communication of results of or actions arising from student feedback (including the reasons for not taking actions). Students felt quite strongly that poor communication between staff and students was one of the main issues and problems that impeded the effective use of student feedback. To counter this, more effective use of the student representative and SSLC roles and further exploration of email and web technology to communicate the consequences of feedback would be welcomed by students.

Improving the student representative role and the use of new technology were also identified by some of the staff focus groups as ways of improving the effective use of student feedback. (Of the main issues and problems identified by the staff focus groups, lack of resources, lack of student engagement and the recruitment, representativeness and training of student representatives were mentioned by a number.)

Both this current study and the HEFCE study found that most students are interested in the results of feedback. Students see considerable efforts put into collecting feedback data which are often not matched by the efforts put into their analysis and use. Suggestions of ways to improve the dissemination of results and actions arising from feedback back to students have been made by a number of the student focus groups in this study and by the HEFCE study.

**Action:** The Scottish higher education sector might wish to give further consideration, with representatives of student organisations, about how best to improve feedback to students.

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### 3. The context of the two projects

#### *Student support in the first year of study*

Given the ever-widening range of students in higher education, the variety of delivery methods in use and the personal, social and economic factors that influence the student experience, the Steering Committee for Responding to Student Needs considered that a holistic approach to responding to student needs was appropriate. The premise that underpinned the project is the particular need to support students throughout the first year of study - during the phases of: (i) pre-entry, (ii) entry/induction, (iii) monitoring/support over the year, and (iv) preparation for progression or exit. In this regard, the periods of transition between school, further education, employment, a period away from study or paid employment and their first year of study in an HEI, have been identified as particularly important by the Steering Committee.

The project aimed to gain an overall picture of the issues facing institutions, practitioners and students in relation to student support, and to ensure that the development work carried out by the Steering Committee reflected the needs of the sector. In addition, the project aimed to identify, within the first year of undergraduate study:

- **at which stages** students may require additional information and support
- **the range of needs** expressed by students in relation to information and support
- **the optimum timing and nature** of effective support or intervention strategies which could be made available
- **current good practice** in relation to responding to student needs
- **who** should provide support
- **how** support is best provided (e.g., face to face, electronic)
- **any staff induction and development needs** for the sector in relation to student support.

For the purposes of the project, 'support' was defined as any measures or services that enhance the process of student recruitment, retention and achievement during the first year of study, e.g. the work of advisers of studies/admissions tutors, personal tutors, professional student advisory services, academic learning skills courses, academic support staff, student health services, student union services, community based services, etc.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Student evaluation of and feedback on their learning experiences*

The process of enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) introduced in 2003 in Scotland focuses explicitly on the enhancement of the learning experience of students. It comprises a number of inter-related elements, which include

- i) a framework for internal review at subject level

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<sup>3</sup> Other definitions were also provided. A student was defined as anyone undertaking a full-time or part-time course of one or more year's duration, delivered on a taught, distance (paper-based or on-line) or mixed mode of study. First year of study was defined as Year 1 of a course or any year at which a student may join the course e.g. entry to Year 2 of an undergraduate course with an HND.

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- ii) a set of public information provided by institutions
- iii) involvement of students in quality management
- iv) quality enhancement engagements involving a structured programme of developmental activities with the sector
- v) the institutional review process – an enhancement-led process through peer review (QAA Handbook for Enhancement-led Institutional Review).

As part of their internal processes, institutions are expected to take full account of student feedback and the means through which this is done will be considered as part of institutional audit. As part of the quality enhancement engagements, SHEFC has stated that it will be considering ways in which it can help institutions develop good practice in this area (Circular Letter HE/04/03).

The aims of this particular project were to determine the main issues and barriers to improving practice in collecting and using student feedback and the extent to which the findings of the HEFCE study were reflected in the current practice and experience of Scottish HE institutions. The HEFCE-funded study<sup>4</sup> found that almost all HEIs had elaborate systems for the collection of student feedback. These included the use of several methods, mainly questionnaires, student representation on committees and staff/student liaison committees. Yet despite the large amount of activity connected with student feedback, the report noted a number of problems with current practice.

- The need for greater clarity and agreed understanding within institutions about the purpose or purposes of collecting student feedback.
- The need for greater clarity and agreed understanding about the use or, more likely, the uses to which feedback data will be put.
- The need for greater clarity and agreed understanding about the needs of different users and the types of information, analysis and presentation they might require from feedback data.
- The need for improved dissemination to students of the results of feedback data and of any subsequent actions arising from them.

As far as HEFCE-funded HEIs are concerned, it was clear that in many institutions a lot of effort is put into the collection of student feedback that is not matched by similar effort in making use of the feedback. And this is linked to another finding that there exists a considerable amount of cynicism among some staff and students about the value of student feedback, as it is currently collected and used.

The aim of the project in Scotland was to take account of the findings of the HEFCE study to discover whether similar practices and their associated issues and problems are experienced in Scottish HEIs and to determine the main issues and barriers to improving practice in collecting and using student feedback.

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<sup>4</sup> Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (Open University), NOP Research Group and SQW Ltd (2003), Collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in HE. Bristol: HEFCE ([www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2003/rd08\\_03/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2003/rd08_03/))

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### 4. Method

Institutional contacts identified by the QAA in Scottish HEIs were invited by the Steering Committee to convene four focus groups in their institutions, comprising two staff and two student groups, to address questions relating to *both* projects. The aim was to gain an overall picture of the broad issues facing institutions, practitioners and students in relation to student support and student feedback. Guidance on the composition of the focus groups was as follows:

**Two staff groups** whose composition should be balanced to reflect staff composition and discipline mix. Staff groups should encompass senior academic, administrative and student support staff as well as mainstream academic, academic support and student services support staff.

- Group 1 was to comprise 3 to 5 members of senior academic and administrative staff who were responsible for institutional policy and practice in areas of student evaluation of their learning experiences and student support. We refer to these as the 'senior staff' groups.
- Group 2 was to comprise around 15 members of a broad cross-section of academic staff across disciplines, and relevant academic support and student support services (to include staff from student services, the library, IT facilities, learning support etc.). We refer to these as the 'mixed staff' groups.

**Two student groups** whose composition should be balanced to reflect institutional student composition and discipline mix:

- Group 1 was to comprise around 15 members of full-time, part-time and/or distance-learning students, primarily drawn from relatively new entrants at undergraduate level, primarily drawn from years 1 –3, i.e. students in their first or second year of university study, including direct entrants to years 2 and 3. We refer to these as the 'new students' groups.
- Group 2 was to comprise around 15 members of full-time, part-time and distance-learning students, primarily drawn from years 3 and 4 (or p/t equivalent) at undergraduate level, and also including postgraduate taught and research students. The purpose of this group was to obtain a retrospective account of first year experiences. We refer to these as the 'experienced students' groups.

When constituting the student and staff focus groups, institutions were asked to try as far as possible to achieve a representative balance of their student body, taking into account gender, ethnicity, disability, academic discipline and social inclusion.

To support the focus group interviews an Enhancement Project Interview Team was appointed by QAA, drawn from senior administrative staff in Scottish HEIs. For the most part, members of the interview team covered two institutions, and were assigned to institutions other than their own, as far as possible on a regional basis, with a view to ensuring objectivity in the conduct of the focus groups. The focus groups of staff and students were common to both projects, so each focus group was asked to address questions relating to both student support and student feedback. (Institutional contacts were asked to make the questions available to members of the focus groups beforehand.) Members of the interview team were invited to one of two meetings to discuss the approach to undertaking the focus groups.

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Reports of the outcomes of the focus group discussions were written up by the members of the interview team for analysis by researchers at the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI). Reports were received for all but two HEIs. This summary report outlines the issues raised from the consultation and includes proposals about possible further work to enhance practice in Scottish HEIs. These form sections 5 and 6 of the report.

### *The method in practice*

Members of the interview team were invited to provide feedback on the process. Of the eight that did, the following issues were reported:

- Six members felt that their groups had gone well and the discussions were good
- Poor student attendance was reported at seven HEIs (in one group only one student turned up – this report was not included in the analysis)
- Students at four HEIs had not seen the questions in advance.

In addition, two members of the interview team felt that their student groups were skewed (one comprised class representatives, one comprised students from the same course and another was made up of first year students who had no experience of student feedback processes). Another member reported difficulties in organising focus groups at one HEI and another that the composition of their focus groups was not as requested. (Indeed, in analysing the focus group reports, eight of the student focus groups were a combination of groups 1 and 2.)

In terms of the experiences of the members of the interview team, at four HEIs it was felt that there was not enough time to answer all the questions; however, another member of the team felt that there was too much time and two more that the time allowed was about right. Three members of the team felt that there were perhaps too many people in the focus groups and that managing the process was difficult. Two members felt that the questions asked were repetitive. Two members also reported some suspicion from the staff groups about the purpose, focus and value of the enhancement themes.

In analysing the focus group reports, the following points should be noted:

- Not all focus groups were composed as requested
- Not all institutions managed to convene all four focus groups
- Some answers to questions lacked contextual information which made interpretation difficult
- Some questions were not always answered, possibly due to time constraints or the above mentioned repetitive nature of some of the questions
- Often answers given were very general – however, this reflected the purpose of the focus groups, i.e. to identify the broad issues affecting HEIs.

### *Suggestions for any future work of a similar nature*

The following suggestions are made in the light of experience of the study.

1. Consideration should be given to the composition of smaller sized focus groups (e.g., up to a maximum of 8-10 people, and possibly running more focus groups in each HEI, depending on institutional size).

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2. The groups should be asked to consider questions relating to one topic/project only.
3. More time should be allowed for discussion among the group to bring out and to elaborate issues.
4. Fewer questions should be used and consideration given to a 'semi-structured' approach and use of 'prompts' to allow more in-depth discussions and probing of issues (although this will require a certain amount of knowledge of the topic and expertise in facilitating focus groups on the part of the 'interviewer').
5. Taking the above into account, more training should be provided to the interview team.
6. HEIs should be given adequate time and guidance to ensure that groups are properly composed and that groups are well briefed about the purpose of the focus groups and the topic/project.
7. Clarity about ethical issues, such as confidentiality, and feeding back outcomes and issues arising to the institution should be provided at the very start of the process.

