Research on Student Partnership in Welsh Higher Education and Further Education Institutions: Executive Summary

Background

1. In May 2019, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and Welsh Government (WG) appointed OB3 Research to undertake research on student partnership in Welsh Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) institutions. The research aims to assess and evaluate the current state of student partnership, engagement and representation in Wales and to inform this agenda in the future.

2. The specific research objectives were to:

   • consider the definition and approaches to student partnership to establish a set of concepts and terminologies to support an integrated approach across the Post-Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) sector

   • assess the effectiveness and impact of student partnerships across Wales

   • consider barriers to effective student partnership working and identify possible solutions

   • highlight best and/or innovative practice in student partnership

   • identify opportunities for partnership working between institutions and the student body

   • explore what student representative bodies in HE and FE want in terms of partnership with the institution

   • make evidence-based recommendations for the development of partnership working in Wales.

3. The methodology included a desk-based review of strategic and policy documentation and relevant reports; analysing information and documentation received from HEIs and FEIs relating to student partnership; conducting a series of nine interviews with strategic stakeholder representatives and arranging a series of triangulated case study visits with a sample of eleven HEIs and FEIs to gather staff and student views and identify examples of innovative or good practice.

Key Findings

4. From the desk-based research and the interviews held with stakeholders, staff and student representatives from HEIs and FEIs in Wales, it is clear that there is **regular discussion around student partnership** between institutions and their student bodies. Representation systems at both strategic (governing body) and operational levels (faculties, schools, departments) are widely developed. Student partnership is also **integrated into strategic decision-making** across both sectors.

5. The work of Wise Wales has helped to **embed an ethos of student partnership** within the HE sector, and to a lesser degree perhaps, the FE sector, and it has identified and **shared good practice examples** and supported institutions to **enhance knowledge and understanding of the principles of student partnership**. Similarly, the learner involvement strategy guidance by Welsh Government has also driven activity within the FE sector which has resulted in the sector utilising more innovative approaches to gathering students' views. Across both HE and FE, the ability to record student partnership outcomes achieved continues to be challenging.

6. There was recognition and agreement that the terms used or an agreed definition of what constitutes student partnership was ultimately not important. Student partnership in HE, and learner involvement within FE, convey the same principles and institutions are simply on a different point on the spectrum of student partnership activity. It is an **attitude and a culture that needs to be embedded rather than a prescriptive approach**. In many ways having fluidity and flexibility was deemed more important than the need to define student partnership too tightly – as it enables **student partnership activity to be driven by the needs of the student body and the institution**. There was a strong view across the HE sector in particular that individual institutions must **retain autonomy** to deliver in partnership with their student body, as they see fit.

7. As part of this research, some very good examples of embedded student partnership approaches have been identified across institutions in the HE and FE sector. Student partnership as an approach has been on the radar for a number of years and **a more nuanced approach is now emerging**, driven by many external factors: the prominence afforded to it via Estyn and the QAA, the desire to improve scores on the relevant NSS survey questions (for the HE sector) and due to the priority it has been given by Welsh Government and HEFCW guidance. At an individual institutional level, policies and strategies consistently evidenced student partnership approaches at work. As such, the current state of student partnership, engagement and representation in Wales is relatively strong.

8. Several examples of particularly **innovative approaches** have been identified within the case studies including:

   - 'Tell Glyn' from Glyndwr University as an example of creative branding and strong identity
   - Pembrokeshire College's well embedded course representative structures
   - Several examples provided by the Open University's use of digital methods to gain the views of a representative sample of students, especially via the Online Consultative Forum
   - Gower College and NPTC Group's utilisation of VocalEyes to capture student feedback
   - Bangor University's examples of students involved in the co-production of university strategies
   - University of South Wales' SVR structures and the individual projects linked to improving aspects of the university provision.

9. During the research, **pockets of good practice** within specific academic departments or schools or led by individual academics and lecturers were often referred to during our interviews with HE and FE staff and student representatives. However, a **greater impact** from current student partnership approaches could be seen if **mechanisms were in place to cascade good practice** throughout institutions and across the PCET system. Effective student partnership seems too often to happen in silos, and there are currently **missed opportunities to widen the impact** by sharing and replicating best practice within and across sectors.

10. Effective engagement and partnership that provides opportunities for all in an **increasingly diverse and complex population of students** (and in particular with part-time students or students across multi-campuses) remains challenging. This was highlighted as an issue in research from over a decade and continues to be a difficult issue that has not been fully addressed in either the HE or FE sector.

11. Both the HE and FE sector generally believed that more work still needed to be done to increase knowledge and understanding of the concept. Across both sectors, whilst 'student partnership' was relatively well understood at a strategic level, **understanding of the concept and its underpinning principles at middle management and amongst academic staff tended to be more ad-hoc**. Similarly, there is a need for institutions and Students Unions/representatives to **communicate the benefits of student partnership** to the wider student body and work with students to build them into decision making processes.

12. The opportunity to **ensure informal opportunities** and an 'open door' approach that allows students to raise issues directly with senior staff and to **access key 'decision makers'** was cited as a key element of effective student partnership. Case studies highlighted several different approaches within FEIs and HEIs to achieve this from learning walks to 'dragon's den' pitch opportunities and online forums. In the same vein, it is imperative that **the feedback loop** is completed and that students are kept informed of how their views are taken on board and implemented upon.

