

# Cylchlythyr

# Circular

## Mechanisms for Supporting the Enhancement of Learning Opportunities

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**To:** Heads of higher education institutions in Wales;  
**Copied to** Principals of directly-funded further education institutions,  
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This circular sets out the key features of HEFCW support for the enhancement by higher education institutions of learning opportunities for students. These mechanisms will also assist in the support of higher education students in further education institutions.

It comprises the second stage of work which contributed to the HEFCW specification for the revised Institutional Review: Wales (IR) process, developed by the QAA for implementation from 2009/10.

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## Introduction

1. This circular sets out the key features of HEFCW support for the enhancement by higher education institutions of learning opportunities for students from 2009/10. These mechanisms will also assist in the support of higher education students in further education institutions.
2. The paper incorporates sector views through contributions to work by HEFCW-commissioned consultants in summer 2008, as well as sector conferences in October 2008 and October 2009.
3. It comprises the second stage of work which contributed to the HEFCW specification for the revised *Institutional Review: Wales* process, developed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for implementation from 2009/10.
4. The mechanisms align with *For our Future, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Higher Education Strategy and Plan for Wales* but will be kept under review as we develop HEFCW's response to the Strategy.

## Background

5. Following a consultation with the sector, Circular W04/06HE set out the HEFCW's *Mechanisms for supporting excellent teaching in higher education*<sup>1</sup>. Those mechanisms comprised primarily three aspects: support for institutional learning and teaching strategies; encouraging institutions to reward teaching through their human resources strategies by making excellent teaching a demonstrably genuine criterion for promotion; and supporting the Higher Education Academy (HE Academy) in developing sector thematic and subject enhancement activities in Wales.
6. This followed the introduction of a new Higher Education Quality Assurance and Standards Framework for Wales (Circular W03/08HE) which set out the core principles and requirements to be adopted for higher education in Wales during a six year cycle from 2003/04 onwards, as a basis for the development by the QAA of an institutional review process for Wales.
7. In preparation for the development of new institutional review arrangements from 2009/10, HEFCW commissioned consultants, Nigel Brown Associates, to
  - Evaluate the current cycle of Institutional Review (IR) in Wales;
  - Identify evidence to inform the development of the next cycle;
  - Evaluate how successful the HEFCW's strategy to support excellence in teaching has proved to date; and
  - Inform the HEFCW's approach to developing an overarching framework, to include IR and the enhancement agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/publications/circulars/circulars\\_2004/W0406HE.pdf](http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/publications/circulars/circulars_2004/W0406HE.pdf)

8. The first stage of the work informed the development of the recommendations for the QAA IR process to be implemented from 2009/10. The second stage comprised an evaluation of HEFCW's strategy for supporting excellent teaching to inform the development of an overarching framework encompassing institutional review and quality enhancement. In support of these developments, HEFCW held a consultation event, *Informing the approach to Quality Enhancement for Higher Education in Wales*, on 21 October 2008. A summary of the workshop discussions, together with HEFCW officers' response is included at **Annex A**. A further seminar in October 2009 provided an opportunity for reporting on the development of HEFCW's proposed mechanisms.
9. This circular comprises a revision to the HEFCW's strategy to support excellence in teaching and sets out mechanisms for supporting the enhancement of learning opportunities.

### **HEFCW's remit and Corporate Strategy**

10. HEFCW's corporate strategy 2009-10 – 2011-12 includes as one of seven strategic objectives one on 'the Deal for Students': 'delivering the highest quality learning and related support'. It notes that 'we wish to see a higher education sector which compares favourably with the rest of the UK and overseas in terms of the provision of higher quality learning and teaching. By 2012 we will have enabled the sector to: continuously enhance the quality, standards and flexibility of provision'.
11. The HEFCW remit letter 2009-10 notes that the 'Welsh Assembly Government strives to make Wales a learning country, where high quality lifelong learning helps people to fulfill their potential and achieve their goals.'

### **Related HEFCW activities and policies**

12. The 'Deal for Students' objective covers a range of actions and funded initiatives providing support for enhancement activity in institutions. These include:
  - HEFCW funding support for Learning and Teaching Strategies;
  - Support to enhance student representation in quality, through liaison with and funded support to NUS Wales;
  - Funding support for the Higher Education Academy to support enhancement of the student experience by institutions;
  - A joint service level agreement with Higher Education Wales and the QAA to deliver the Institutional Review: Wales process and related enhancement activities;

- The Technology-Enhanced Learning Strategy and allocations to support benchmarking and the 'Gwella' programme, including funding support for the UK Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC);
- Support for the Welsh Video Network to facilitate virtual approaches to learning and teaching;
- Welsh medium provision developments, including support for the Centre for Welsh Medium Higher Education and the National Development Plan for Welsh Medium provision;
- Support for overseas student recruitment, engagement with Bologna and internationalisation strategies, including through the UK Europe Unit, Wales International Consortium and Wales Higher Education Brussels.