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### 5. Student support in the first year of study

#### *Findings from the focus groups*

The set of questions groups were asked to answer varied according to the group type (i.e., staff, students), although some questions were common to all groups. Questions were grouped according to the pre-entry, on-course and progression phases. See the appendix for the questions asked of the groups.

The analysis below is based on 18 reports of senior staff groups, 18 of mixed staff, 18 of new students (although seven of these groups were composed of new and experienced students) and 14 of experienced students (although one was composed of new and experienced students).

#### *Pre-entry phase*

##### **A wider range of student population and modes of attendance**

The *senior staff* focus groups were asked how the institution was 'coping' with a more diverse student body. Over half the groups mentioned that this was not a new issue - many HEIs have been dealing with such diversity for a number of years. As a consequence, strategies, policies and practices were well established, and with dedicated specialist staff in post.

Many HEIs provided pre-entry induction such as summer schools and special courses, and other forums and events to help the transition to higher education, including skills testing; others had good and established liaisons and partnerships with schools and further education colleges (FECs). An example of work with schools is the GOALS project (Greater Opportunity of Access and Learning in Schools) – mentioned by members of two groups. The project allows school pupils aged between 10 and 18 to learn about and become familiar with higher education. It is targeted at schools with low rates of progression to higher education. Examples of work with FECs were mentioned by a number of groups and one HEI had joint staff development sessions with its partner FECs.

It was also reported that information was made available to new students at pre-entry and this was often made available online. One group mentioned the importance of the admissions interview and a number stated that induction events were organised for particular types of students (especially international and mature students). One group mentioned that induction events were being revised to place more emphasis on academic issues and less on social activities.

The effects of these initiatives had generally not been evaluated in any systematic way and it was not within the project's terms of reference to attempt to do so. However, a number of issues were highlighted by senior staff where it was felt that current practice might be improved. These included:

- embedding learning skills in first year courses
- using Personal Development Planning (PDP) to identify individual needs and plan institutional strategy
- reviewing the needs at departmental level to feed into the institutional strategy
- using student mentors
- looking at ways of bridging the gaps between vocational, sub-degree and degree level programmes

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- providing more flexible modes of learning
- recognising the importance of staff development and sharing good practice.

### **Making use of new technology**

New technology is seen to be fundamental in providing more efficient and effective student support. This was the view of the *senior staff* focus groups when asked what plans their institutions had to make use of technology. Discussions indicated that there was potential to exploit the technology far more. For example, plans that were mentioned included the development of online support to provide prospectus information, course descriptions, links with schools and FECs, and to advertise support services. Also mentioned was the use and development of the virtual learning environment and in particular Blackboard (and in this context three groups mentioned the use of PDP). Email was seen as useful in enhancing communications between staff and students, especially with new entrants and overseas students, and one group mentioned the use of email to help communications between student mentors and confirmed applicants. Other developments included a computerised applications system that enabled targeting and follow-up of potential applicants for pre-entry courses and open days, an induction CD, and the availability of soft/hardware for students with disabilities and dyslexia.

However, a cautionary note was sounded by two groups – they felt that it was important that HEIs ensured that new technology did not become a barrier to some students, for example to mature students who often lacked the skills and the confidence to take full advantage of IT facilities, or who had no or limited access to IT when away from campus. Barriers could also be experienced by students with disabilities, especially those that might require specialist hard/software.

### **Achieving more effective integration between central and academic support systems**

When asked how their institutions had tackled achieving greater integration between central institutional units and academic units, the *senior staff* groups reported a variety of issues and practices. For example:

- some reported that their institutional structures and processes were under review
- others stated that new structures had been specifically established to bring people together and to help understand roles
- some institutions had brought all central services together under one director
- one institution had established a 'one stop shop' for central support services
- other institutions had tackled the issue through the appointment of dedicated staff in academic units who had a liaison role with the central services
- a number pointed to their committee structures that allowed for interactions and integration through the representation of support services on relevant committees.

Again, there appeared to have been little systematic evaluation of the effects of these and other initiatives.

Other views were that sufficient support was embedded in the courses, that integration could only be achieved through effective communication and good relations, and a few mentioned their academic advisor system. Only one group highlighted the tension between the tutorial and the specialist roles – where does one

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start and the other finish? - and the tension between academic and non-academic roles.

### **Preparing students (and their families) for university**

Both staff groups – *senior staff* and *mixed staff* - were asked whether they felt that students and their families might be better prepared for the progression to higher education and what improvements might be considered. All groups believed that their institutions (or others) could improve the ways in which students were prepared.

Around two-thirds of the *senior staff* groups mentioned the work their HEIs were doing with schools (and three specifically mentioned the GOALS project) and FECs, although often it was stated that more work was needed. A number raised the issue of where the responsibility should lie – with the institution or with schools/FECs, or shared by all concerned - HEIs, schools, FECs, the clearing organisations, students and their families.

Three of the 18 groups thought that it was the traditional school leaver who needed the most support and in this context one stated that all school leavers were interviewed at this particular institution. Five groups mentioned that their HEIs held pre-entry events for parents and families, and indeed it appeared that HEIs were increasingly recognising the need to better inform both parents and students and to promote realistic expectations of higher education. Other groups mentioned their open days and campus visits, the specially designed courses to help students with preparation and the use of student/academic mentors; another reported that certain of its current students returned to their old schools to give talks about life at university. One group suggested the need for sector-wide initiatives regarding pre-entry materials and linkage between PDP and Personal Learning Plans.

Nine of the *mixed staff* groups felt that links with schools and FECs were essential to enable the transition between school/college and university (given the lack of autonomous learning and study skills prevalent in these sectors). However, questions were again asked about who should take responsibility: higher education or the school/further education sectors? One group felt that there was an over-reliance on HEIs while another felt the responsibility had to be shared. Three of groups highlighted the unrealistic expectations of parents/families and students and the need to do more to counter the mismatch. Again, seven groups pointed to their open days and induction events that aimed to provide as much information and preparation as possible, as well as the mentoring and buddy schemes a number of institutions operated.

Some suggestions were made of ways to improve preparation and these included:

- the need to interview applicants
- the use of more formative assessment in the first year
- looking at ways to embed an independent learning environment
- setting work or providing reading lists during the summer vacation (note that this latter suggestion was also made by students in a number of groups and is reported later).

A couple of groups reported specific skills that students lacked on entering higher education, such as time and financial management. And in this context of skills, one group felt that the gap year should be discouraged whilst another felt it should be encouraged.

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### The academic and social integration of students into university life

Both staff focus groups were asked whether they felt there were particular types of students that were likely to require more help. The majority of groups tended to list particular categories of students, although a third of the *senior staff* groups (six) felt that *all* students needed help and that particular groups should not be pigeonholed; they believed that support should be customised to the individual because it was impossible to predict the sort of support that might be needed on the basis of membership of a particular 'category'. Likewise, a third (six) of the *mixed staff* groups warned against categorising students and felt that all students should be provided with help if needed. One group was more specific and felt that limited resources would be better spent on targeting those students that were in danger of failing. We might note in this context the conclusions of another recent CHERI report (Brennan and Shah, 2003) that many institutional initiatives and support services fail to reach those students who stand most to benefit from them.

Both staff groups produced similar lists of 'categories' of students that needed the most support. The categories mentioned by *senior staff* in three or more groups included:

- international students (7)
- mature students (6)
- direct entrants<sup>5</sup> (5)
- students with special needs (5)
- first generation students (4)
- students with disabilities (3).

The categories of students most likely to require support and identified by *mixed staff* in three or more of the groups were:

- international students who require cultural and language support and tend to have different approaches to learning (10)
- mature students who often lack confidence and feel they don't fit in (9)
- direct entrants who require academic support and have difficulty integrating socially (8)
- students with special needs (5)
- school leavers who tend to lack motivation and time management skills (4)
- part-time students because of the way in which the curriculum is delivered and the lack of access to facilities (4)
- students with disabilities (4).

The two student groups were asked whether they felt they were well prepared for the whole university experience – both academically and socially – and a variety of experiences were reported and discussed.

The views expressed by the *new students* varied between and within the focus groups and were as follows:

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<sup>5</sup> That is, students entering the second or third year of a course.

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Positive experiences because of	Negative experiences because
Summer school	The transition was confusing
School	No prospectus was received
Open days	The web information was out of date
Buddy system	Little help was provided
Siblings	Induction was chaotic or too focused on school leavers
The student handbook	There was an overload of information
Talking to other students	Information in the summer would have been better (including reading lists)
A gap year	A general lack of information
Taking the international baccalaureate	The need for a central information point
	An 'insiders guide' to the institution prepared by the students union

(Among the students reporting positive experiences were school leavers, mature students and FE and access students. Among those reporting negative experiences were mature students who felt they lacked IT and academic writing skills, and international students.)

Again the *experienced students* groups reported a variety of experiences:

Positive experiences because of	Negative experiences because
The preparation provided for mature students	It depends on the school you come from
Online conferences	Freshers week is a waste of time (it needs to shift from a drinking to support culture)
The foundation course	Reading lists should be available for the summer vacation
Support materials	More information is needed in advance
Information packs	Pre-entry support is targeted at school leavers
Summer school	More information is needed on financial issues
Advisers and work experience (which had helped in the context of time management)	

In addition, school leavers, international students and those entering direct from FECs reported 'culture shocks'.

### Additional forms of staff induction and development

Both staff groups were asked whether they felt there was a need for additional forms of staff induction and development to help raise awareness and to identify particular students' needs. The need was recognised by all groups comprising *senior staff*. Among the *mixed staff* groups, the majority were in favour of additional forms of staff induction and development.

It was clear from *senior staff* group discussions that HEIs already provide induction and development to varying extents, but many felt that more training was needed to help staff identify the needs of particular students and through awareness raising. It seems that most institutions provided some level of awareness training/information for new staff at induction, but those staff that had been in post for some time and who might be in need of refresher information and awareness were frequently neglected, were not prioritised or were not interested. Indeed five groups emphasised that training should be available to all staff, although two groups felt that certain dedicated staff should be targeted.

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Other points made included the following:

- One group of senior staff felt that it was important that senior management were involved in induction and staff development in order to inform institutional policy development properly.
- One institution was introducing a personal tutor system and this would include the provision of training to enable staff to identify and take action on students' needs.
- One institution was introducing training to help staff support students with special needs.
- Another group felt that training on new legislation was needed, especially the Disability Discrimination Act (and within this context the 'teachability' project – funded by SHEFC and focused on creating an accessible curriculum for students with disabilities - was mentioned within four of the groups).
- Another felt that training was needed to enable staff to explore ways of introducing and encouraging independent learning among students.

