

2012 UNIVERSITY ANNUAL LEARNING & TEACHING CONFERENCE

2012 & Beyond

Theme: Student Engagement

13:30 – 13:50

Student Unions should play a starring role in student engagement's new fame

Matthew Barrow, Hull University Union

Abstract:

Student engagement has become a bit of a celebrity at the moment within the ever changing higher education sector. With Mr Willetts' strong urge to put students at the heart of the system, we are seeing this buzzword crop up more and more often. But, what does this hot topic mean? And how on earth do we measure effective student engagement?

For me, it concerns the relationship that the institution has with its students. It is about treating students as partners in their education and openly encouraging them to participate in the management and development of all aspects of learning and teaching. By effectively and proactively engaging with students, we can start to understand the changing needs of the modern generation. By encouraging students to get involved and urging them to constructively participate in their learning, we will not only help to generate more skilled, well rounded graduates, but the feedback they bring to the institution will benefit an improved [student experience](#) for current and future cohorts of students.

This may all seem a bit dreamy and theoretical; however, with increased student fees, the drivers behind these shifts are becoming stronger and stronger. If institutions want to steer away from the infamous consumerist type student relationship then communicating with and responding to students is an absolute must.

Another force behind student engagement's new stardom has been down to the hard work from NUS, students' unions and various other student groups around the country. The fundamental object of nearly all SU's is to improve the student experience and to advance the education and academic welfare of its membership. This is by no means a new concept; however, I believe that some of the exciting work taking place recently across the student movement is encouraging students to feel increasingly empowered within their individual learning.

We are seeing top level commitment from the national bodies of HE. One of the few pleasing points to come out of the White Paper on Higher Education was its specific reference to the [NUS/HEA Student Engagement Toolkit](#). I was at a [WIDAR Conference](#) (Workers In Democracy and Representation) when I first got to grips with the toolkit and for me personally, this was where student engagement caught its big break. The toolkit contains measurable benchmarks to help Students' Unions evaluate their course rep systems and includes exciting ideas as to how they can further develop student engagement.

The [Quality Assurance Agency](#) (QAA) has a new strategic plan that puts students at the heart of quality assurance. At their latest conference, Quality Matters, which was exclusively targeted towards students, they announced that they will be investing more than £230,000 in supporting SUs to better engage students in enhancing quality. They are also using students as reviewers in the new IRENI

review system and are urging more and more students to engage in periodic review panels.

The Higher Education Academy also has an entire strand dedicated to student engagement at their latest annual conference and a growing niche of academics have founded a network called [RAISE](#) (Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement) which aims to share ideas and research around the topic of student engagement.

In this new and ever changing higher education landscape, it is without question that strong and effective engagement with students will be a key to success. It is imperative, I believe, that the Students' Union has a starring role in all of this. Of course, every Students' Union is different and you cannot treat every institution as the same, but when it comes down to who knows students best, it's a no brainer. Unions and the University should be working in partnership, agreeing a shared set of principles that they can both work towards. Student charters are becoming increasingly popular within the sector and if they are to be successful, it is important that students can buy into them.

While further empowering SUs to provide effective engagement is a positive step to achieving my aforementioned definition, we must be careful that this is not just the latest craze. Celebrities can rise to the top, but equally, they can come crashing back down to earth. Students' Unions must be supported and adequately resourced by the institution if they are to grow in this aspect.