

## Capturing the student voice: creating more effective mechanisms for listening

Jack Lay, Chris Mattinson, Louise Naylor  
University of Kent

### Introduction

*“The role of students in the process of shaping the student learning experience (through formal institutional processes for assuring and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching, and more informal mechanisms) has long been recognised in UK higher education (HE) and elsewhere. Further, the increasing marketisation of higher education and continuing drives to greater public accountability have arguably prompted renewed institutional efforts to ensure that student voices, as consumers and stakeholders, are listened to and their messages acted upon as appropriate” (Little et al, 2009).*

Whether we view students as consumers and stakeholders (Little et al, 2009), or as partners, collaborators or co-producers (Little, 2012; McPherson and Heggie, 2015), many of the components of student engagement mechanisms are shared across the sector - selection and use of student representatives, student/staff liaison committees (SSLCs), responses to surveys, consultation and monitoring the effectiveness of student engagement (Little et al, 2009). However, the challenge is not only to represent the voices of an increasingly diverse student body, but to use evidence-led approaches to demonstrate the impact of student engagement on the development, delivery, management and enhancement of their educational experience (Garwe, 2015). Attempts to improve student engagement takes many forms, from involving students in administering and interpreting student feedback or acting as change agents through the student union, to University support for activities that seek to improve the educational provision (Gibbs, 2012).

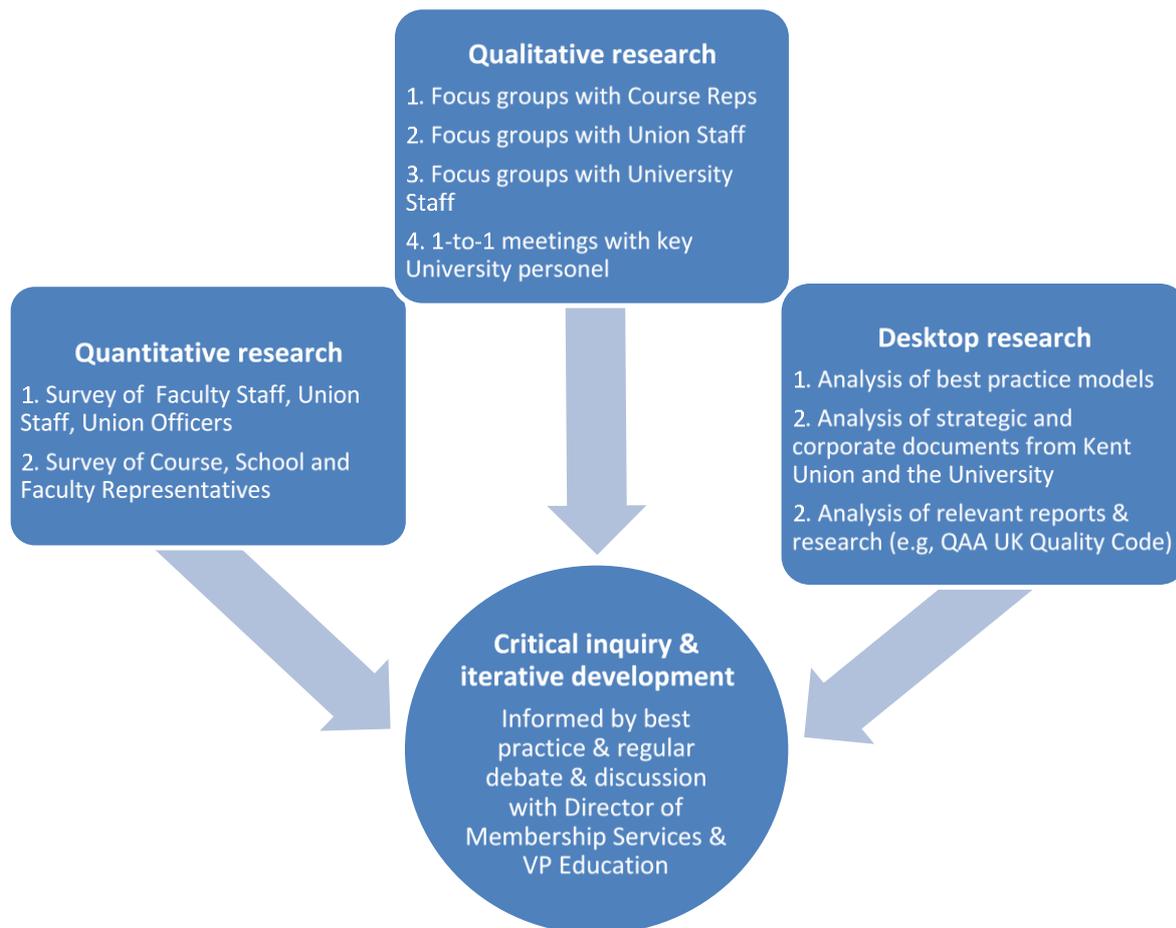
Although the use of student evaluation and feedback is now commonplace, the extent to which this informs or drives changes in practice can be variable and selective (Zhao and Galant, 2012). Therefore, the challenge is to ensure that the voice of students is not only effectively captured, but also that it becomes operationalised in order to improve higher education practice (Blair and Noel, 2014).