Like the senior staff groups, eight of the *mixed staff* groups pointed out that provision already existed but there were issues about staff time and conflicting priorities (often related to pressures to undertake research) as well as making resources available. Also, eight groups felt that existing provision might be extended to established staff, some of whom needed it more – especially in terms of raising awareness about particular students' needs, making information on guidance available, and making sure that knowledge about what support exists was widely available.

### ***On-course phase***

#### **Problems typically faced by students in their first year**

*Mixed staff* groups were asked about the kinds of problems typically faced by students in their first year and how they are dealt with. The most mentioned problems (by three or more groups) were:

- transition issues e.g., lack of independent learning and self-motivation, false expectations, stress, not recognising the amount of work required, absence of social integration (13)
- financial issues (9)
- students trying to balance term-time working with study (6)
- lack of time management (5)
- wrong choice of course (4).

Few groups went into detail about how these issues were managed, but four groups made suggestions which included buddy schemes, open days, induction events at institutional and departmental levels, and the use of more experienced teaching staff in the first year. Staff in another group reported that their institution was attempting to create more flexibility in its programmes to help those students studying full-time but also working during term-time; however, this group also noted that in doing so, students' lack of time management skills had been highlighted.

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### Identifying and targeting certain groups of students

Both staff groups were asked whether certain groups of students should be identified and targeted for some forms of support. The majority of *senior staff* groups felt that certain groups should not be stigmatised and support should be available to *all* students – it is better to allow students to ‘buy in’ to a service than target them. Three of these groups mentioned that their institutions monitored attendance and followed up where necessary, and another three felt that awareness raising among the student (and staff) body was the most important factor. A significant minority of *mixed staff* groups (eight) also felt that on the whole certain groups of students should not be identified and that support should be available for *all* students. One group felt that limited resources would be better targeted at those students at risk of failing. Mechanisms that were identified to help identify those in need include pre-entry interviews, attendance monitoring, buddy schemes, formative assessment and helping students to facilitate their own personal development.

Those ‘at risk’ groups mentioned by three or more of the staff groups were:

Senior staff	Mixed staff
Students with disabilities (4)	International students (7)
International students (4)	Students with special needs (6)
Direct entry students <sup>6</sup> (3)	Mature students (3)

One of the *mixed staff* groups identified the tension between the institution’s ‘duty of care’ and the onus on students to take responsibility for their own needs. Members of another group disagreed about where that institutional support should be located: centrally or within academic units.

### Being clear about what was expected

The two student groups were asked whether they were clear about what was expected of them on their course and the workload that was required. Half of the groups comprising *new students* and the majority of *experienced students* groups felt they were clear about what was expected of them. Four groups of *new students* mentioned the course handbooks (one group mentioned that programme specifications were included) and one the summer school. Those *new students* who did not feel clear cited the time demands and the perceived lack of course structure. Among these groups, it seemed that school leavers had a more positive experience than the distance learning, direct entrants and mature students. Similarly, handbooks were cited by four of the *experienced students* groups as being useful indicators of what to expect. Those that felt they had been unclear about what was expected were more likely to be adult returners and open and distance learners (where categories of students were identified).

### The support services and academic support mechanisms available to students to help them achieve greater autonomy

Staff groups were asked about the sort of services and mechanisms that were or should be available to help students achieve greater autonomy. Both staff groups reported a range of views and practice, which suggests a lack of consensus about what works. The different perceptions may also reflect real differences in context (e.g., subject and institutional differences), but they may also reflect an absence of

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<sup>6</sup> Need definition

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any systematic analysis and evaluation of use and effectiveness of these services and mechanisms.

Five groups of the *senior staff* groups mentioned that their courses were specially designed to support learner autonomy and that this was graded as the student progressed (the 'pyramid of support'). Three groups specifically mentioned the use of the web and Blackboard as support mechanisms with one group reporting that its VLE encouraged student learning autonomy and staff were able to monitor the extent to which students engaged with the system. Other support mechanisms provided by institutions included the use of the 'best' teachers in the first year, the advisor/tutor system, the use of student mentors and the monitoring of those students who were not engaging in the learning and teaching process.

Four groups mentioned PDP as a means of encouraging learner autonomy, although one group reported that their institution had had varying degrees of success – PDP seemed to work well in those disciplines/courses that required an element of self-reflection in the learning process; social work was provided as an example.

Many of the groups of *mixed staff* provided lists of services and mechanisms that existed in their institutions. These included advisers of study, the tutor system, learning, teaching and assessment support, specialist advisers and counsellors, study skills support, and the use of the web/virtual learning environment (VLE) to raise student awareness of the support services available. Three groups highlighted the inherent tensions of providing support on the one hand and enabling students to become independent on the other. A number also listed ways in which they would like to improve their services and mechanisms and these included:

- increasing the availability of support outside the 'traditional' opening hours (especially for part-time students)
- better guidance for direct entry students
- better trained professionals
- the introduction of buddy systems, student mentors
- the need to embed learning skills in the curriculum (although one group felt that there was too much teaching and assessment to allow this)
- repeat inductions
- more resources.

### **Being aware of the different sources of support**

Student groups were asked whether they had been made aware of the institutional support services and the academic support provision available to them. The extent to which students felt they had been made aware varied between the two groups. Half the groups comprising *new students* said they had been made aware of the available support. This tended to be through handbooks, email, and the freshers' pack. Those that felt they had not been made aware said they had to seek information out for themselves or found out by accident, that there was a lack of information and publicity or that they had been overloaded with information at induction. In contrast, the vast majority of groups comprising *experienced students* were positive. Means of being made aware reported by the students included: good advertising through multi-media, being directed by personal tutors, information packs, induction lectures and class representatives. Those who felt they were not made aware felt they had been overloaded with information in the first week, no tailored support was available for part-time or mature students, and it just was not clear who

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to go to. To students in four groups, it appeared that the variation in experience depended on which course you were studying.

### Support required/used during the first year of study

Student groups were asked what support they had required or used during the first year of study and how useful that support had been. Both student groups reported a wide variety of support that had been used. Of the support cited as being useful by *new students* was:

Useful support	Not so useful support
Careers advice	Welfare office
Email with tutors	Accessibility of academic staff
Face-to-face contact with tutors	Accommodation services
Tutorials	IT
Financial advice	International office
Support for mature students	
Accommodation services	
Advisers of study	
IT support for inexperienced users	
Buddy/mentoring system	
Academic support	
Dyslexia support	
Language support	
Seeking part-time work	
Placement advice	

*Experienced students* reported the following support as being useful:

- Skills support for adult returners
- Mentoring
- Dyslexia support
- Counselling
- Class representatives
- Tutors (although this was variable)
- IT
- Student employment service
- Disability service

Students in one of the latter focus groups reported that the support services in their institution had been integrated and located in one building. However, the location was not good because it was like walking down a 'corridor of shame'.

### Ranking of the importance of different forms of support

The student groups were also asked to rank the importance of various support services and academic support on a scale of 1-5 (where 1 was 'of little importance' and five was 'of great importance'). The lists of services presented to the groups were as follows:

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### Student Support Services

Accommodation  
Chaplaincy  
Child care/nursery  
Counselling and advice  
Careers service  
Disability support  
Dyslexia support  
Financial advice/support  
Health service (including mental health)  
International student support  
Job shop  
Mature student support  
Students union

### Academic Support

Language support (for international students)  
Learning resources (IT resources, library, online support)  
Learning/study skills support  
Mentoring  
Tutors/academic advisors

The support services and academic support given a ranking of '4' or '5' by the two students groups are shown below. Only those services/support ranked 4 or 5 by half or more of the focus groups are listed and in order of popularity.

Student support services		Academic support	
<i>New students</i>	<i>Experienced students</i>	<i>New students</i>	<i>Experienced students</i>
Accommodation	Accommodation	Learning resources	Learning resources
Counselling and advice	Financial advice/support	Tutors/academic advisors	Tutors/academic advisors
Dyslexia support	Counselling and advice	Learning/study skills support	Learning/study skills support
Financial advice/support	Careers service	Language support	Language support
Health service	Disability support		
Disability support	Child care/nursery		
Careers service	Dyslexia support		
International student support	Health service		
Students union	International student support		

It should be noted that the importance given to each of these services and support mechanisms will depend on the make-up of the various focus groups and therefore care should be taken in interpreting of the data. However, using the above criteria, it is worth noting that both student groups ranked all the academic support services as important. Of the student support services, only the chaplaincy was omitted by both groups and child care/nursery by the *new students* groups.

### **Developing existing institutional support services and academic support mechanisms to meet student needs more effectively**

Staff groups were asked about the ways in which existing services and mechanisms could be developed to meet students' needs more effectively. Views were mixed, which again might signify a lack of consensus about what works and on priorities as well as a lack of systematic analysis and evaluation of use and effectiveness of services and mechanisms.

Groups comprising *senior staff* identified a number of ways, including putting support services all on one site ('one stop shop'). Some institutions had done so or were doing so while others wished to, but resource issues were preventing it. Two groups mentioned that their services were under review and three focus groups specifically

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mentioned the resource issue as impeding any development; another group highlighted the tension about the location of support – central or devolved to academic units. Four groups felt that awareness raising among both staff and students was the issue and this required training and development and a more strategic approach; one felt that the emphasis should be placed on students identifying their own needs. Other ways mentioned included the development of online information about services, mentoring schemes, the need for better diagnostic tools and monitoring, more one-to-one support, around the clock provision and the sharing of good practice in the sector.

A third of *mixed staff* groups mentioned the need for more resources to support any development. Other common developments mentioned by the groups were

- an improved tutor/advisor of studies system (5)
- better and more information about and publicity of services/support (4)
- one stop shops (4)
- better communication between staff and students about what support is available (3)
- better communication among staff – between centrally provided services and academic units and within academic units (1).

Other ways suggested were: normalising the support culture, promoting the pyramid of support, better training and policy development, the need to develop PDP, expanding the mentoring scheme, repeat inductions, and the use of the VLE to track students and their work.