13. Timing is also key to effective student partnership: interviewees consistently raised the **importance of ensuring early student involvement** in the development of new policy or provision with **co-production** seen as the next step in this evolving agenda, building on the ideas of **students as 'change agents'** and continuously improving and developing new, innovative and collaborative approaches to partnership.

14. This research has demonstrated an appetite within the HE and FE sectors to learn more about good practice in relation to student partnership, **a desire to build upon the good practice** that exists and to **disseminate more widely across the whole PCET system**. A series of recommendations are set out below:

Recommendations

15. A list of recommendations are included for consideration by Welsh Government, HEFCW, individual institutions and other key partners for short- to medium- term activity that could be implemented to move the student partnership agenda forward in Wales:

Recommendation	For:
R1: a set of core principles around what constitutes student partnership should be agreed at a strategic level, in consultation with key partners, and communicated widely.	Wise Wales and its partners
R2: an increase in understanding of the principles of 'student partnership' should be encouraged across the sectors with a particular focus on increasing understanding amongst middle-management staff.	WG, HEFCW, NUS Wales, HEIs, FEIs
R3: HEFCW and Welsh Government should create the necessary culture for ensuring that student partnership is prioritised within HEI and FEI institutions. As such student partnership should continue to feature strongly in HEFCW and WG communication.	WG, HEFCW

R4: Institutions and students' unions should communicate clearly with their student body about the benefits of student partnership to the individual, and to the institution.	HEIs, FEIs, SUs
R5: Distances between campuses and travel costs impact on effective student partnership in several ways. Institutions should consider the practicalities of where and how meetings with students are held and ensure that there are easy public transport links available, video-conferencing options or adequate reimbursement of costs where necessary.	HEIs, FEIs
R6: A 'what works' conference should be organised at least every two years, with a view to sharing good practice and learning about international best practice. The Open University could also be invited to demonstrate how they are engaging disparate learners via innovative student partnership methods.	NUS Wales, HEFCW, WG
R7: HEIs and FEIs should consider more digital approaches to engaging with students and gaining their input into strategic developments. Pockets of good practice in this area exist but need to be shared more widely between institutions (this could be a key theme for a 'what works' conference).	HEIs, FEIs
R8: Whilst ensuring student representation in governance structures remains a key element to student partnership, informal opportunities for engaging with senior staff are also important. HEIs and FEIs should continue to seek opportunities to do this.	HEIs, FEIs
R9: In some of the best practice examples of partnership, the student is viewed as a 'change agent'. HEIs and FEIs should look for opportunities for students to co-produce strategies and practical solutions from the outset and to be involved in the process of bringing about change.	HEIs, FEIs
R10: Effective student partnership needs training, support and resources in place to enable all students to fully participate. NUS Wales should continue to be resourced to support the development of students for active participation.	NUS Wales, WG, HEFCW, HEIs, FEIs

R11: As Students' Unions develop or evolve in order to respond to the changing face of learners, they should continue to implement innovative mechanisms for engaging with the student body, ensuring that equivalent and consistent opportunities exist to access student representatives across multi-campus locations.	SUs
R12: The FE sector is at a very different point in its journey and requires support to build up adequate student representation structures and processes. FEIs should consider various sustainable models for student representation which could include paid sabbatical officers, students' unions and dedicated staff to support and enhance their activities.	FEIs
R13: A 'seed fund' to help set up sustainable models of student representation within the FE sector should be considered, with an application process that requires a clear commitment to continuing funding support to the structure thereafter	WG
R14: an 'innovation fund' should be established to fund joint bids across HE and FE that seek to embed student partnership. It should seek to fund innovative approaches into teaching and learning practices; digital engagement; student wellbeing and health and the development of training and resources. The fund should prioritise applications that include co-production elements and/or supports the replication of innovative practice from one institution to another. The fund should also look to prioritise applications that aim to increase cross-fertilisation of ideas across the FE, AL and HE sectors.	HEFCW, WG
R15: The Wise Wales toolkit has been a useful tool to benchmark institutions and provide a baseline. As the next step, a set of indicators that can measures tangible outcomes for and impacts on individuals and institutions as a result of student partnership approaches needs to be developed and adopted across the FE, HE and AL sectors.	Wise Wales, HEFCW, WG

16.   A set of longer-term recommendations for the proposed PCET Commission are set out below for consideration:

Recommendations:
R16: With the establishment of the PCET Commission, there is an opportunity to lead by example. The PCET Commission should ensure that student partnership is fully embedded in structures and processes from the outset.
R17: A key priority for the PCET Commission will be to develop a system-wide overarching student partnership strategy at the earliest possible opportunity. The strategy should set out what effective student partnership looks like and ascertain what benefits can be achieved for the student body and the institution. The strategy should be underpinned with associated, updated guidance on how student partnership should be embedded in institutional practice
R18: A monitoring and evaluation framework which sets the baseline standard for student partnership and outlines the minimum requirements for institutions (in terms of structures, support and activities) should also be developed, to underpin the overarching strategy, that is adaptable and flexible enough to fit with the requirements of the range of institutions within the PCET system. The evaluation framework should include a set of key performance indicators for reporting on progress against outcomes.
R19: The PCET Commission should consider whether ring-fenced funding to support student partnership across the PCET system should be considered in future. This should be sufficient as to fund some form of student representation proportionate to the nature and size of the institutions across the system. The sparqs model in Scotland could provide a model for this but expanded to fulfil the needs of the whole PCET system.
R20: The PCET Commission should consider a National Ombudsman role as part of its structure, which could provide final arbitration for learner/student complaints or issues.