In their paper, Brand et al (2013) present a three-layered approach to enhancement that mirrors to some extent our approach at Kent: i.e. individual students or groups of them acting as partners in change projects (Bride et al, 2013); curriculum enhancements at School and Faculty level, using student feedback (Brooman et al, 2016), and long-term relationships between the University and Kent Union, built through strategy and governance structures that remain distinct, yet linked, to promote innovation and institutional level change (Healey et al, 2015; 2016).

In this paper, we focus specifically on how Kent Union and the University have worked in partnership to develop high-level strategic, governance and operational links, to improve the capture of the student voice<sup>i</sup> from the whole student body and to provide ways of working more effectively with academics and administrators to change the institutional culture, so that student advocacy can successfully lead to changes in educational practice or policy (NUS 2012<sup>ii</sup>; HEA 2015<sup>iii</sup>).

## Methodology

The objectives of this study were to review the existing course representation system run by Kent Union, using a range of methodologies and stakeholders to assess better ways of engaging students and capturing collective student views to ensure that the 'student voice' is heard (Garwe, 2015). The review involved (Figure 1) three main areas of research:



**Figure 1.**

*Desktop research* - This was the first part of the review; its aim was to draw upon existing sources of information to identify areas to be tested out in the qualitative and quantitative research aspects of this review. This involved a full review of Kent Union's Strategic Plan (2014-17)<sup>iv</sup>, the University of Kent's Institutional Plan (2015-2020)<sup>v</sup> and Kent Union's Impact Report (2014-15)<sup>vi</sup>, together with an analysis of the Student Written Submission for the last QAA Higher Education Review of the University (2015)<sup>vii</sup>. This desktop research also involved a benchmarking exercise against the best practice guides from the National Union

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of Students (NUS) on learning and teaching<sup>viii</sup> and specifically, student representation and engagement<sup>ix</sup>, using the results of Kent Union's latest volunteer satisfaction survey. In addition, there was a mapping exercise against relevant sections of the QAA UK Quality Code and the University's Code of Practice for Quality Assurance (Annex N - Student Engagement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement).<sup>x</sup>

*Qualitative research* - The objectives of the qualitative research were: to test some of the findings identified in the desktop research; to involve students and staff in the review in order to gain buy-in to the process and findings; to identify key learning points and recommendations for the Union and the University, based on best practice at Kent and other HEIs. This research included: focus groups with a wide variety of stakeholders (over 250 students and staff), incorporating a selection of Faculty, School and Course administrators and course representatives; one-to-one interviews with four Deans, the Senior Deputy-Vice Chancellor (DVC), Pro-Vice Chancellor Teaching and Learning and the Director of UELT; a focus group with Union staff; observation of course representative conference and the Education Forum; visits to other universities and the NUS.

*Quantitative research* - The quantitative research provided an opportunity to engage people who had not been involved in the qualitative research and involved two separate surveys: one for course representatives (fifty responses) and one for administrators (twenty-five responses) at Faculty, School and Course level. This quantitative research was used to triangulate key findings and recommendations from the earlier desktop and qualitative research, in order to generate greater confidence in the outcomes.

### Results and discussion

The Kent Union Strategic Plan (2014-17) places a strong emphasis on student representation that positions 'empowering students to have a voice' right at the heart of the Union's purpose. Similarly, the ambitions in the University Plan (2015-20) are to 'develop an excellent student experience... and deliver, in conjunction with the Students' Union, a range of extra-curricular activities that support a vibrant and inclusive environment' in which students can achieve their potential. Building upon the outcomes of our most recent QAA Higher Education Review (2015) that confirmed there was good alignment between the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Part B - Chapter B5 on Student Engagement), students have continued to develop and implement the jointly-agreed Code of Practice with the University to operationalise the engagement of students as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience (Annex N).