The student groups were asked the same question and a variety of responses were provided. The following suggestions were made by each of the groups:

<b>New students</b>	<b>Experienced students</b>
More and better publicity (including follow-ups and reminders)	More and better publicity to make services visible
Involving support service staff at induction time to meet with students	More resources
More academic staff time to meet with students	Use of the web, email
Better communication between staff and students	Special events for support services to meet with students
Information being made available on the web or by email	Talks in class
Better staff awareness of students needs	The availability of services (e.g., IT, library, careers service) outside the 'traditional' opening hours
The provision of childcare facilities	Improved services (e.g., careers advice available to students of all years and not just final year students)
Better access to facilities for part-time students	The disadvantages of multi-site campuses
Improving/extending the mentoring scheme	

### Sorts of academic support provision that should be available

Student groups were asked whether they preferred face-to-face, online or electronic forms of academic support provision. Here the two groups of students held similar views. The majority of *new students* groups went for a mixture of provision: face-to-

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face (12) and electronic/online (11). However, a third of groups felt that face-to-face support could not be substituted. Other useful forms of support mentioned or suggested by the groups were: a buddy system, subject-specific societies with an academic rather than a social focus, and class mentors. Half of the *experienced students* groups felt that a mixture of forms should be available and that the individual student should make the choice. However, five groups felt that face-to-face was the most important form of support followed by email and online provision. Other suggestions included talks in class, peer group support and self help groups.

### **Information for students about available support services and academic support mechanisms – the best time to disseminate information**

The *mixed staff* focus groups were asked about the best time for students to receive information about available support services and academic support mechanisms, about how this information should be made available and whether the services should be better publicised. The majority of groups agreed that induction was not the ideal time because of information overload, although some felt that essential information should probably be made available on or before entry. Eight groups felt that constant reminding was key. Six groups felt that a gradual approach was best or at key times during the academic year, for example before entry (and perhaps to parents also), on entry and during the academic year. One group felt that the 'just in time' approach was effective: students best receive information when they acknowledge to themselves that they have a problem. However, another group felt that because of the many different 'types' of students in higher education today, there was no standard time to disseminate information. Other suggestions included the need to raise awareness (among staff and students), simplify publicity and embed support in the culture. One focus group mentioned that their institution had a representative of the support services present at staff/student liaison meetings.

Students were also asked about the best time to be told about services and mechanisms. Like the staff groups, students in both groups agreed that induction was not the best time. The majority of *new students* groups felt that information about support services should be before arrival (e.g., while at school, and during the summer vacation with course reading lists) and continuous - at induction and at the beginning of and during each academic year because students forget until they have a problem. Four groups explicitly stated that publicity should be improved and suggestions were made by the majority of groups of ways to inform students about services including, the web (use of 'pop-ups'), email, hard copy, newsletters and the use of beer mats. Students also felt that information should be made available in schools, at open days and in prospectuses. The majority of groups made up of *experienced students* felt that information on support services should be made available before entry and with constant reminders or gradual 'drip-feed' of information after entry. The majority indicated the need for better publicity and the ways in which this might be done were provided. Posters were not felt to be a good idea because notice boards are often chaotic. Groups felt that the best ways were through email, use of the web, by tutors and lecturers and through mentors.

### **A need for greater coordination between academic departments and centrally provided support services**

Staff groups were asked whether they felt there should be greater coordination between centrally and locally provided services and mechanisms. The majority view among both groups was that coordination could be improved. The *senior staff* groups tended to stress the need for continual improvement through effective working practices, the establishment of good relationships, and a team-based

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approach. The *mixed staff* groups tended to stress the need for better communications between the centre and academic departments and students, more awareness about what is available and better clarification of the different roles performed in different locations.

Three *senior staff* groups said coordination had already been achieved in their institutions – as did two of the *mixed staff* groups - or that it was currently under review. A couple of *senior staff* groups also mentioned the 'one stop shop' approach and the use of dedicated support staff in academic units.

Some staff groups also pointed to the problems associated with attempting greater coordination. These included, for example, the tensions over where the resources should be located and staff turnover (mentioned by two of the *senior staff* groups) and the pressure of time on advisors and tutors to fulfil their duties and the tension between the academic and pastoral roles (mentioned by one of the *mixed staff* groups).

### **Closer monitoring of the use of support services/academic support, the types of students that make use of it, and the impact on student success**

*Senior staff* groups were asked whether services and mechanisms required closer monitoring of their use, including the students that use them and their impact on student success. The majority of groups felt that there should be closer monitoring and a number reported that their institutions were already doing this through tracking systems, internal reviews, the development and use of strategies, and surveys/questionnaires to evaluate the effectiveness of academic support and support services. Two groups also mentioned the need for more resources to do this properly and a significant minority (five) felt that while this was a good thing, it was difficult to measure, especially the impact on student success – how should success be defined?

### **Additional forms of staff induction and development**

The staff groups were asked whether more staff induction and development were required to raise awareness and meet the needs of staff in this area during the on-course phase. In principle the *senior staff* groups seemed to be in favour. Additional forms of induction and development that were mentioned related to teaching and learning strategies in the first year, and especially course design; others included the use of PDP, E-learning and mentoring of new staff. As mentioned for the pre-entry phase, many HEIs already have compulsory induction events for new staff and special training support for all staff. However, in terms of the latter there are issues around making time for it, making it a priority and seeing it as important. Others felt that awareness raising was more important, especially among established staff and one group mentioned that sector-wide developments were needed.

The majority of *mixed staff* groups agreed there was a need, but issues of staff time and priorities were raised again. A minority felt that existing provision was good. One group felt that what was available for newcomers should be made available to established staff and another that established staff were in need of the support. Other areas mentioned where there was a need for development and training were raising awareness, improving communications and integration, sharing information and good practice and better training in the mentor role.

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### ***Progression phase***

#### **Preparedness to move on to the next year of study**

The vast majority of students in both groups felt they had been sufficiently prepared to progress to the next year of study. However, four of the *experienced students* groups reported mixed views. (But no group reported a negative consensus.)

#### **What has helped or hindered that preparation process**

Responses to this question from the *new students* groups included the following.

- *Helpful things*: opportunities for study skills, study groups, IT for mature students, access to past exam papers, academic tutors, increasing the intensity of the first year, contact with students between years.
- *Unhelpful things*: computer down time, resits, not prepared for the amount of work, modular system, not knowing earlier about what happens in the next year, and lack of coordination between departments.

Helpful things reported by the *experienced students* groups included talking to students in the year above, and making information available on the web and in the course handbook. This group of students also provided a number of suggestions:

- using the summer vacation for course preparation/work and making reading lists available
- better use of subject societies
- making past exam papers available
- increasing the workload and difficulty level gradually through the year
- providing a forum at the end of the year to prepare for the next (focusing on the effort needed as well as the content)
- having a buddy system.

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### *Aspects of existing good practice identified by the focus groups*

Whilst focus groups were not asked specifically about existing good practice, a number of possible examples of it were identified during discussions. Lack of time prevented the focus groups from going into details but the following points arose from several groups – some already reported in the sections above. In general, the practice was found in particular departments (and often small ones) rather than the whole institution. The aspects identified are as follows:

1. A number of student groups commented on the usefulness of course handbooks. These were detailed enough to provide students with sufficient information about how the course was structured, the teaching, learning and assessment methods used, what was expected of students and the workload involved.
2. One department had its own VLE system which included information regarding the curriculum, course structures and online support mechanisms; this information was also available to local schools.
3. One institution had a management information system that was accessible to all staff. It included students' details with comprehensive tracking and reporting on any pre-entry and on-course advice, special needs and progression information.
4. Some students reported that they were encouraged to form self-help groups and those that had commented on their usefulness in providing peer support.
5. Another set of students pointed to their institution's 'really useful handbook' that provided a comprehensive list of support services, including contact details.
6. One department at another institution gave its students a course handbook for the second year of study at the end of the first year.
7. Elsewhere students received talks from students in the year above about what to expect in their next year.
8. Another department ran a 'reorientation' event for students that entered the honours stream.

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### ***Conclusions and Actions : Student Needs in the First Year of Study***

The need to support a diverse student body in Scottish higher education is not new. It is clear from the analysis of the focus group reports, especially the senior staff groups, that many institutions have years of experience of supporting a very diverse student body. Many have well established strategies and practices, and have dedicated staff to provide a range of academic support and support services. Many institutions hold open days and induction events, and others have developed special courses to help 'non-traditional' students before they enrol in higher education; a number have invested in designing curricula which embed academic support and learning skills development.

However, the focus groups identified a range of issues where current provision is insufficient to support the greater diversity and more complex needs of students today. Student support systems, administrative infrastructure, application of technology, and staff development all need to be further developed, if these issues are to be addressed.

#### *Preparing students and their parents/families*

1. The student groups held mixed views about whether they felt prepared, both academically and socially, for the 'whole university' experience. Reasons for feeling ill-prepared included lack of information and insufficient or inadequate preparatory events. Staff groups tended to feel that many students and their parents/families had unrealistic expectations about higher education, both in respect of the institutional environment and the expected learning styles. Staff accepted that better ways of preparing students needed to be found.

**Action:** The Scottish higher education sector may wish to consider looking at ways to improve the preparation of students and their parents/families before they enter higher education. They might also consider reviewing the first year learning experience and explore ways of further embedding the development of learning skills and an ethos of support. A sector-wide approach might consider identifying existing good practice, both nationally and internationally, and disseminating it to the sector.

#### *Liaison with schools and further education colleges*

2. The message from the staff groups, especially senior staff, was that good links between schools or further education colleges (FECs) and HEIs are essential. Most staff groups mentioned the work their institutions were already doing with schools and FECs - and the majority felt that this work was important in helping to prepare students and their parents/families. However, both staff groups also recognised that their institutions could do more to counter the mismatch of expectations. But should they? Some of the groups questioned where that responsibility should lie – should it be the responsibility of schools, FECs, HEIs, or should it be a shared responsibility?

Many links have already been successfully established between HEIs, schools and FECs.

**Action:** a sector-wide approach to gathering and disseminating good practice should be considered. It will also be important to establish greater clarity and

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agreement across the sectors about where responsibilities lie for the preparation of students for HE study/experience.

### *Staff induction and development*

3. Not all staff are sufficiently aware of student needs and require help to identify them with particular students. This was the view of the staff groups, especially senior staff, when asked whether additional staff induction and development was needed – at the *pre-entry phase*. Some groups felt it should be available to all staff, not just those that were new to the institution. A number of the mixed staff groups pointed to the problems of making time and resources available and dealing with conflicting priorities. Staff groups were also in favour of additional forms of induction and development at the *on-course phase*, although similar issues were raised as for the pre-entry phase. A few groups did discuss whether this induction and development should be targeted at all staff or focused on staff in centrally provided support services, although the views expressed were mixed.