### **What do we mean by 'enhancement'?**

13. When we talk of enhancement, we are using the QAA definition of *'taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities'*.

However, individual institutions may wish to adopt their own definitions of 'enhancement'. We wish to encourage approaches to enhancement at sectoral, institutional and individual staff levels. These are described below.

14. HEFCW has a statutory responsibility to secure that assessment is made of the quality of provision which we fund or are considering funding. We address that responsibility primarily through the *Institutional Review: Wales* process<sup>2</sup>. We plan to make a much more explicit link between the statutory quality assessment process and quality enhancement, particularly by ensuring that the outcomes of the IR inform institutional approaches to enhancing learning opportunities. Therefore the revised Institutional Review process from 2009/10 has an increased emphasis on quality enhancement, as a natural outcome of quality assessment, and we will encourage closer working between the QAA and the HEA to achieve that increased emphasis on quality enhancement. Our overall objective in taking this approach is that the quality of the student experience should be improved.
15. The QAA and the HE Academy undertook a joint project in 2008/09 on the balance of quality enhancement and quality assurance in HEIs in Wales, building on a similar project in England and Northern Ireland. The outcomes of this work were presented at the sector conference in

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/reviewWales/Handbook2009.pdf>

October 2009 and the report launched at that seminar<sup>3</sup> will assist the sector in taking forward quality enhancement in individual institutions.

## **HEFCW Mechanisms for Supporting the Enhancement of Learning Opportunities**

16. The key features of the support are set out below. They build on the mechanisms set out in our 2004 circular and comprise:
- (a) Supporting institutional Learning and Teaching Strategies. We plan to continue this support, as set out in our previous approach;
  - (b) Sector level support. We will provide funding to support UK agencies which assist institutions in Wales in the enhancement of learning opportunities;
  - (c) Coordination of thematic priorities. Action to add value to work across the sector and funded bodies by encouraging greater coordination and focus on key priorities;
  - (d) Encouraging student engagement. This includes funding for the 'Have your Say' project.

### **(a) Institutional Learning and Teaching Strategies**

17. HEFCW will continue to support institutional learning and teaching strategies. We recognise that the strategy should be a document of value principally to institutions, and should provide structured guidance for the strategic development and management of learning and teaching within the institution's overall management processes. Its secondary function remains that of informing and assuring third parties, not the least ourselves, that your institution is addressing the needs and requirements of its students appropriately. The current HEFCW guidance on learning and teaching strategies is set out in circular W07/16HE. This is guidance only. However, given the level of public funding supporting these strategies, we would expect institutions to cover key policy areas of importance to Wales, including responses to key Welsh Assembly Government strategic documents.
18. Through learning and teaching strategy funding we support institutional approaches to developing and supporting excellent teaching, through institutional learning and teaching development schemes and recognition and reward schemes such as teaching fellowships. Building on previous work, we will also continue to encourage institutions, through our guidance and through other actions, which might include making teaching a demonstrably genuine criterion for promotion. We would be

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<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/publications/QualityEnhancementAndAssurance.pdf>

content to see institutions use some part of their learning and teaching strategy funding to reward and recognise excellent teaching.

**(b) Sector level support**

19. There are a number of sector level bodies which we fund to provide UK or pan-Wales support to institutions in the enhancement of learning opportunities. These arrangements are kept under review including, where appropriate, with other funders. All these bodies have expectations placed upon them to take account of Equality and Diversity matters and the Welsh medium context in Wales.
20. Two key bodies are the Higher Education Academy and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, the roles of which are set out in more detail below. We also fund the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) to support and enhance information and communication technology services. JISC provides particular support for our Technology-enhanced Learning Strategy and further information about its UK role is set out below.
21. We also provide funding support for, and through, the Centre for Welsh Medium Higher Education (Canolfan Addysg Uwch Cyfrwng Cymraeg) to strengthen Welsh medium provision. The activities involved help to increase the range of courses and to enhance the quality of the learning and teaching concerned.
22. HEFCW also funds other organisations which may support institutions in quality enhancement; these include the Leadership Foundation, the Equality Challenge Unit, and the Wales Video Network.