#### *Improving the student representation system*

A review of the feedback from course representatives who responded to the Kent Union volunteering satisfaction survey (2015) showed that a high proportion were satisfied (76%) with the level of support and training (93% attendance) they had received from Kent Union; significantly more (42%) agreed that their experience had helped them fulfil their potential, compared with volunteers overall (26%). Mapping our provision against the ten criteria in the NUS Benchmarking Tool for Course Representation Systems (with rating scale of First steps, Developing, Developed, Refining and Outstanding), Kent Union rated six areas as 'Developed' with four areas as 'Refining', thereby exposing a number of areas for improvement. Specifically, training for course representatives was improved by providing

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more bespoke training sessions for different roles (i.e. course, School and Faculty representatives) and there was greater participation in student-led elections through more effective communication between Kent Union and Schools/Faculties. This has led to over 8% growth in representatives in post this academic year.

In response to interviews with staff as part of the qualitative research, nominated staff members in each School are now responsible for liaison and communication with representatives and, in line with the University policy, have reviewed how SSLC meetings are organised to ensure that students can fully participate and provide input to meetings, including the anonymous submission of concerns.

Further focus groups with students and Faculty, School and course representatives resulted in a clearer hierarchy within the course representation structure (with better mentoring between Faculty, School and course representatives). Kent Union has made significant improvements to its website, creating a directory with more user-friendly policy briefings and relevant resources for student representatives, including student profiles and contact details, as well as a calendar of training events, SSLC meetings and other key dates.

### *Capturing the student voice*

Further to address issues about the level of communication between representatives and students and allay staff concerns that the views expressed are often not truly representative, there was widespread approval for the development of an online tool to capture feedback in both qualitative and quantitative ways that would enhance communication between meetings and provide continuing monitoring of the effectiveness of student representation in quality assurance and enhancement.

Kent Union adopted an online evaluation tool to collect feedback from students about their student experience; it used a bespoke piece of software called SimOn (SIMple ONline Tool – licenced from University of Bournemouth – renamed ‘Digital Rep for Kent’), which asks students to identify what is/is not working well and to offer ideas about how to improve the student experience. This online tool is available on the Kent Union website and can be used to survey students or gather feedback from all of them at any time. Digital Rep can generate instant reports to inform students about their relevant representative work at various levels (e.g. course, School, Faculty or institution levels), allowing for continuing developments and enhancements throughout the year. Since its launch (Autumn term 2016), 858 individual students have engaged with the system and provided over 1350 pieces of feedback to their representatives across all Schools and Centres at the University.

### *Strategic enhancement*

The qualitative research also included comparisons with, or visits to, other HEIs to evaluate good practice with regard to student engagement partnerships. Of particular merit was the quality of the course representative system at Exeter, with strong links between students and staff through its planned approach to supporting academic communities and the practical steps taken to empower course representatives. Notable features included the Union’s ‘Visions for the Future of Education’<sup>xi</sup>, with supporting action plans based on SSLC minutes, NSS results, feedback from the University’s module and course evaluation system, feedback

from course representatives, teaching award nominations and consultation with University staff.

To reflect this model, Kent Union created its first Education Strategy in 2016<sup>xii</sup>, supported by the University to run in parallel with and to complement the University's Education and Student Experience Strategy (2016-20)<sup>xiii</sup>, to encourage shared innovation and partnership working on key themes relating to the student experience. The Kent Union strategy has not only provided focus for course representatives and Vice-President Education for continuity from year to year, but has also identified core areas for student engagement in the enhancement of educational quality and the student experience. For example, the new student-led Kent Union Education and Student Representation Board was established (with University staff representatives, including DVC Education) to oversee these student-led developments. One of the emerging themes was Assessment and Feedback and this has led to a greater collaboration on an internal academic audit of this theme as well as informing a research project with the NUS on capturing the student voice in the Annual Provider Review<sup>xiv</sup> (see Conclusions).

Similarly, Kent chose to emulate the strong system of academic societies at Exeter, by resolving to integrate (or, where absent, implement) these in each School. Funded by the University, a new member of staff for academic societies was appointed (to the Representation and Democracy Team) as support for the creation of academic communities to work alongside the existing post for student representatives. Such collaboration has enabled stronger links to be forged between this team and Schools - for example, committee representatives from the Faculty of Sciences have launched a series of open forums where students can share their ideas for improving the student experience. The numbers of students engaged with academic societies has already increased by 10% in this first year, with plans to roll this out to all undergraduates.

