



**QAA**

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# **STUDENT EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

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## **A STUDY OF UK HIGHER EDUCATION**

Commissioned by the  
Quality Assurance Agency

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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## Foreword

QAA has long been committed to understanding and meeting the needs of students, to help make sure they get the best possible experience from higher education. This report provides valuable evidence to help us in our work, and to guide universities and colleges. Now more than ever it is critical that providers and QAA act on what students say.

The report sheds new light on what students perceive as value for money, and what is important to them. It also provides evidence about the information students need and what they get, how their courses are managed and structured, and the role of technology in shaping their experiences. It raises the issue of what feedback students expect – something that comes up regularly in QAA's reviews and that universities and colleges still need to consider very carefully.

We are extremely grateful to Camille Kandiko and her team for the work they have undertaken in this report. I know it will spark useful and constructive debate, and provide evidence for any changes QAA and the wider higher education sector may make in response to its messages.

Anthony McClaran  
Chief Executive  
Quality Assurance Agency

## **Acknowledgments**

The project team wishes to thank the students who generously gave their time to participate in this research project. Gratitude goes out to the individuals, academics, professional staff, Student Union staff and representatives who helped coordinate interviews and focus groups with students, and without their efforts this project would not have been possible. Thanks also goes out to the King's Experience Project interns who reviewed drafts and provided feedback throughout the project.

Many thanks goes to the QAA for commissioning this research, particularly for their interest in including student perspectives in policy research. Particular support and advice was given by Chris Taylor and Sarah Halpin, from the Student Engagement team, throughout the project, and their effort is graciously appreciated. Finally the team expresses gratitude to King's Learning Institute staff for support managing the project.

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# Student Expectations and Perceptions of Higher Education

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

This Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)-funded research project explored the views of students in higher education across the UK in 2012-13, to investigate their expectations and perceptions of the quality of their learning experience and the academic standards of their chosen programmes of study. This project provides illustrative examples of the issues affecting student perceptions and expectations regarding quality and standards in the first year of a funding model in England that is significantly different both to that in existence in previous years and to that operated in the other countries of the UK.

### Aims

- A better understanding of student perceptions of quality and standards, leading to the possibility of more effective relationships within and across institutions
- Sector, academic and student groups that are better equipped to understand student engagement and thus facilitate enhancement
- Examine the impact of recent policy developments on students' perceptions of quality
- A more developed understanding of how perceptions vary across student groups, institutional types and regional settings

Research consisted of conducting interviews and focus groups with over 150 students (primarily Years 1 and 2) at 16 institutions, across a range of mission groups, institutional types and UK-wide geographical locations. Concept maps of students' higher education experience were collected along with transcripts of interviews and focus groups. Open coding was conducted using grounded theory on selected transcripts, allowing themes to emerge from the data itself. These were compared with emergent themes from the concept maps and the codes were then refined. This iterative process has produced eight major themes with supporting concept maps, reported in the order prominence across the data.

This report represents a holistic view of the student experience from students' perspectives, encompassing a wide view of student life. This goes beyond what is often traditionally part of the academic student experience to include internships, work experience, extra-curricular activities, accommodation, facilities, a sense of community and transition, which are all what students expect as part of higher education, and from students' perspectives play a significant role in their learning experience. This report summarises how students view higher education, the management and organisation of their course and the role of the institution in fostering an environment for learning, opportunities for social activities and development of students' employability. Recommendations are made for how students' views can be represented in policy decisions, how institutions and the

higher education sector can respond to student expectations and how students themselves can engage in enhancing higher education.

In the selection of participants the aim was to represent the diversity within UK higher education, including part-time, mature, international and European Union students. Within the scope of this project we would not expect to achieve a full representation of higher education settings but we were not intending to do that: we wanted to illustrate the range of situations and different ways students perceive quality and standards and how this reflects on their current experiences. A limitation of the study was that despite best efforts, interviews were not conducted in Wales, although Welsh students were represented in the interviews. Below are key findings and selected recommendations, further recommendations are in the main text.

## Key Findings: How Students View Higher Education: Ideology, Practices and Purposes

### 1. Students' Framing of Ideology: Consumerist ethos: Student perceptions of value.

A major finding from study was that dominant across all student year groups, institutional types and subjects, students have a consumerist ethos towards higher education, wanting 'value-for-money'. This was seen tangibly through sufficient contact hours and resources available and abstractly through institutions' investment in students, learning spaces and the educational community. This emerged across all year groups and locations (across the UK), rather than being particular for first-year students on the new fee regime in England. Students have at best a vague understanding of how their tuition fees are spent, and many do not think they are "getting their money's worth" (see Figure 1 and Map 1).