**Action:** The Scottish higher education sector may wish to consider whether staff development (and induction of new staff) arrangements are taking sufficient account of the current diversity of student intakes. This should be undertaken in conjunction with the recommendations made in 6 below.

### *Publicising services*

4. The 'new' students groups were less positive than the groups of 'experienced' students when asked about the extent to which they were aware of the central support services and academic support provision available to them. The new students felt they had to seek it out. A number of the student groups felt that awareness and accessibility could be improved using both online/electronic methods as well as hard copy.

Better publicity of services was also mentioned by a number of the staff groups. This would seem to be especially important given that the majority of senior staff and a significant minority of mixed staff focus groups felt that specific types of students should not be identified and targeted pre-entry or on-course, but that students should be encouraged to 'buy-in' to a service. If this is to avoid 'missing' the students most in need of support, such an approach needs to ensure that *all* students are at least aware of and are able to access the relevant support services.

**Action:** The Scottish higher education sector should investigate with representatives of student organisations how services might be more efficiently and effectively publicised, and especially how new technology might be used.

### *When to publicise*

5. Induction is not a good time to tell students about support services. This was the view of the majority of student groups. Instead a continuous or gradual dissemination of information was recommended (i.e., before entry, at entry and during the higher education experience). This view was echoed by the majority of mixed staff groups. Suggestions about how to improve the publicity of

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**Action:** In combination with 4 above, the Scottish higher education sector might wish to investigate with students what information is needed and at what time.

### *Coordination between the centre and academic departments*

6. The majority of staff groups agreed that there was a need for greater coordination between centrally provided services and those provided by academic departments. A number of HEIs have recognised that coordination problems exist and are reviewing current practice. Factors relevant to achieving good coordination included: the importance of good communications, the need to understand the different roles/services available at different locations, and the benefits of team work. Other staff groups, while recognising the need for greater coordination, pointed to the tensions between central and academic units regarding resource allocations, the problems of staff turnover and demarcation of roles.

While the need for improvement was generally shared among the staff groups, there was little discussion about who should have responsibility for what i.e., what should be coordinated and delivered at the centre and what should be the responsibility of academic departments. As highlighted above, a few groups touched upon the issue by highlighting the lack of clarity between the 'tutor' and the 'specialist/central' roles – where does one start and the other finish? Again, the circumstances of different departments need to be taken into account regarding, for example, staff/student ratios and curricular organisation.

**Action:** The Scottish higher education sector might wish to consider ways of improving the organisation and coordination of support services. A sector-wide approach might consider identifying good practice, both nationally and internationally, and the findings disseminated to the sector.

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### **Further reading**

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**6. Student evaluation of and feedback on their learning experiences**

*Findings from the focus groups*

The set of questions groups were asked to answer varied according to the group type (i.e., staff, students), although some questions were common to all groups. See the appendix for the questions asked of the groups.

The analysis below is based on 18 reports of senior staff groups, 18 of mixed staff, 18 of new students (although seven of these groups were composed of new and experienced students) and 14 of experienced students (although one was composed of new and experienced students).

**Purpose in collecting and using student feedback**

Staff and student focus groups were asked their views about the institution's purpose or purposes in collecting and using student feedback. The purposes recorded below represent those that were mentioned by three or more groups (the numbers in brackets refer to the number of groups mentioning the purpose). A majority of all groups mentioned 'improving teaching and learning' as an intended purpose of collecting student feedback. Quality assurance was given a low priority by all groups except the senior staff.

<b>Senior staff</b>	<b>Mixed staff</b>
Quality assurance and audit (12)	Improving/enhancing teaching and learning (9)
Improving the student learning experience (9)	External requirement (9)
Improving/enhancing teaching and learning (8)	Improving the student learning experience (5)
Engaging students (5)	Identify problems/confirm things are OK (5)
Feeding into planning/development at all levels (5)	Quality assurance (3)
	Engaging students (3)

<b>New students</b>	<b>Experienced students</b>
Improving teaching and learning, and services (13)	Improving teaching and learning (11)
Improving the students' experience (4)	Measuring performance (4)
Quality assurance and standards (3)	Improving the reputation (3)
	Because they are told to do so (3)

The student groups were also asked *how* their feedback was used, whether students were told *why* their institutions and teaching staff wished to find out what students thought about their studies, and if so *how* students were told. Of the *new students* groups that addressed these questions, seven groups said that they were told why the HEI collected student feedback. This was done either informally by tutors and/or by printing the reasons on the questionnaire. Students in one group reported that they were told it would benefit future students. Students in eight of the groups stated that they were **not** told why the HEI collected feedback.

Most of the *experienced students* groups that answered the questions stated that they were not told why student feedback was collected. Those that were (four) said they were told informally when the questionnaire was issued or the reason was printed at the top. Students in one group were told that their feedback would benefit

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next years' students; however, these students also pointed out that this made them feel like 'guinea pigs'.

### **Achievement of objectives**

*Senior staff* groups were asked the extent to which their institutions were achieving their objectives in collecting and using student feedback. Half the groups acknowledged that their systems were not perfect. It was felt that the achievement of objectives was variable or partial and depended on the level at which feedback was collected and used within the institution (e.g., systems may be working well at the module level but not at the institutional level). Of the problems cited, 'closing the loop' and questionnaire 'fatigue' were highlighted a number of times. A minority of groups were more confident about the achievement of objectives, stating that students' comments were acted upon, students saw the changes that took place, and the objectives were embedded in quality assurance procedures and the committee structure. Four groups reported that their systems were under development or review.

### **Mechanisms used**

All focus groups were asked what mechanisms were being employed by their institutions to collect student feedback, centrally and at other levels (e.g., faculty, department). The list of feedback mechanisms presented to the groups was as follows:

- Questionnaires (student opinion surveys)
- Student representatives on course/university committees
- Staff student liaison committees (or their equivalent)
- Discussion/focus groups
- Nominal group technique
- Lecture/seminar
- Tutorial system
- Informal discussion/chat

The majority of groups – both staff and students - identified almost all the above mechanisms as being in use in their institution (sometimes to varying degrees), although less than half of the *new students* groups mentioned discussion and focus groups. The only mechanism to be mentioned by a minority of groups (both staff and students) was nominal group technique. Groups were also asked to state any other mechanisms that were being used. Those 'other' mechanisms mentioned by three or more of the groups were as follows:

- *Senior staff*: online feedback and in particular Blackboard
- *Mixed staff*: the web and email, suggestion boxes/cards and external examiners
- *New students*: the use of the web/VLE and email
- *Experienced students*: electronic means (email, VLE/Blackboard).

### **Responsibility for determining how student feedback is collected**

*Senior staff* groups were asked who had responsibility for determining how student feedback was collected, and whether it was centralised or devolved. Practice was variable:

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- A third of groups stated that responsibility was centralised, of whom three mentioned that there was a standard questionnaire at module/course level; two mentioned that local questionnaires were approved centrally, although one stated that its administration and analysis were done at the local level. The other group, whilst stating that responsibility lay at the centre, reported that the institution allowed flexibility regarding the administration of the mechanisms used.
- Five groups reported that responsibility was a local one; one specifically stated that departments were allowed to choose the most appropriate mechanisms for collecting feedback and another said that whilst responsibility lay at the local level, a standard questionnaire was administered.
- Seven groups felt that responsibility was shared: two mentioned that a standard module questionnaire was administered centrally, but that everything else was determined at the local level. Another university operated a university-wide questionnaire, but departments were responsible for their own module level questionnaires. Three mentioned a central policy, an institutional overview or a minimum standard that required feedback to be collected, but the method used was determined locally.

Well over half the groups reported that their institution and student union provided support for student representatives.

### **Analysis of feedback**

*Senior staff* groups were asked how analysis of feedback was carried out, the extent to which the institutions provided central support and the extent to which the analysis was devolved to faculty or departmental levels. Eight groups stated that analysis was devolved to the local level with no central support provided. However, four HEIs did provide a central support to a devolved system through scanners, optical mark readers (OMR) and other software. Five stated that analysis was centralised but that data were then devolved to the local level for interpretation and use in the annual monitoring/committee cycles, along with other feedback mechanisms. One group reported that analysis was centralised and that the results were placed on the web.

### **Reporting the analysis of feedback**

The main mechanism used to report the analysis of feedback at the various institutional levels was the quality assurance and annual monitoring procedures and committee cycles. This was the mechanism mentioned by the majority of *senior staff* groups (15) when asked how analysis of feedback was reported at the university level, the faculty and departmental level and to students. As far as reporting analysis back to students, seven groups mentioned staff student liaison committees (SSLCs), four student representatives and three notice boards. Five, however, stated that their HEIs needed to improve in this respect and that practice was variable, especially at the module level.

### **Mechanisms to ensure that student feedback is taken seriously by staff**

Institutional quality assurance procedures, and in particular annual monitoring and review and committee/reporting cycles, were again cited by the majority of *senior staff* groups (11). Three mentioned that seriousness was 'embedded' in the ethos and culture of the HEI. Other mechanisms mentioned were the centralisation of the

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process, external assessor comments, external bodies, staff development, professionalism of staff and student representatives on decision-making bodies.

A similar proportion of *mixed staff* groups (12) also cited the annual monitoring and committee cycles when asked the same question. Other mechanisms mentioned by these groups included staff meetings and discussion (five) and internal review (four); two groups mentioned professional bodies and another two student representatives and SSLCs.

### **Ensuring that student feedback is taken seriously by students**

The two student groups were asked what their institutions did to ensure that student feedback was taken seriously by the students. A variety of responses was provided by the *new students*. Four groups mentioned that they did not know what the HEI did to ensure feedback was taken seriously by students because they did not know what happened to their feedback. Another three felt it was not taken seriously by the HEI (although two felt the departments did better) or by the students (one group). Of the ways in which 'seriousness' was demonstrated, the following were mentioned by more than one of the groups:

- through class representatives (3)
- SSLC minutes (2)
- actions taking place (2)
- receiving the results of feedback by email (2).

Other processes that were mentioned included the role of the students union, the training of representatives, and that student representatives were treated courteously.