### Conclusions

The review of Kent's course representation system has been an enormous undertaking, involving the collection of a huge amount of data, input from over 300 people and analysis of a large volume of information. Although the full review identified fifty-one individual recommendations, we have specifically focused on those that sought to strengthen the Union-University partnerships in this case study. By means of a triangulated approach to interrogating ways of enhancing the course representative system, recommendations emerged that included improving mechanisms for capturing the student voice and more effectively monitoring the outcomes to assess impact - i.e. to demonstrate whether the student voice was being heard (Blair and Noel, 2014; Brooman, 2015).

At the time of writing, many of the recommendations have already been implemented, with the rest likely to have been addressed by the end of the 2016-17 academic year. Kent Union has enhanced its renamed 'Student Representation System' by: supporting democracy and academic societies in Schools; improving the selection, training and support of student representatives; using technology to capture more effectively the collective student voice at all levels within the University. Specifically, its online feedback platform, called Digital Rep provides continuing student feedback to support the work of student representatives at School, Faculty and University committees, providing a more timely and comprehensive view of the student experience throughout the year. The new Kent Union Education and Student

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Representation Board is charged with implementing and monitoring their Education Strategy and considering key themes emerging from this new digital platform for student feedback.

As a result, Kent Union, with University support, is currently engaged in a project to plan a separate student written submission for the next Annual Provider Review (2017), based on the methodology developed by The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP),<sup>xv</sup> that will extend into further desk-based research (including internal and external student survey data – e.g. NSS). The focus of this research will be to harness the student voice in enhancing Assessment and Feedback practice, in order to address an area of strategic priority for the both the University and Kent Union.

In terms of practical advice to the sector, there are three key areas to consider in improving the partnerships between students and staff:

1. Establish sustainable relationships with the student union through Union staff, as well as sabbatical officers, to ensure continuity and sustainability of operational and strategic objectives;
2. Identify ways of engaging students more widely with the representation system, by improving mechanisms for feedback and communication of outcomes through effective governance;
3. Encourage student-led committees and change projects that seek to improve the student experience, by assuring autonomy yet encouraging alignment to shared strategic visions, where relevant.

In conclusion, by reviewing our student representative system, we have developed and enhanced strategic, governance and operational arrangements for capturing the student voice that will not only improve the partnership with students at all levels (Brand *et al*, 2013) but ensure that student opinions are not only heard, but also heeded, in relation to University-wide academic issues. Using evidence-led approaches to improving the student learning experience and integrating academic societies with the student representation system in Schools should generate a strong sense of academic community (belonging) and more effectively support student engagement and success (Thomas, 2012).

### Acknowledgements

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<sup>i</sup> Student voice - refers to the values, opinions, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds of students within a HE community <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/enhancement/definitions/student-voice#sthash.TRMeOybE.dpuf>

<sup>ii</sup> NUS 2012 NUS (2012) A manifesto for Partnership. London National Union of Students (mentioned in TSEP) <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/a-manifesto-for-partnership>

<sup>iii</sup> HEA (2015) Framework for partnership in learning and teaching in higher education - See more at: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/students-partners-framework-action#sthash.Wy3NXLQS.dpuf>

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- v University Plan (2015-20) <https://www.kent.ac.uk/about/plan/>
- vi Kent Union's Impact Report (2015-16) <https://www.kentunion.co.uk>
- vii QAA Higher Education Review (2015)  
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/ReviewsAndReports/Documents/University%20of%20Kent/University-of-Kent-HER-15.pdf>
- viii NUS Comprehensive Guide to Learning and Teaching: A Resource for Students' Unions (2015)  
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- ix NUS Course Rep Systems Benchmarking Tool.  
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- x Annex N <https://www.kent.ac.uk/teaching/documents/quality-assurance/codes/taught/pdf/AnnexN.pdf>
- xi University of Exeter - <https://www.exeterguild.org/academicrepresentation/visions/>
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<https://www.kentunion.co.uk/pageassets/representation/reps/resources/educationstrategy/Education-Strategy-2016-2020.pdf>
- xiii Education and Student Experience Strategy (2016-20)  
<https://www.kent.ac.uk/uelt/strategies/ita.html>
- xiv Student Voice in Annual Provider Review <http://tsep.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Student-voice-in-APR-pilot-programme-briefing-1.pdf>
- xv The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) [www.tsep.org.uk](http://www.tsep.org.uk)