- Recommendation:** Institutions and the sector need to explain the relationship between fees and the quality and value of their degree. There is also a need for financial education and information for students on how universities are funded and where their money goes, as there is still a lack of understanding around the case for funding universities in a new way.

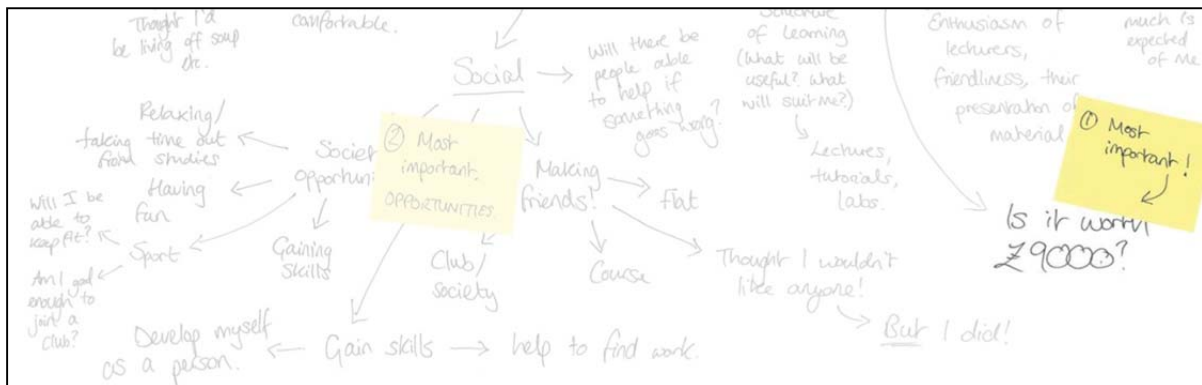
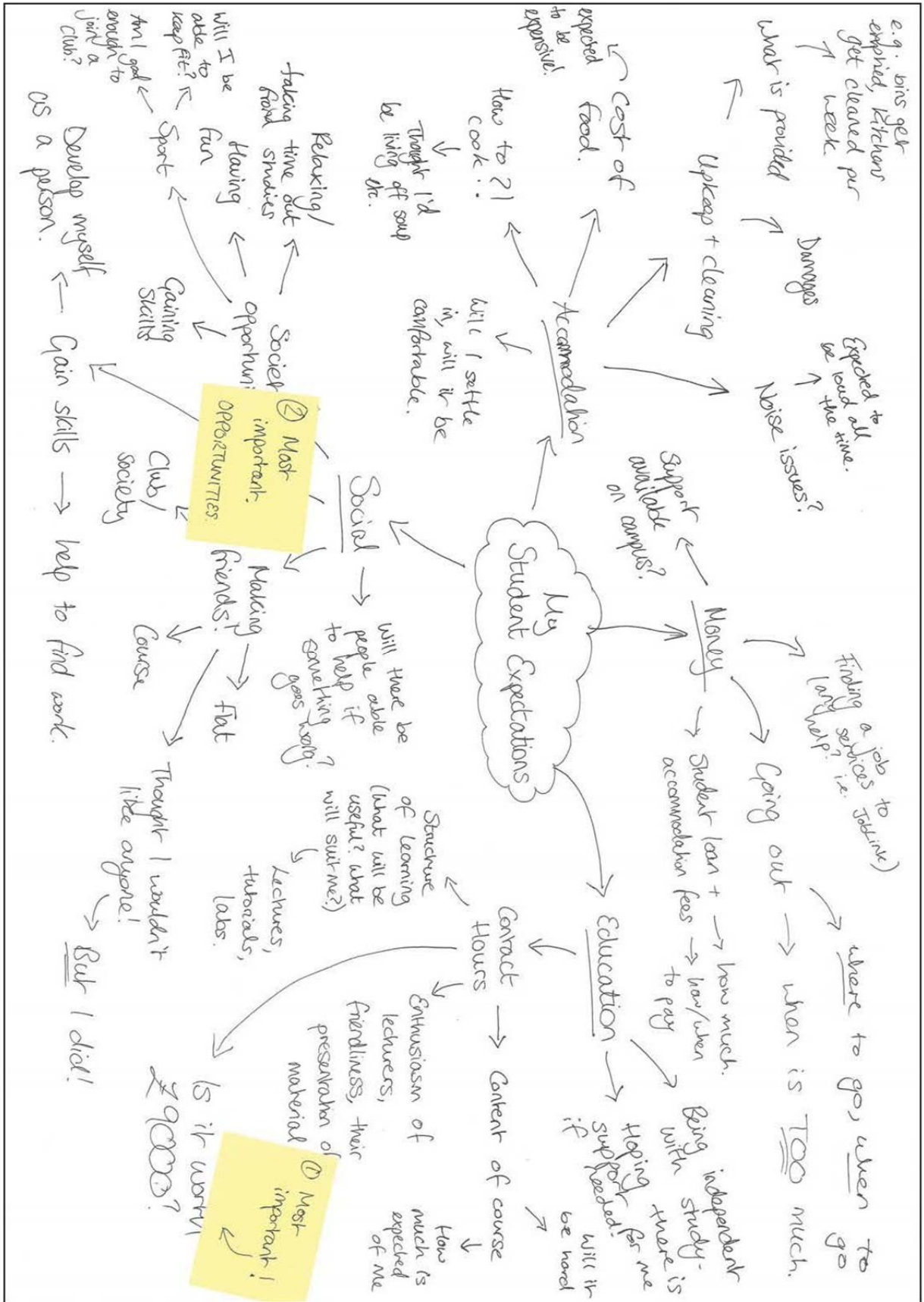