The majority view of the *experienced students* groups (eight) was that very little or nothing was done to ensure that feedback was taken seriously by students. Two groups, however, cited the student representative system. Another two groups felt that HEIs needed to make sure that staff took student feedback seriously.

The highly fragmented and generally negative views of the student groups on this issue are matters of some concern.

### **Adequate opportunity to comment on experiences**

Half the groups of *new students* (nine) felt there was adequate opportunity to comment on their experiences. Four other groups held mixed views – highlighting the variability of practice within their institutions, and two groups felt there were not enough opportunities. The groups of *experienced students* were split on this issue: half said it was about right or adequate and the other half felt there was too little or none at all.

### **Assuring actions are taken in the light of feedback**

Once again, the annual monitoring process was mentioned by the vast majority of *senior staff* groups (15). Seven groups explicitly stated internal reviews, three the use of action plans, two external assessor reports, one the publication of actions and another external reviews. Only one group highlighted the role of the student representative system and staff development in this context.

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### Problems in using specific types of student feedback

*Senior staff* groups were asked whether particular problems had been experienced in using specific types of student feedback. A wide range of problems were identified as follows:

- low response rates (11)
- questionnaire fatigue (3)
- timing of questionnaires (3)
- involving part-time and distance learning students (3)
- student representatives – their recruitment and representativeness (3)
- student anonymity (3).

Other problems included how to deal with questions on teacher performance, getting the questions right, feedback not always providing information about the nature of the problem, assuring students that web questionnaires were anonymous, analysing written comments, ensuring staff provided encouragement to students, and the view that dissatisfied students were less likely to provide comments.

We might conclude from this that problems can arise with all types of feedback mechanism, reinforcing the widely held view that reliance on a single method would be unwise.

### Effectiveness of the mechanisms employed

*Mixed staff* groups were asked their views on the effectiveness of the mechanisms employed by the institution, which ones they felt worked best and which ones students most engaged with. Those identified as working best were informal/face-to-face feedback (nine groups) and SSLCs (seven), although with the latter it was acknowledged that student recruitment and representativeness could be a problem. The mechanism cited as least effective was questionnaires (six groups).

The student groups were also asked the same questions. The most effective mechanisms cited were as follows:

<b>New students</b>	<b>Experienced students</b>
Informal/face-to-face feedback (8)	Informal/face-to-face feedback (6)
Student representatives (5)	Student representative system (5)
Questionnaires (4)	
SSLCs (3)	
Other: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• meetings</li> <li>• the web/online discussions/questionnaires</li> <li>• social events</li> <li>• the open-ended part of questionnaires</li> <li>• use of a range of mechanisms</li> </ul>	Other: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• questionnaires</li> <li>• SSLCs</li> <li>• electronic mechanisms</li> </ul>

The generally low regard for questionnaires – despite, or perhaps because of, their universal use – raises questions about the value for money being obtained from this ubiquitous feedback mechanism.

The two groups also reported negative aspects:

For *new students*, these included:

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- student representatives (knowing who they were and problems of recruitment)
- questionnaires and assuring anonymity
- timing of SSLCs
- communicating actions
- having enough time to attend meetings.

For *experienced students*, the following negative aspects were identified by some of the groups:

- Of SSLCs - one group mentioned the sensitivity of discussing teaching styles and another mentioned that meetings should be held more often.
- Of the student representative system - one group felt it was not useful for dealing with day to day issues/problems, another mentioned that the system was not well known, and another that recruitment and training were a problem.
- With regard to questionnaires, it was mentioned that students did not take them seriously enough, there was not enough time to reflect on the questions, and anonymity issues created sensitivities (and in this latter context, the dilemma was raised about complaining about someone through feedback who you know is going to mark your work).

### **Most useful aspects of student feedback**

Informal and face-to-face feedback were highlighted as the most useful aspects of student feedback by *mixed staff* (six groups), *new students* (five) and *experienced students* (seven) groups. The question also prompted a wide range of other views:

- Of the *mixed staff* groups, written constructive and detailed comments (five groups), and things that you can put right (three) were also mentioned.
- *New students* also identified when you could see actions/changes (four groups), student representatives, SSLCs and discussions groups (each mentioned by two groups).
- And *experienced students* highlighted any feedback where something was done (four groups), student representatives (three), and just being given more opportunities to provide feedback (two).

### **Main issues and problems that impede the effective use of student feedback**

Lack of resources seemed to be an issue for both staff groups, while for the student groups, lack of communication of results and actions was the main issue.

The *senior staff* groups identified a wide range of issues and problems. The most common were

- lack of resources (8)
- lack of staff time (5).

Other general problems mentioned included the following:

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- recruitment and representation of student representatives (4)
- the problems associated with 'engaging' students (2)
- receiving feedback from part-time, distance learning and postgraduate students (2)
- low response rates (2)
- questionnaire fatigue (2)
- assuring anonymity (2).

Other specific problems mentioned included: the narrowness of module questionnaires, standard questionnaires that were too generic, the effort to analyse data, the timing of questionnaires, including questions about teacher performance, abusive comments, trying to ensure a speedy response to feedback, having a diverse student body can mean that student views are diverse, and 'closing the loop'.

The question also generated a range of issues and problems among members of the *mixed staff* groups – some of them similar to those reported by the *senior staff* groups - and they include:

- lack of resources (8)
- lack of student engagement (6)
- the recruitment, representativeness and training of student representatives (4)
- lack of time (4)
- low response rates (3)
- problems may be outside the control of staff and the HEI (3)
- cultural barriers for international students (3).

The student groups also identified a wide range of issues and problems. The most commonly mentioned problem by *new students* was the lack of communication about results of feedback and actions taken (10 groups). Other problems/issues mentioned included lack of time/priority given to feedback by staff, shyness/reluctance to provide feedback on the part of students, student/staff apathy and approachability of staff. Among the many solutions these groups put forward, the following were mentioned:

- publish photos of student representatives
- improve the training of student representatives
- publicise results/actions of feedback
- make more use of Blackboard
- make the benefits of feedback clear to students
- nominate a feedback officer
- print a summary of the previous results on the present questionnaire
- inform students about changes at the start of a module.

The most commonly cited problems by the *experienced students* were the lack of results/actions on feedback (three groups), lack of resources (three) and the need for feedback to be taken seriously by staff and students (three). Other problems included the general lack of opportunity for feedback, better awareness of and recruitment to the student representative system, having a clear remit for SSLCs, the timing of questionnaire feedback and the reluctance of students to complain.

The solutions offered were again varied. For questionnaires:

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- putting the results of the previous year's questionnaire on the present one
- ensuring web questionnaires were anonymous
- using an independent body to analyse results
- including open-ended questions
- administering the questionnaire mid-session
- getting students to design and conduct surveys.

Other general suggestions included appointing a student feedback officer, holding in-class discussions, using focus groups, publishing feedback, ensuring better communications among staff and students, and publishing photos of student representatives.

### **Tackling issues/problems, implementing solutions and identifying impediments**

All groups were asked how their institutions had tackled these issues and problems, what solutions had been implemented or considered and with what success, and what were the factors that had impeded the institution's ability to resolve the issues. Again responses were varied, but electronic and online solutions were mentioned to varying extents by both staff and student focus groups, while the main impediments cited by the staff groups were again lack of resources.

Those solutions cited by *senior staff* groups included:

- the use of web-based questionnaires
- giving students advance warning of questionnaires to allow reflection
- ensuring that questions are properly phrased and reviewed
- making more use of Blackboard
- timing questionnaires earlier in the year/semester
- improving the training of student representatives
- implementing a buddy system for student representatives
- giving students incentives to participate as student representatives.

The main impediments mentioned by these groups were lack of resources (six).

Solutions offered by the *mixed staff* groups included:

- the training of student representatives
- the use of the web
- combining formal and informal mechanisms
- using a variety of mechanisms
- sampling students or reducing the number of questionnaires to overcome questionnaire fatigue
- ensuring good communications
- ensuring that students have realistic expectations.

Like the senior staff groups, the main impediment to resolving issues (mentioned by six of the groups) was resources.

Around a third of the *new students* groups did not provide answers to these questions. One group highlighted an improvement through the use of web/email feedback. Other groups focused on the impediments which included lack of resources (mentioned by three), factors being outside the control of the HEI/staff,

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student apathy, the need for better training of student representatives, better communication, and greater commitment at a senior level.

Again a minority of groups comprising *experienced students* did not provide answers to these questions. Of those that did, the solutions offered were student representatives and electronic forms of feedback. Of the latter, one group reported that SSLC minutes were placed on a notice board and that students were emailed to tell them where it was; another reported the use of the web/email to feedback results/actions and another mentioned the move to electronic feedback whereby students would be issued email reminders to complete questionnaires. Other suggestions included an independent body to analyse and publish feedback results and student designed and conducted questionnaires. Impediments cited by these particular student groups were the lack of a university-wide policy on student feedback, issues that were outside the control of staff, greater attention required to improve the system at university level, and the lack of transparency.

### **Informing students of the results/actions taken regarding feedback**

*Mixed staff* groups were asked whether students were informed of the results and actions taken regarding feedback and if so how effective dissemination was. The groups were split on the effectiveness of dissemination: three explicitly stated that it was and three that it was not. Another six felt the effectiveness was variable and often students have to seek out the information for themselves. The main mechanisms mentioned for disseminating results/actions were:

- SSLCs/minutes (10)
- the web (5)
- student representatives (5)
- notice boards (4)
- email (3).

The student groups were asked the same question and similar views emerged from both groups. The majority concluded that there was little or no feedback to students. Effective means of disseminating that were mentioned by the groups were

- informal/face-to-face feedback
- SSLCs
- the use of notice boards
- the use of Blackboard
- student representatives, although it was noted that practice was often patchy.

One group of *new students* reported a number of effective mechanisms for disseminating results and actions: a discussion in class about the results of a questionnaire, minutes of SSLCs posted on the web or emailed to students, and feedback from the students in the previous year provided to the current group of students.