**Higher Education Academy**

23. The Higher Education Academy's mission is 'to support the sector in providing the best possible learning experience for all students'. It is funded primarily by the UK funding bodies through an annual grant, and by institutional subscriptions.
24. We provide an annual grant letter to the Academy identifying areas to be addressed in the coming year, including UK-wide and Wales-specific priorities. We discuss the Wales-specific priority areas to be included in the grant letter with Higher Education Wales.
25. The priority areas which we have identified annually in our grant letter to the HE Academy are:
  - Assessment
  - Work-based learning/employability
  - Research-informed teaching practice
  - eLearning
  - Welsh medium

26. The 2009/10 grant letter from HEFCW also requested that the Academy prepare a quality enhancement action plan for Wales, in collaboration with Higher Education Wales, identifying short term and longer term enhancement activities. Through the proposals set out in this circular we propose to take a more focused approach to the identification of priorities. The aim of this is to encourage a more coordinated response and identification of development activities throughout Wales.
27. In terms of supporting individuals, the Academy also accredits institutional teaching and learning development schemes, which enable individuals to become Associates or Fellows of the Academy. In addition it provides support for individuals to develop practice within their discipline areas through the network of subject centres.
28. As an additional component of this strategy we plan to consider with funders the inclusion of Wales in the Higher Education Academy National Teaching Fellow Scheme. This should facilitate applications from Wales as 'National Teaching Fellows' within this Academy Scheme.

#### **Quality Assurance Agency**

29. The QAA's mission is 'to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education.'
30. The QAA is funded by institutional subscriptions and by the funding bodies. A service level agreement (SLA) is operated between HEFCW, HEW and the QAA. Through this agreement, we are able to meet our statutory remit to 'secure that assessment is made of the quality of education provided in institutions for whose activities we provide, or are considering providing, financial support'.
31. The QAA also runs an annual conference for Wales to support the HE sector on quality assurance and enhancement issues relating specifically to Wales.

#### **Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC)**

32. JISC's activities support education and research by promoting innovation in new technologies and by the central support of information and communication technology services. JISC is funded by the UK funding bodies through a joint annual grant letter, which sets out relevant priorities. JISC provides the JANET network; access to electronic resources; new environments for learning, teaching and research; guidance on institutional change; advisory and consultancy services; and regional support for small HE institutions and FE colleges, through the JISC Regional Support Centre. The RSC in Wales is based in Swansea.
33. JISC funds initiatives and services to provide expertise, independent advice, guidance and resources to the UK FE and HE education sectors to promote the effective and innovative use of ICT. It manages research and innovation programmes in the use of ICT in teaching, learning and

research to build knowledge; develop services, infrastructure or applications; and provide guidance and leadership.

**(c) Coordination of thematic priorities**

34. Concerns were raised through the consultation process about the plethora of committees and groups involved in quality assurance and enhancement in Wales. More than twenty committees, sub-committees, groups and related initiatives were identified in support of quality enhancement in higher education institutions, some with very similar roles. HEFCW has already taken action to rationalise its own committees, establishing a newly-constituted Student Experience, Teaching and Quality Committee incorporating the activities of three of the previous committees, including oversight of the HEFCW's quality assessment responsibilities. Consultees were keen to see some coordination of activities through joint working between the groups and bodies involved and alignment around key thematic priorities across Wales.
35. We want to help to maximise resources in Wales by ensuring that the various funded bodies, groups and organisations which are active in quality enhancement are enabled to work in a co-ordinated way, and without duplicating work which has already been completed elsewhere. This coordination would enable some work to be agreed centrally and carried out by all committees, organisations, and groups where appropriate, while other activities would continue outside those agreed areas.
36. We propose asking the Higher Education Academy, through our annual grant letter, to coordinate this activity, ideally by using an existing group or committee with representation from key stakeholders to steer the activity. This will include identifying potential quality enhancement themes for a major conference to be held every two years. Information on the agreed theme will be fed back through each organisation's groups and inform their independent planning processes. The outcomes of the conference will be published and inform a coordinated programme of further work carried out in the year following the conference, for example via events held by the Academy's subject centres and the QAA's annual conference for Welsh institutions (see para 28). The outcomes of these would be fed back to the steering group as they planned the next conference.