Figure 1. Snapshot of Concept Map 1. First year, Female, Chemistry, Teaching-intensive institution.



Map 1. First year, Female, Chemistry, Teaching-intensive institution.

Students perceived a lack of clear information about what most concerned them: essentially how can students find out if they are going to be (and what proportion of the time) taught by well-qualified, trained teaching staff in small settings? Students felt these factors had the greatest impact on their academic experience and are metrics that they would be able to base their market decisions on.

- **Recommendation:** To support student choice, there should be greater information and transparency over of information on how money is spent on teaching and learning activities, what qualifications do academics have in their subjects and for teaching, how are academics hired and trained and how teaching is structured and allocated. Information could include nuanced statistics on size of tutorials and seminars, department-level teaching staff-student ratios and staff teaching qualifications to allow students to choose courses offering what is most important to them.

## 2. Students' Framing of Practice: Student expectations of the learning environment: Clear benchmarks.

Students' expected their learning environment to meet clear benchmarks across four areas: instrumental (computers and physical spaces); organisational (timetabling and course structure); interpersonal (staff support and engagement); and academic (lecturers' knowledge and attitude towards students). Facilities and resources were central; if the institution is unable to effectively provide the environment in which the student can learn, it appears to be seen as failing in its mandate. Students increasingly reflect negatively on failures to meet their expectations.

- **Recommendation:** There needs to be clear and simple statements communicated for the most important aspects of a student's degree, focused at the course-level. Institutions should be cautious of using these as marketing opportunities and setting unrealistic expectations or 'selling' an undeliverable experience.

Students value face-to-face interactions for learning and support. Students viewed technology as a means to access resources and support studying, and no students mentioned pedagogical uses of digital technologies.

- **Recommendation:** Institutions should be cautious of using technology as a replacement for face-to-face interactions, or as a substitute for developing an active and collaborative learning environment and community.

## 3. Students' Framing of Purpose: Student expectations for employability: "Future-focus".

Across all subjects of study, the primary purpose for students entering higher education was to improve their career prospects and as a pathway for career enhancement. Students expected institutions to offer advice and guidance to support them in developing their employability for

future careers within and beyond their formal course. Students spoke of needing to go beyond their degree to gain the skills and experience they would need for employment, highlighting the importance of extra-curricular activities, internships and work placement opportunities. Students were rarely satisfied with centralised careers services.

- **Recommendation:** Students want more support for their employability, focusing on processes, guidance support available and development opportunities, including internships, placements and work experience. There is a need for more information on employability, with a focus on 'process' and development opportunities, rather than 'product' statistics.