### **Conclusions of a study on student feedback in England**

The HEFCE-funded study – ‘collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in higher education’ – and undertaken in 2002-03 had found that despite a large amount of activity connected with student feedback, there were a number of problems with current practice. These problems were formulated into six statements and both staff and student focus groups were asked

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whether they agreed, disagreed or held no opinion about each statement. The statements were:

1. That many institutions put a lot of effort into the collection of student feedback, but often this is not matched by similar effort in making use of the feedback.
2. That there exists a considerable amount of cynicism among some staff and students in some institutions about the value of student feedback, as it is currently collected and used.
3. The need for greater clarity and agreed understanding within institutions about the purpose or purposes of collecting student feedback.
4. The need for greater clarity and agreed understanding about the use or, more likely, the uses to which feedback data will be put.
5. The need for greater clarity and agreed understanding about the needs of different users and the types of information, analysis and presentation they might require from feedback data.
6. The need for improved dissemination to students of the results of, and any subsequent actions taken from, feedback data.

The majority of staff groups agreed with all but the first of the above statements, although the *mixed staff* groups were less likely to agree than the *senior staff* groups. The overwhelming majority of student groups agreed with all the above statements.

### Development needs or sector-wide approaches

All groups were asked whether there were any aspects of the feedback process or procedures where they saw value in a sector-wide approach to meeting development needs. The staff groups identified a wide range of development needs:

Senior staff	Mixed staff
Sharing good practice (4)	Sharing good practice (4)
Guidelines (2)	Guidelines and information (2)
Advice on the use of different mechanisms	Advice on types of feedback
Clarity about who has responsibility for student feedback	Advice on interpreting feedback
Establishing a bank of feedback resources	Ways of reporting back actions to students
Advice of the timing of feedback	Educational research
Ways of ensuring the effectiveness of student representatives in the first year	Ways of assuring student anonymity
Overcoming questionnaire fatigue	Ways of informing students about the purpose and benefits
The use of electronic questionnaires	Ways of managing student expectations and their transition to higher education
A framework for student feedback	
Benchmark statements	

As far as a sector-wide approach was concerned, a third of each staff groups felt there would be no value because of the diverse nature of the sector. Another three of the *senior staff* groups were explicit that a national questionnaire should not be administered. Two of the *mixed staff* groups were in favour of some form of benchmarking of central university support services.

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Whilst the majority of the staff groups did not explicitly refer to sector-wide approaches, from the responses made by those that did, it can be inferred that feedback was a matter best left to individual institutions to develop in ways suited to their distinctive needs.

Three groups of *new students* had some support for a national questionnaire, but cautioned against rankings and felt that results would be too general. Two groups felt diversity would not allow a sector-wide approach, although five mentioned a sector-wide approach as a good way to promote the value of student feedback, extend student representative training, issue guidelines and provide training in communications for staff. Other 'institutional' development needs mentioned by the *new students* groups included standardising the feedback system within individual institutions, better student representative training, introducing web-based feedback, producing simpler/user-friendly questionnaires, better communication, better understanding of students' needs/issues, and allowing a bigger role for the students union.

Four groups of *experienced students* were against a sector-wide approach because they felt HEIs are too distinct. Four were in favour: three for a national survey (to ensure accountability and highlight resource issues, and as long as it complemented internal systems), and another felt an external body should collect and publish feedback using categories of similar HEIs.

### Aspects working well and models of good practice

All focus groups were asked to identify aspects of the institution's procedures for gathering student feedback that were working well and those they considered to be models of good practice.

Senior staff	Mixed staff
The use of online/electronic questionnaires and communication (5)	SSLCs (5)
The use of SSLCs (2)	Focus groups (5)
Embedding an ethos of responsiveness	Informal/face-to-face methods (4)
Committee representatives	The use of online questionnaires
Student working groups	VLE discussions
The annual monitoring process and feedback to students on results/actions	Placing SSLC minutes on the web and 'ticking off' actions as they are addressed
The year tutor system	
The use of focus groups (and independently run focus groups)	

Again, the frequent differences in perceptions between senior and other staff are worthy of mention.

Other aspects highlighted by the *mixed staff* groups included

- Focus groups in one institution at the course level with independent auditors – from another department – following which a report is written for the head of school.
- The use of questionnaires in a business school a third of the way into the year, analysed by students and then the results forwarded to the SSLC (the exercise

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was repeated two-thirds of the way through the year to assess if issues had been resolved).

Those aspects identified by the student groups as working well or as good practice included:

<b>New students</b>	<b>Experienced students</b>
The use of email/web discussions	Student representatives (3)
Informal/face-to-face feedback	SSLCs (2)
Student representatives	Web surveys/email communication (2)
SSLCs	Publishing results of questionnaires
Discussion groups	Time to complete questionnaires at the start rather than the end
Completing questionnaires at the beginning of class rather than at the end when students need to get away	Anonymising questionnaires
	Student designed questionnaires
	Social events
	Lecturers asking students at an early stage whether there are any problems
	Open door policy
	Group discussions

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### *Aspects of existing good practice identified by the focus groups*

The previous section has included aspects of institutional procedures for gathering student feedback that the focus groups felt were working well and those they considered to be models of good practice. Often those that were mentioned by the student groups were 'wish lists' as opposed to current practice in the institution. However, it was a clear that discussions with students had identified a number of aspects that might constitute good or interesting practice. Due to the lack of time available to the focus groups to probe these aspects, it is only possible to provide limited details (and some have already been mentioned in previous sections). In general, the practice identified has tended to be found in specific departments (and often small ones) rather than across an entire institution. The aspects identified are as follows:

1. Students at an institution felt well-informed about the purpose of the questionnaire as it was clearly stated on the form.
2. Departments in two institutions administered their questionnaires at the start of the lecture (and not during the last five minutes).
3. One school was experimenting with a questionnaire administered a third of the way through the academic year. Results were analysed by the students and discussed at the SSLC. Two-thirds of the way into the year the exercise was repeated to assess whether issues raised had been resolved.
4. At another institution, students on a particular course had weekly class meetings with staff to give and receive feedback. It was also an opportunity for the class representative to have discussions with other students.
5. One institution used independently run focus groups with students which resulted in a report being sent to the head of school.
6. A number of student groups at a few institutions reported that some departments published results on the VLE from student feedback as well as information on the actions that would be taken.
7. Other departments fed back information on the changes made to the module/course as a result of the feedback received from the previous set of students, either at the start of the session or as information in the handbook.
8. Other lecturers presented oral reports on the results of student feedback questionnaires and the actions that would be taken.
9. Some departments also published their SSLC minutes, either on the VLE or on a dedicated notice board, together with action plans, the staff identified to take forward the action, and a 'ticking off' system as the actions were taken.
10. Another department used email to notify students of the results of questionnaire feedback along with intended actions and also notified them that SSLC minutes had been posted.
11. Two departments at one institution had credit-bearing modules for student representatives.

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### ***Conclusions and Actions: Student Evaluation of and feedback on their Learning Experience***

The majority of students did not seem to know why their institutions collected student feedback and what happened to it. But they wanted to know. Students valued being asked their opinions and wanted to be treated as full partners in the process. Overall, it was clear from the responses made by the focus groups that current approaches to collecting and using student feedback need to be improved, and students need to be more engaged in the process. Half the senior staff groups felt that their institution's objectives with regard to the collection and use of student feedback were only being achieved partially.

The main points to come out of the analysis of the staff and student focus groups are as follows.

#### *Transparency of purpose and use*

1. The majority of students were not told why their institutions wanted to find out what they thought about their studies. (This may be because teaching staff are not clear themselves about why it was being collected – although this hypothesis was not tested out in the focus groups.) Those students that were told why it was collected reported that they were informed by their tutors or that the purpose was printed on the questionnaire. Some were told it would benefit future students, although one group felt that in doing so they were being treated 'like guinea pigs'.

A key point for clarification is 'what need or problem is student feedback meant to address'? Staff and student groups identified a range of purposes (which might be indicative of confusion over purpose) in the collection and use of student feedback but often these purposes were couched in very general or vague terms. For example, 'to improve teaching and learning' was identified by both staff and student groups to varying extents, but it is not clear from the focus group reports (or the questions asked) whether the collection of student feedback was in fact helping to improve teaching and learning. Different aspects of teaching and learning might require different approaches to feedback. For example, an approach that is intended to result in actions by an individual teacher to improve his/her performance might be different from the approach taken by a programme team to improve the content of the curriculum, or that by an institution to improve the accessibility of the library. An institution might be effective in resolving issues at some levels but not at others. A related point, therefore, is 'are the mechanisms that are being used to collect student feedback achieving their intended purpose'?

One of the main findings of the HEFCE study was that clarity of purpose is key and that all involved in the collection and use of student feedback, including students, need to be clear about the purposes and intended uses of the data. Furthermore, it also concluded that use of a range of feedback mechanisms will be more effective than reliance on a single one, for example questionnaires. This conclusion appears to be fully consistent with the Scottish experience.

**Action:** The Scottish higher education sector might wish to give further consideration to the purposes of student feedback at all the levels within institutions at which feedback is collected and used, and ensure that the

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mechanisms used are appropriate for the intended purpose. They should also explore ways of ensuring that information about 'purpose' is disseminated effectively to students as well as staff.

### *The value of informal feedback*

2. All institutions were operating a range of mechanisms to collect student feedback. However, when asked about the effectiveness of the mechanisms in use (which ones students most engaged with? which worked best?), the most common mechanism identified by the student groups was informal/face-to-face feedback. This was echoed by the 'mixed' staff groups.

However, it was not clear from the focus group reports *why* face-to-face feedback was so useful and what it achieved. Given the value placed on it, should institutions rely on it more? Would it be safe to do so, given differences in staff student ratios and curricular organisation and the implications these have for relationships between students and staff? There is a further issue of whether face-to-face feedback can provide an institution (rather than an individual teacher) with sufficiently robust evidence to provide a basis for action.

Resource constraints and staff student ratios do not allow institutions to rely completely on face-to-face feedback through traditional tutorial arrangements.

**Action:** a sector-wide approach should be considered to identifying and exploring alternative ways for institutions to provide some opportunities for face-to-face feedback for all students.

### *The role of the student representative*

3. The majority of the senior staff groups reported that their institutions provided institutional and student union support for student representatives. Students and staff valued the role of the student representative and the staff student liaison committees (SSLCs). Some of the student focus groups cited the student representative and the SSLC as ways in which their institutions ensured that student feedback was taken seriously by students. They were also cited by students and staff as the most effective mechanisms and the most useful aspect of student feedback after informal/face-to-face feedback. At the same time, there was recognition that student representation was often not very effective. Some students reported that the student representative system was not well known, that recruiting students was a problem and that training needed to be extended or improved. While staff appeared supportive of the student representative role, there was a feeling that recruitment, the representativeness of those elected/selected, and the training provided for them, all needed to be improved.

