Circular

NUS Wales work to enhance student representation in Wales and to support the Institutional Review Process

1 August 2007   **Ref: W07/32HE**

To:	Heads of higher education institutions in Wales
Summary:	This circular provides a description of NUS Wales work, which we are funding, to enhance student representation in Wales and to support the Institutional Review Process.
Response by:	No response required
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INTRODUCTION

1   This circular informs you of the NUS Wales work, which we are funding, to enhance student representation in Wales and to support the Institutional Review Process.

BACKGROUND

2   Circular W06/52HE attached a copy of the report of the HEFCW-commissioned *Study of the Extent and Effectiveness of Existing Student Representation Structures within Higher Education Institutions across Wales.* We subsequently convened a well-received seminar (9 January 2007) to present the outcomes of the work and to discuss areas of future action with a wide range of institutional staff and student representatives. A copy of the feedback and workshop reports is attached at **Annex A** for your information.

3   Based on the outcomes of the seminar, we developed an action plan with NUS Wales, which we have discussed in our regular officer liaison meetings. This is available at **Annex B.** The first part of that action for HEFCW was to draw attention to the study in our guidance to institutions on Learning and Teaching Strategies (W07/16 paragraph 20 refers). Other aspects were for further consideration by NUS Wales. The final action was to ensure that seminar participants were informed of the action plan. We are therefore also copying this circular to those participants.

PROPOSALS

4   In response to this action plan, we have provided some limited funding support to NUS Wales to undertake work over the next two years to enhance student representation in Wales and to support the Institutional Review Process through working with HEIs, Higher Education Wales (HEW) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The proposals outlined below have been discussed and agreed with both QAA and HEW representatives and have also been drawn to the attention of Higher Education Academy officers.

5   In summary, the proposals comprise a two-strand campaign:

Part 1: Freshers' Roadshow, with members of NUS Wales Executive attending each Freshers' fair with flyers, leaflets and 'freebies' to raise awareness of student representation opportunities at an early stage of students' academic lives. NUS Wales will obtain students' contact details and invite them to join a new 'Student Representatives in Wales' facebook[1] group, which NUS Wales will set up and administer. NUS Wales will provide additional support for officers within Students Unions through the provision of a 'Student Rep' CD/memory stick with briefing documents on generating involvement, running successful elections, model course representative handbooks, posters, flyers etc. NUS Wales will also provide course representative training to each union if requested.

Part 2:   NUS Wales will produce a step-by-step guide and review pack highlighting best practice in preparing student written submissions for the institutional review process. This can also be used in the handover process if

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[1] . Facebook is a social networking website (http://www.facebook.com/).

necessary. Along with the pack will be a wall planner for every officer in Wales containing a time frame to assist transition between executives. All materials will be produced in consultation with the QAA and HEW.

6   We are writing to draw this work to your attention as it will supplement and strengthen HEI structures which are already in place. We are aware that practice in the area of student representation varies across institutions in Wales and that some institutions already have staff in place to facilitate student involvement in quality. However, we believe that the NUS Wales project can add value to institutional practice for the remainder of the QAA cycle and feed into the development of new cycle arrangements. Your staff may wish to work with NUS Wales in delivering these services, so that your students' union officers can gain benefit, and student representation at your institution can be enhanced.

7   HEW has asked that NUS Wales make contact with Pro Vice-Chancellors' Learning and Teaching and/or Academic Registrars, as well as with students' unions, regarding this work. We would therefore be grateful if you could pass this information on to the relevant contact point in your institution so that they will expect to be contacted.

Annex A. **Feedback and workshop reports**

STUDENT REPRESENTATION STRUCTURES – OUTCOMES OF SEMINAR GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Group A

The general consensus of those present in the Group was that the conference had been very worthwhile and rewarding. Members wished to thank HEFCW for arranging the event.

As the presentations had over-run their allocated slots, time allowed for group discussion was curtailed. In the 30 minutes available, this group discussed the following:

1. Institutions are aware of the need for support to facilitate the 'bridging' between academic tutors and the Students' Union in ensuring collaboration on what is regarded as an important element of 'support and feedback'.
2. The group was also aware of a **process** issue. In the majority of institutions, sabbatical officers often serve a 12 month term of office and then move on. There is no continuity for a consolidated 'drive' regarding the CR programme. '*As soon as we get to know the officers, they are moving on and we have to start the process from scratch once again'.*
3. Where the system is working well, the 'feedback process' is seen as effective and most valuable by both academic and students in reflecting on both 'learning and teaching'.
4. Not always easy to integrate undergraduate and post-grads in this process, especially those post-grads on short Masters programmes. PhD students are often seen as being even further removed from the process.
5. Whatever support package is devised, either by HEFCW or an individual HEI, it was agreed that in these matters 'one size does not fit all'.
6. Establishing a 'Coordinators' Group' on www.jiscmail.ac.uk should be considered as one option in order to disseminate/share 'good practice'. Institutions could also consider setting up a Blackboard site for Course Reps to access and share 'best practice' within their respective universities. One HEI had a forum www.myspace.com for their CRs, but conference members were concerned about the fact that such a site is very much in the public domain and open to abuse.
7. All HEIs should be encouraged to 'share' whatever handbooks have been produced or 'best practice' that they have identified.
8. One member noted that the QAA were planning a conference later this year focusing on this issue and questioned whether it was more of a QAA issue rather than purely for HEFCW.
9. Another member felt that possibly HEFCW could collaborate with the QAA, HEA and the NUS to prepare generic guidelines/pack, etc. Such a publication/pack would be useful in involving academics and students. (Some participants were concerned that Student Reps took advantage of their roles to 'whinge' about academics etc. This must be discouraged, and a pack giving clear guidelines from a central/national body(ies) might help in developing an even better and more effective structure.) (Note HEA's support of PDPs).