### **Key findings: The Importance of Course-level Quality and Standards**

#### **4. Evaluation, feedback and feed-forward.**

Students were concerned about evaluation and feedback at the course-level. Students wanted clear, on-going and open processes for evaluation, and feedback opportunities that could improve their own experience, not only providing commentary on what could help future students. Frustrations emerged around the opacity of comments being acted upon or communicated appropriately. Students noted differences in changes that helped them, which were often instrumental, such as those related to buildings and facilities, versus feedback that only helped future students—often core aspects of the design and delivery of the course. Students were generally more concerned about quality and format of feedback than the timing of it.

- **Recommendation:** Institutional feedback time targets may not be tackling the most salient issues in feedback quality. The pressure for quick feedback returns with limited staff time can exacerbate the problems students have identified with feedback detail and personalisation. Institutional policies should prioritise quality, format and timing of feedback in relation to other assessments, managed at the course level, over standardised feedback turnaround times.
- **Recommendation:** Students almost exclusively spoke of their educational learning experience in terms of their course. This raises the need for strong course-level management of curriculum, quality and standards, with a clear structure of academic management mirroring undergraduate student-facing aspects, including local feedback and evaluation, module and course review.

#### **5. Staff: Attributes, practices and attitudes.**

Students praised enthusiastic, experienced and engaged staff, but wanted mechanisms in place to develop staff and to manage 'bad' teachers. Students wanted staff to be qualified and trained, and students expressed a desire for procedures to manage "bad teaching", described as



lecturers not knowing the course material, reading off slides and failing to offer any support to students. Despite having a consumerist approach to higher education, students complained about academics who ostensibly took the attitude of “just doing their job”. Students wanted lecturers who were passionate and knowledgeable about their subject, with sufficient content knowledge and teaching capability.

- **Recommendation:** Staff need to be supported by their institutions to provide the interaction and support that is important to students. This includes manageable teaching loads, a balance between teaching and research responsibilities and meaningful reward, recognition and progression opportunities related to teaching and support activities.

Students were aware of inconsistency in teaching competence and ability, they acknowledge personality differences and personal style, but have minimum expectations, such as not reading off slides or teaching straight out of a textbook. Students wanted teaching staff who were enthusiastic, experts in their field and met benchmarks of good teaching.

- **Recommendation:** There should be support for staff development and training (both initial and continuing support), public information about teaching qualifications, along the lines of the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) and institutional reward for teaching and recognition of teaching excellence.

## 6. Equity of opportunity: Personalisation versus standardisation.

Students wanted a personalised higher education experience, with small teaching sessions, opportunities to meet other staff and students. Students wanted acknowledgment of their individual circumstances and these to be accommodated, with flexibility and some degree of authorship over their degree experience. Students wanted options for a ‘tailored’ education, but with a sense of fairness and clear rules being maintained. The diversity across the sector indicates there is no one “student experience” rather each individual student has his or her own experience.

- **Recommendation:** There needs to be recognition that students enter higher education on different trajectories, they need different kinds and levels of support, and the institution needs to be responsive to students’ needs. A considered balance needs to be sought between having clear and consistent procedures and being flexible and accommodating for students.
- **Recommendation:** The role and function of personal and academic tutors may need to be revised at some institutions. Students should have clear avenues for support that they are comfortable using for personal and academic concerns.

## **Key findings: The Role of Students in the Institution**

### **7. Students as stakeholders? Community, engagement and belonging.**

Being part of a community and having a sense of belonging were the most important environmental aspects for students. This related each individual's engagement with the institution, and the institution with them, for the enhancement of the student's overall learning experience. Students wanted opportunities to interact with other students through Students' Union societies and clubs, institutional activities and other social opportunities; students from a variety of institutions spoke of wanting activities less centred on drinking, particularly with respect to Students' Union events.

Students wanted more interaction with staff, both within the classroom experience and beyond. To students, engagement meant all students having opportunities to engage with course and institutional-based activities, rather than in a "representational" context. Students' views suggest more of "a partnership of aims" rather than "a partnership of means" with staff at a local level, indicating more of a sense of collegiality with staff, rather than large-scale, high-level partnership work.

Students wanted opportunities to meet and interact with other students, engage with their course and participate in extra-curricular activities, both social and academic-related.

- **Recommendation:** There needs to be sophisticated promotion and coordination of student services, within institutions; this means building relationships between Students' Unions, institutional student services and support and departmental activities. Management and leadership can be provided at the institutional level through Director or Pro-Vice Chancellor of Student Engagement positions. Across the sector this requires greater support, promotion and development opportunities for those in student-facing roles.

