

**To: Heads of higher education  
institutions in Wales**

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## INTRODUCTION

- 1 This circular presents the final report on the 'Study of the Extent and Effectiveness of Existing Student Representation Structures within Higher Education Institutions across Wales.'

## BACKGROUND

- 2 In July 2005, the HEFCW Quality Working Group received the Student Participation in Quality Scotland (Sparqs) annual report and considered whether a similar model might be beneficial for institutions in Wales.
- 3 It was agreed that a meeting should be held between HEFCW, Higher Education Wales (HEW) and the National Union of Students (NUS) Wales and, if supported, a proposal for future action would be considered. This meeting was held in September 2005. Officers recommended that HEFCW should consider funding an audit of existing institutional arrangements to provide the evidence base for a decision on whether a Sparqs model would be appropriate for Wales.
- 4 In March 2006, York Consulting Ltd was awarded the tender to explore the extent and effectiveness of existing student representation structures across the twelve higher education institutions in Wales.

## THE RESEARCH

- 5 The study consisted of desk-based research and structured telephone interviews with Students' Union and institutional representatives from Welsh HEIs. Telephone interviews with HEW, NUS Wales, HEFCW, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and Higher Education Academy (HEA) officers were also undertaken.
- 6 Views were sought on the effectiveness of existing structures and on whether the establishment of a national support structure similar to the 'Sparqs' model would be beneficial.
- 7 The study explored the mechanisms utilised across Wales and beyond for encouraging widespread student participation in the quality of the student learning experience. The approach aimed to gather the official view of both the institution and the Students' Union, in terms of the range and effectiveness of the structures in place.
- 8 The final report is attached at **Annex A**. It:
  - (i) provides an account of existing institutional student feedback arrangements operating across HEIs in Wales;
  - (ii) provides an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the existing arrangements;
  - (iii) identifies best practice from across the UK, such as the Universities Scotland publication 'Student Enhanced Learning through Effective Feedback' which encourages teacher and student dialogue around learning and the 'Sparqs' process in Scotland;
  - (iv) provides recommendations on the use of a range of incentives to reward student engagement in quality assurance activities;
  - (v) offers a range of options for future institutional and national developments to enhance student representation in quality assurance and enhancement procedures across Wales.
- 9 The evidence indicated variations between institutions in how students are engaged in the quality assurance and enhancement agenda and clear commonalities in terms of the issues faced in involving students in the various mechanisms in place. All institutions had structures in place at institutional level; faculty, school or department level; and programme, course or module level. Encouraging students to become representatives was a difficulty faced by all institutions, however, students were reported to have effected change at institutional and operational levels, and all institutions considered students to be key in the quality improvement agenda, with good links between senior management of institutions and SU Presidents.

## OUTCOMES

- 10 Members of the Council's Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC) welcomed the study as presenting a positive picture of student representation structures in Wales. The Committee resolved that support for student representation should be primarily institutional based but aided by other bodies (HEA/QAA/NUS Wales) and that HEFCW guidance on new institutional Learning and Teaching Strategies (Spring 2007) should highlight the outcomes of the study. In the light of the study outcomes, a 'sparqs'-type model was not felt to be cost effective in a Wales context.
- 11 HEFCW Council received and noted the executive summary of the final report and recommended future action at its late September meeting. It resolved to approve:
  - (i) the publication of the report and to invite HEIs to take forward the development of student representation structures;
  - (ii) the organisation of a dissemination seminar to include student representatives;
  - (iii) regular liaison meetings with NUS Cymru and HEA/QAA to explore further development of support;
  - (iv) provision of Council Learning and Teaching Strategy Guidance to highlight the outcomes of the study.
- 12 This circular invites HEIs to take forward the development of student representation structures, taking account of the outcomes of the report, taking account of the outcomes of the report.
- 13 An event will be held in January 2007 to disseminate the findings of the report and highlight good practices in relation to student representation.
- 14 HEFCW guidance to institutions on new three year Learning and Teaching Strategies (Spring 2007) will draw attention to the outcomes of the study.
- 15 If you have any queries please contact Ms Celia Hunt or Dr Cliona O'Neill.

Yours sincerely



**Philip Gummatt**