10. Reference was made to the valuable guidance available from the NUS website on CR issues.
11. It was recognised that several institutions are exemplars in this field, especially UCN and Glamorgan University. Reference was again made to the programme established at the University of the West of England whose presentation we had shared in earlier in the day.
12. It was felt that there is a great deal of 'good practice' amongst Welsh HEIs but that it is currently very 'scattered'. There is a need for coordination; for somebody to 'bring it all together'.
13. The consensus was that the key to a successful CR programme in any institution is the element of continuity of the 'coordinator' (part-time/full-time), preferably based within the SU. Such a scheme would require some additional investment, but could prove to be very worthwhile to HEIs in ensuring CR programme of high quality. The UWE was an excellent example.

Group B

1. We must work more effectively to close the loop – we might use blackboard, student publications/newspapers. However, whatever we choose to do, we must use more appropriate communication methods.
2. More appropriate handover is required year on year. Documentation or a handbook to include points that were achieved and points that remain outstanding could be passed between Sabb officers. It was noted that there is lots of training available to the officers but we must make an effort to raise awareness of these sessions and to encourage attendance at these events.
3. There was a concern that our structures may be inappropriate and are certainly slow. Institutions should make an effort to make themselves available to attend the student meetings on their terms in addition to including students in the University meeting structure.
4. It was agreed that the student rep coordinator role appears to be very valuable and lends itself well to bridging the gaps left by short term sabb appointments. These roles will allow for a more long term strategic approach to student representation.
5. Part-time, postgraduate, overseas and FE students are not currently being represented well, further consideration is required to solve these problems which appear to exist across the sector.
6. More consistency across the staff and their approach/support for students and student reps is required. Although the theory may be in place, institutions should be careful to ensure that all staff are providing at least a minimum standard of support.

Group C

1. The Group acknowledged the strong starting in point in Welsh HEIs identified in the York Consulting Report and the good practice featured in the day's presentations.
2. A number of the ideas put forward on the day appear relatively simple to adopt. These included establishing web pages for the dissemination of information and feedback for students (eg minutes of Staff:Student Committees) and e-mail user groups.
3. In other cases, HEIs would need to balance carefully the cost implications of specific initiatives with the likely benefits for the HEI as a whole, bearing in mind the relatively strong starting point in Wales.

4. The concept of a Course Representative Organiser appeared particularly attractive and would help in providing continuity over different years as Student Sabbatical Officers changed. This could result in a much more effective system as representatives could get up to speed much more rapidly.
5. There was an interesting point whether the CRO should be based in the Students' Union or in the central administration. The chief concern here is that situating the post in the centre might be seen as seeking to influence students to safeguard the HEI's interests rather than awareness-raising amongst students and seeking to improve effectiveness. The same point applies to other awareness-raising initiatives from the centre.

Group D

1. Recognise that this is part of a wider context of policy initiatives in Wales for Schools Councils, etc.
2. Report is useful in giving an impetus to institutions to take further action.
3. The rise of the student voice is to be celebrated: it indicates a more equal and respectful relationship between the institution and the student body; as well as personal benefit for students as beginning professionals, with accrual of life skills.
4. The focus today is how can students contribute to decision making. However, we may still be confusing things: there is a difference between student participation and student feedback on their concerns.
5. Still some argument as to whether we are dealing with 'customers'; 'clients' or 'learners,' which confuses what we are trying to achieve.

ANNEX B

STUDENT REPRESENTATION IN QUALITY – ACTION PLAN

ACTION	BY WHOM	BY WHEN
Investigate use of JISCMAIL, to facilitate communication between student representatives/coordinators	NUS	June 2007
Consideration of on-line student forums for student representatives through NUS Web site	NUS	Ongoing national development
Consideration of link between NUS Website and individual student union/institutional guidance for student representatives	NUS	June 2007
Facilitation of sharing of guidance handbooks for student representatives between institutions and areas of good practice	HEFCW	Ongoing
Consider development of a handbook to cover transition period between student sabbaticals.	Individual institutions	Ongoing
Recommendation in guidance on learning and teaching strategies that HE institutions should consider use of a web page or section on a virtual learning environment (VLE) on student representation and feedback including, eg minutes of staff:student committees.	HEFCW	April 2007
Encouragement to students to take up places on centrally organised QAA events	NUS	Ongoing
Encouragement to institutions to consider sharing a student representative coordinator	HEFCW	April 2007
Organisation of a further seminar in 2008/09 to identify developments in student representatives since the student participation study. This would include consideration of how students feed in to the QAA Institutional Review Process as part of the consultation on the development of the new Review process.	HEFCW/NUS	June 2008
Ensure that seminar participants are informed of this action plan	HEFCW	June 2007