



Taking the long view of the student voice: Analysis of student written submissions to QAA review and audit

Executive summary

For universities and colleges going through QAA review the student submission provides an impression of what it is like to be a student at that institution. It also demonstrates how students' views are incorporated into the decision-making and quality assurance processes of the university or college.

QAA introduced student written submissions (SWSs) into its review methods in 2002. This was a pioneering initiative, predating the White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System*¹ by 10 years. In 2011, based on student feedback, we began accepting submissions in non-written form, such as videos, but a written submission has remained the dominant format. The student voice had never been captured so systematically before, or had a direct bearing on the student experience. Now, some 15 years later, student engagement in quality assurance (and students as partners in their education) is the norm in universities.

There was an immediate impact when SWSs were introduced. Institutions 'readily accepted their SWSs as an important source of information in the work of enhancing their quality management and academic standards arrangements'.

Direct improvements to the student experience have been made through cycles of review and audit. A case study from Nottingham Trent University describes how the SWS has directly resulted in an improved student experience; how SWSs have improved through the use of data and the engagement of a wider range of students; and how students became more engaged in quality assurance and enhancement.

Over the 15 years students have remained consistent in their concern about contact time, assessment and the need for timely feedback. Their more recent concerns support research commissioned by QAA in 2013 by King's College, London: students are now more likely to have a consumerist ethos towards higher education.

Background and introduction

The SWS helps review teams understand what it is like to be a student at the institution, and how students' views are considered in decision-making and quality assurance. The SWS forms part of the evidence base used by review teams to inform their judgements and lines of enquiry.

SWSs were introduced in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2002. At that time there was no set format for the submissions; rather, student representatives were invited to structure the SWS around four questions.

- How accurate is the information that the institution publishes?
- Do students know what is expected of them?
- What is the student experience as a learner like?

¹ Higher education White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System* (2011). Available at: www.gov.uk/government/consultations/higher-education-white-paper-students-at-the-heart-of-the-system.

- Do students have a voice in the institution and is it listened to?

This format was changed, in 2011, to reflect students' feedback that their submission should mirror that of the institution's self-evaluation document (SED).

Over the years SWSs have varied considerably in length and detail. The support provided by the student body, and the institution's engagement with its student representatives, tend to improve the SWS. This engagement has also improved over time, although part-time and postgraduate students are less likely to contribute to a student submission than their full-time undergraduate peers.

The Annex provides a list of publications and other evidence that have informed the drafting of this report.

Has QAA review and the student written submission improved the student experience?

The evidence seems to suggest that it has. There was certainly an immediate impact. In 2004 the first 'outcomes' research in this area² found evidence that institutions 'readily accepted their SWSs as an important source of information in the work of enhancing their quality management and academic standards arrangements'.

A further report from the same year³ concluded that 'the SWS was viewed as identifying problems or concerns and providing an evidence base for both the institution and the audit team. In some instances the evidence or information provided through the SWS was seen to provide a stimulus for change'.

Later, in January 2006, we found that the SWS had positive outcomes for the student body.⁴ Giving students a voice made them a valid and active participant in quality assurance. As the SWS and SED are submitted eight weeks prior to the audit visit, it 'gives the SWS potential leverage over aspects of institutional policy'.

Since 2006 the SWS has continued to be submitted alongside the SED before any review. The guidance given to students has changed as our approach to student engagement has developed.

The impact of the student written submission through QAA review

Nottingham Trent University

Since the introduction of the SWS, Nottingham Trent University (NTU) has undergone three QAA reviews. Each review has seen improvements in student engagement in quality assurance and an increasingly evidence-based SWS. The SWS has provided a structured and timely opportunity for students to reflect upon and comment on the student experience and the relationship with the University. The University has responded positively to the role of the SWS in the review process.

The SWS was first included in the University's 2004 audit. An example of one of the areas highlighted by students noted in the review report was the 'mixed picture of the library resources available to students which varied across discipline areas'. Productive and

² *Outcomes from Institutional Audit: The Contribution of the Student Written Submission to Institutional Audit 2002-04*, QAA (2004). Available at: <http://heer.qaa.ac.uk/SearchForSummaries/Summaries/Pages/QA127.aspx>.

³ *Student Experience in Audit 2003-04*, QAA

⁴ *QAA Annual Report to HEFCE* (2006)

helpful discussions with staff and students during the audit explored the impact of multi-site operation on the provision of learning support resources to students. No recommendations were necessary.

The SWS produced by the Students' Union for the 2008 audit was better evidenced and better captured NTU's many and diverse student voices. An example of an issue highlighted for improvement by the SWS was timely assessment feedback, which was reflected in a recommendation of the audit to 'consistently apply the policies and guidance...with respect to feedback to students on assessment'. The audit concluded, in relation to the student voice, that 'the University values the input of students, is a responsive institution and has an extensive framework for student participation in its quality assurance processes. The University is aware of areas where student representation might be improved, particularly at programme level, and is taking steps to address this.'