Improving the student representation system was also a recommendation made by the HEFCE study. In particular that study concluded that the importance of the role of student representatives should be recognised by staff at all levels and by students, that student unions should be more involved in awareness raising and training in the role, that where training is provided by the student union full co-operation should be provided by staff at all levels, and that time should be made available to student representatives to allow them to gather and feed back issues to the student body.

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**Action:** The Scottish higher education sector might similarly wish to consider the student representative role in collaboration with representatives of student organisations and SPARQS (Student Participation in Quality in Scotland).

### *Improving communication about results and actions*

4. The majority of student focus groups reported that there was little or no communication of results of or actions arising from student feedback (including the reasons for not taking actions). Students felt quite strongly that poor communication between staff and students was one of the main issues and problems that impeded the effective use of student feedback. To counter this, more effective use of the student representative and SSLC roles and further exploration of email and web technology to communicate the consequences of feedback would be welcomed by students.

Improving the student representative role and the use of new technology were also identified by some of the staff focus groups as ways of improving the effective use of student feedback. (Of the main issues and problems identified by the staff focus groups, lack of resources, lack of student engagement and the recruitment, representativeness and training of student representatives were mentioned by a number.)

Both this current study and the HEFCE study found that most students are interested in the results of feedback. Students see considerable efforts put into collecting feedback data which are often not matched by the efforts put into their analysis and use. Suggestions of ways to improve the dissemination of results and actions arising from feedback back to students have been made by a number of the student focus groups in this study and by the HEFCE study.

**Action:** The Scottish higher education sector might wish to give further consideration, with representatives of student organisations, about how best to improve feedback to students.

## **Quality Enhancement Themes- Steering Committee for Responding to Student Needs**

**Further reading** (including articles on student feedback processes and methods of collecting student feedback)

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## **Quality Enhancement Themes- Steering Committee for Responding to Student Needs**

*Appendix*

### **Questions asked of the focus groups**

#### **Senior staff**

##### *Student Support in the First Year of Study*

#### **Pre-entry Phase**

- a) How do you intend to cope with a wider range of student population and modes of attendance?
- b) What plans, if any, do you have to make use of new technology to provide more efficient and effective student support?
- c) How have you tackled achieving more effective integration between central and academic support systems?
- d) Do you think that students (and their families) might be better prepared for the progression to university from their previous learning experiences? What improvements might be considered?
- e) Do you think that there are particular types of students that are more likely to need help both academically and socially to integrate into university life?
- f) Do you think that additional forms of staff induction and CPD might be required to help raise awareness and meet the needs of staff to identify particular students' needs? In what ways and what categories of staff might this apply to?

#### **On-course Phase**

- g) Do you feel that certain groups of students should be identified and targeted for certain forms of support (i.e., given that often those most in need of support are least likely to seek it)? Which groups? What needs? How feasible might this be?
- h) What sort of support services and academic support mechanisms should be/are available to students to help them to achieve greater autonomy?
- i) In what ways, if any, could existing support services and academic support mechanisms be developed to meet student needs more effectively?
- j) Do you feel that there should be greater coordination between academic departments and centrally provided support services/academic support to better support the needs of students? If so, how?
- k) Do you feel that there should be closer monitoring of the use of support services/academic support, the types of students that make use of it, and the impact on student success?
- l) Do you feel that additional forms of staff induction and CPD are required to raise awareness and meet the needs of staff in this area? In what ways and what categories of staff might this apply to?

##### *Student Evaluation of and Feedback on Their Learning Experience*

- a) What is the institution's purpose in collecting and using student feedback?

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- b) To what extent is the institution achieving its objectives with regard to the collection and use of student feedback?
- c) What mechanisms are being employed to collect student feedback, centrally and at other levels, e.g. Faculty, Department?
- d) Who has responsibility for determining how student feedback is collected? Is it centralised or is responsibility devolved, i.e. is a standard questionnaire used at programme/ module level; is there institutional /student union support for student representatives?
- e) How is the analysis of feedback carried out? To what extent does the institution provide central support? To what extent is the analysis devolved to Faculty/ Department level?
- f) What mechanisms are being used to report the analysis of feedback (i) at University, Faculty and Departmental level, and (ii) to students?
- g) What mechanisms does the institution employ to ensure that student feedback is taken seriously by staff?
- h) How does the institution assure itself that actions are taken in the light of the analysis?
- i) Have you experienced any particular problems at different levels within the institution in using specific types of student feedback or particular mechanisms to collect student feedback? If so, please specify.
- j) Within your institution, what do you consider to be the main issues/ problems which impede the effective use of student feedback? Please distinguish between the types of student feedback and the levels at which it is collected and used.
- k) To what extent has your institution been able to tackle these issues/problems? If so, what solutions have been implemented or are being considered, and with what success? Identify any factors which have impeded the institution's ability to resolve such issues?
- l) To what extent are the conclusions of the HEFCE-funded study reinforced by experiences within your institution?
- m) Are there any aspects of the feedback process or procedures where you see a development need or you see a value in a sector-wide approach?
- n) Identify any aspects of your procedures for gathering student feedback which are working well, and which you consider to be models of good practice?

### **Mixed staff**

*Student Support in the First Year of Study*

### **Pre-entry Phase**

- a) Do you think that students (and their families) need to be better prepared for the progression to university from their previous learning experiences? What improvements might be considered?
- b) Do you think that there are particular types of students that are more likely to need help both academically and socially to integrate into university life? Who are they and what kinds of help do they need?

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- c) Do you think that additional forms of staff induction and CPD might be required to help raise awareness and meet the needs of staff to identify and meet particular students' needs? In what ways?

### **On-course Phase**

- d) What are the kinds of problems typically faced by students in their first year and how are they dealt with?
- e) Do you feel that certain groups of students should be identified and targeted for some forms of support (i.e., given that often those most in need of support are least likely to seek it)? Which groups? What needs? How feasible might this be?
- f) What sort of support services and academic support mechanisms should be/are available to students to help them to achieve greater autonomy?
- g) In what ways, if any, could existing support services and academic support mechanisms be developed to meet student needs more effectively?
- h) When is the best time for students to receive information about available support services and academic support mechanisms, and how? Do you feel that support services/mechanisms for students need to be better publicised?
- i) Do you feel that there should be greater coordination between academic departments and centrally provided support services/academic support to better support the needs of students? If so, how?
- j) Do you feel that additional forms of staff induction and CPD are required to raise awareness and meet the needs of staff in this area? In what ways?

### *Student Evaluation of and Feedback on Their Learning Experience*

- a) What, in your view, is the institution's purpose in collecting and using student feedback? How is it used?
- b) What mechanisms are being employed to collect student feedback, centrally and at other levels, e.g. Faculty, Department?
- c) What mechanisms does the institution employ to ensure that student feedback is taken seriously by staff?
- d) How effective, in your view, are the mechanisms employed? Which mechanisms work best for you? Which ones, in your experience, do students engage most with?
- e) What aspects of student feedback do you find most useful?
- f) Within your institution/department, what do you consider to be the main issues/problems which impede the effective use of student feedback? Please distinguish between the types of student feedback and the levels at which it is collected and used.
- g) To what extent has your institution/department been able to tackle these issues/problems? If so, what solutions have been implemented or are being considered, and with what success? Identify any factors which have impeded the institution's ability to resolve such issues.
- h) Are students informed of the results/actions taken regarding feedback? If so, how and how effective is this dissemination?
- i) To what extent are the conclusions of the HEFCE-funded study reinforced by experiences within your institution?

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- j) Are there any aspects of the feedback process or procedures where you see a development need or you see a value in a sector-wide approach, which would be helpful to you in your role?
- k) Identify any aspects of your procedures for gathering student feedback which are working well, and which you consider to be models of good practice?

### **Students**

#### *Student Support in the First Year of Study*

##### **Pre-entry phase**

- a) Do you feel that you were well prepared for the whole university experience – both academically and socially? If you feel you were, what contributed to that preparation? If you feel you were not, what was missing and how might you have been better prepared?

##### **On-course phase**

- b) Were you clear about what was expected of you on your course and the workload required?
- c) Were you made aware of the support services and the academic support provision available to you?
- d) What sort of support have you required/used during your first year of study? How useful was that support?
- e) What sort of support services in your view should be available to students to help them adjust successfully to university life? Rank the importance of different forms of support.
- f) When is the best time to tell students about such support services and how? Should they be better publicised?
- g) In what ways, if any, could existing support services be developed/utilised to meet student needs more effectively?
- h) What sort of academic support provision in your view should be available to students (e.g. face-to-face, online, and electronic)?

##### **Progression Phase**

- i) Do you feel that you will be/have been/were sufficiently prepared to move on to your next year of study?
- j) What has helped or hindered that process?

#### *Student Evaluation of and Feedback on Their Learning Experience*

- a) What, in your view, is the institution's purpose in collecting and using student feedback? How is it used? Are you told why the institution/ teaching staff wishes to find out what you think about your studies? If so, how are you told?
- b) What mechanisms are being employed to collect student feedback, centrally and at other levels, e.g. Faculty, Department?

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- c) What does the institution do to ensure that student feedback is taken seriously by students?
- d) Are students given adequate opportunity to comment on their experiences? Is there too much /too little?
- e) How effective, in your view are the mechanisms employed? Which mechanisms, in your experience, do students engage most with? Which ones work best for you? What types of feedback do you consider to be the easiest to provide?
- f) As a student, what aspects of student feedback do you consider most useful?
- g) Are students informed of the results/actions taken regarding feedback? If so, how and how effective is this dissemination?
- h) Within your institution/department, what do you consider to be the main issues/problems which impede the effective use of student feedback? Have you any suggestions on how these issues can be addressed? How can students become more engaged with the process?
- i) To what extent has your institution/department been able to tackle these issues/problems? If so, what solutions have been implemented or are being considered, and with what success? Are there any factors which have impeded the institution's ability to resolve such issues?
- j) To what extent are the conclusions of the HEFCE-funded study reinforced by experiences within your institution?
- k) Are there any aspects of the feedback process or procedures where you see a development need or you see a value in a sector-wide approach, which would be helpful to you as students?
- l) Identify any aspects of institutional/ Faculty/ Department procedures for gathering student feedback which are working well, and which you consider to be models of good practice?