A significant proportion of students had very limited contact with the Students' Union, particularly groups such as mature and part-time students, students on time-intensive pre-professional courses, and students who were not interested in a sporting or drinking culture.

- **Recommendation:** Students' Unions may want to promote the availability of non-drinking-associated activities, societies and clubs.
- **Recommendation:** To offer opportunities for the full range of students there may be need for dedicated institutional staff to work in partnership with Students' Unions and course-level management, mediating engagement with those students typically insulated from the Students' Union.

Despite many institutions adopting them, there was not a single mention of student charters in the interviews. Although charters may be seen as an efficient way to inform students about higher education, they seem to have negligible impact on students' expectations.

- **Recommendation:** Institutions and sector agencies should consider the purpose, role and effectiveness of student charters.

## 8. Transition into higher education.

Students' incoming expectations of higher education came from family and friends; secondary schooling and further education; and the general media and political discourse. Key features of transition for students were "feeling in the loop" with what was expected of them, balancing the various demands of higher education and developing independent learning approaches. Students' expectations rarely matched their subsequent experiences of higher education, indicating a potential need for guidance for students embarking on a degree course. It is noted that across institutions, subjects and demographic characteristics, students have varied reasons for entering higher education, information they used to choose an institution and their planned trajectories after higher education.

There was a recurrent theme about transgression of expectations, mostly these relate to expectations of higher education being shaped by the 'campus' discourse of the university, content and structure of courses, difficulty of work, availability of opportunities and degree of independent learning. It was common that students felt lost, unsure of what was expected of them and not sure of where to go for assistance in their transition to higher education.

- **Recommendation:** Institutions should consider direct interventions in students' transitional experiences, not only the general provision of services. Direct intervention strategies, such as peer mentoring of incoming students, were well regarded by students.

## **Further Student Concerns: Additional Recommendations**

There were several additional issues raised by large number of students, as well as some significant omissions by students. These are noted here to better inform sector and institutional responses to students' concerns, particularly around issues of student life and technology.

- **Recommendation:** Regarding finances, students spoke as often about immediate financial concerns, such as money for food, rent and transport, as about tuition fees and student loans; there should be increased access to flexible part-time work, paid internships and educational maintenance loans and grants.

- **Recommendation:** There needs to be a collective, institution-wide response to support for student services and student affairs, offering a balance of course-based provision and access to centralised services coordinated at the course-level. This includes greater institutional responsibility, oversight and partnership with wider aspects of the student experience, including accommodation, transport, cheap and healthy food options, family-study balance and social activities.

Students tend to focus on functional aspects of IT infrastructure, including ease and reliability of accessing resources and quality of wireless internet, rather than innovative uses of technology in teaching. Students also continue to value face-to-face interactions for support and feedback.

- **Recommendation:** Institutions should consider students' preferences for functional infrastructure and face-to-face interactions when allocating resources related to teaching and technology.

## **Summary**

Students have positive perceptions of higher education, but also clear expectations in mind of what institutions should provide to support and enable their learning and enhance their career prospects. Students wanted to be challenged in their learning, but also supported by the institution. Students almost exclusively spoke of their educational learning experience in terms of their course. This raises the need for strong course-level management of the curriculum, quality and standards, with a clear structure of academic management mirroring undergraduate student-facing aspects, including local feedback and evaluation, module and course review. There needs to be institutional-level support and management of quality enhancement and quality assurance of student engagement, individually and collectively, which can be coordinated through dedicated offices or senior appointments. Together this would allow for evaluation and feedback processes to be managed at the course level and coordinated at the institutional level, keeping in mind to seek, ask and report on feedback to and from students.

The trajectories of students into higher education and out of higher education are highly influential in shaping their perspectives. The question of what is 'quality' or 'good' about a particular institution should thus be framed within the contingent question of what a student is looking for in an institution, which may or may not be academic reputation. Whatever the institutional type, institutions need to develop a community and help students transition into it. Staff need to be supported by their institutions to provide the interaction and guidance that is important to students.

Across the sector there needs to be a focus on how students can enhance their employability within, related to and beyond their course. Students are investing significant amounts of time and money in their education, and expect institutions to do the same. At the same time, students need to be held responsible for their role in the institution, and further opportunities for students to engage should be encouraged. There is much work to be done across the higher education sector to support students, staff and institutions in this endeavour, working *with* not *for* students.