Ten years on from the University's first SWS, the 2015 SWS had improved yet again. Better and more intelligent use of data - including National Student Survey data, other national and local survey data, and informal discussions with students - gave weight to the strengths and improvement areas the SWS identified for the University to focus on, as well as reflecting on the role the Students' Union had to play. The SWS also considered how the University had addressed the recommendations from its previous review - for example, providing feedback within three weeks of submission. Overall, the 2015 review found that the relationship between the Students' Union and the University had 'improved significantly'. The SWS noted that the views of the Students' Union Executive Officers were 'more highly valued than in the past'; the input of the Union was actively sought in a range of areas; and the Union and University were engaged in a true, meaningful partnership.

The SWS is now fully embedded in the review process, and QAA's investment and support has equipped students to participate confidently and appropriately. Students' increased engagement in quality assurance and with teaching and learning performance data has been a positive consequence of their preparation of a written submission. Engagement with quality assurance and data has allowed the Students' Union to more intelligently and effectively pursue change.

While the SWS has been used as a catalyst for change, it is the use of data and evidence, as well as the commitment to building strong relationships between the Students' Union and the University, which ensures that the opinions and ideas of students are heard and that positive outcomes for students are achieved well beyond the process of Higher Education Review. This positive working relationship was identified as good practice in the 2015 Higher Education Review report for the University: 'The partnership between the University and Students' Union which effectively responds to the diverse and complex needs of the student body to ensure students are engaged individually and collectively.'

Our analysis suggests that the majority of institutions have gone through a similar transition to Nottingham Trent University: from an innovation in the review method that was ahead of its time; to acting on review recommendations that were directly influenced by the SWS; to review acting as an assurance mechanism to ensure that improvements had been made to the student experience (and ensuring those improvements were being sustained).

We find that the better SWSs tend to make good use of data and are more representative of the many and varied student voices. They mirror university SEDs in their thoroughness and rigour. The impact of SWSs is illustrated in this quote from one of our Lead Student Representatives.

'...the process of preparation for the review has helped the college identify its strengths and weaknesses, and plan further improvements...I am proud that my contribution has made an impact on the quality of learning at my institution.'

Conclusions and observations

While the SWS guidance given to students has changed over time, students have remained concerned about contact time, assessment and the need for timely feedback. Common complaints are that deadlines are often not met, and that feedback can be insubstantial and received too late to be used as learning tool. Concerns about the inconsistency in the student experience - across courses, campuses and in education delivered by partners - remains a common theme. While student representation on committees has improved, more recent comments have focused on the lack of representation for specific groups of students.

Teaching quality, interestingly, was a minority concern in earlier SWSs. The majority of SWSs (notwithstanding concerns about the consistency of the student experience) indicate that students are generally content with their teaching and their wider learning experience.

We have noted a change in focus following the 2011 higher education reforms. Fees have become more of an issue for students. They are more likely to insist on 'value-for-money' and see themselves as partners in the delivery of their education. To illustrate this, there are calls for timetabling to be more student centred. These findings concur with research recently commissioned by QAA into student expectations and perceptions of their education.⁵ Students are now more concerned about hidden costs and the accuracy or otherwise of published information.

The overarching issues for students, in stark contrast to earlier SEDs, is value for money and inconsistencies in the student experience. Students tend to have an even greater awareness of differences of the levels of contact with staff and the provision of resources between disciplines. Set against this background, the Teaching Excellence Framework will link the funding of teaching to quality. Providers that have achieved positive QAA review outcomes will, from autumn 2017, be able to maintain their fees in line with inflation.

SWSs continue to provide invaluable information and intelligence about students and their experience. The impact of QAA's investment in students through the SWS can be seen in direct improvements to their education.

⁵ Student expectations and perceptions of higher education, King's College London (2013). Available at: www.kcl.ac.uk/study/learningteaching/kli/People/Research/student-expectations-perceptions-HE.aspx.

Annex

Outcomes from Institutional Audit: The Contribution of the Student Written Submission to Institutional Audit 2002-04, QAA (2004):

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Outcomes from Institutional Audit: Student Representation and Feedback Arrangements, QAA (2009): www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Outcomes-from-institutional-audit---Student-representation-and-feedback-arrangements---Second-series.pdf (PDF, 151KB)

Student expectations and perceptions of higher education, King's College London (2013): www.kcl.ac.uk/study/learningteaching/kli/People/Research/student-expectations-perceptions-HE.aspx

What Students Think of Their Higher Education: Analysis of Student Written Submissions to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2011-12, QAA (2013): www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Analysis-student-written-submissions.pdf (PDF, 554KB)

What Students Think of Their Higher Education: Analysis of Student Submissions to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2012-13, QAA (2014): www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/What-Students-Think-of-Their-Higher-Education.pdf (PDF, 254KB)

QAA Annual Report to HEFCE (2006): www.lancaster.ac.uk/fss/events/hecu3/documents/janet_bohrer.doc (DOC, 182KB)

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The Impact of the Student Written Submission, QAA (2008)

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