**(d) Encouraging student engagement**

37. In March 2006 HEFCW appointed York Consulting Ltd to study the extent and effectiveness of existing student representation structures within higher education institutions (HEIs) across Wales. They examined representation structures at institutional level, and within faculties, schools and departments. The study presented a highly positive picture



of the mechanisms for encouraging widespread student participation in the quality of the student learning experience, and did not recommend the adoption of a sparqs-type model (sparqs - Student Participation in Quality Scotland).

38. HEFCW subsequently convened a seminar of institutional staff and student representatives in early 2007, the outcomes of which informed an action plan with NUS Wales. For HEFCW, this included drawing attention to the York Consulting study in guidance to institutions on Learning and Teaching Strategies.
39. In 2007/08 NUS Wales launched its pilot 'Have your Say' campaign, funded by HEFCW and supported by the QAA and Higher Education Wales (HEW). It focused on generating awareness and involvement of students and provided support to Students' Unions for the QAA Institutional Review process. In parallel with the new *Institutional Review: Wales* process, HEFCW has renewed funding for the NUS Wales 'Have Your Say' project to enhance student representation.
40. The project will continue to deliver training opportunities to students and develop their skills regarding representation. 'Have Your Say' will provide support and advice to students for completing an annual student statement to support a regular exchange of information with their institution about quality assurance and enhancement and to inform the student submission for institutional review. This will provide some continuity of the student view between the terms of office of sabbatical students' and over the review cycle. The project outputs also include the creation of a guide on issues students' unions may consider when completing their statement, eg to consider feedback from the National Student Survey in collaboration with their institution.
41. A multi-agency approach was adopted in early 2008 to actively engage higher education students in their learning experiences. This included the HE Academy as well as HEFCW, HEW, NUS Wales and the QAA. The organisations collaborated to formulate a joint statement to show the Wales-wide commitment to student engagement. The joint statement has been launched, and a copy is attached at **Annex B**.

***For our Future, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Higher Education Strategy and Plan for Wales***

42. *For our Future* was launched in November 2009. HEFCW has been asked to develop the priorities set out in the strategy into detailed proposals. We will take areas of quality enhancement into account as we develop those proposals.
43. The approach set out in this circular is in alignment with the *For our Future* strategy, which includes the following expectations:
  - Continuing efforts are made to deliver an excellent student experience; and to
  - Ensure that the student voice strengthens higher education.

44. We will keep the arrangements in this Circular under review, in the light of *For our Future* and the action plan to be developed, taking account of developments elsewhere in the UK.

## **Informing the approach to Quality Enhancement for Higher Education in Wales, 21 October 2008.**

A range of issues were raised at the above consultation event. These have been collated into various categories, as detailed below. HEFCW Officers' commentaries are in italics below each category.

### **The establishment of a Quality Enhancement Framework**

The following queries were identified:

- What added value does a framework work provide?
- Should there be a quality enhancement framework?
- Should any framework be on a UK level rather than a country level?
- Does the framework risk QE becoming a bureaucratic process and therefore not achieving its aims?

*We had originally proposed the establishment of framework around quality enhancement activities, to provide coordination of activities. However, in the light of this feedback and the views of our Quality Working Group, we will not use the word framework but will facilitate better communication between the great diversity of committees and organisations, to encourage working on common agendas. This in turn would minimise duplication and maximise the use of resources.*

*Given the different status of enhancement in each country of the UK, and the different methodologies through which the quality of higher education provision is assured, it would not currently be possible to have a UK-wide quality enhancement framework.*

### **The number of groups involved**

Many delegates noted the wide range of groups, committees and initiatives involved in quality enhancement in higher education in Wales. Points raised included the following:

- The remit of each group should be examined to determine strategic priorities and recommend possibilities for restructuring. This could be done by HEFCW and/or the HEW PVC Group.
- It was highly desirable to streamline the current arrangements, especially as the same individuals were represented on many of these groups with similar remits/agenda items.
- Institutional and organisational autonomy/priorities and competition for demonstrating innovative practice might constrict the streamlining which could be achieved.
- Some groups did share practice, but this was not easily apparent.

*HEFCW has reorganised its committee structure and brought a number of advisory committees together.*

*As each organisation has devised a committee structure to suit its own purposes, it is not possible for anyone outside of these organisations to try to achieve streamlining of these structures, so coordination will need to be undertaken in a different way.*

## **Quality enhancement**

Points noted by delegates were as follows:

- The varying definitions of quality enhancement were confusing. For some delegates this had resulted in a lack of clarity;
- Enhancement needs to grow from HEI and students;
- The definition of enhancement within institutions may vary with the mission, markets, and priorities of institutions;
- Was there a reasonable means of demonstrating what 'deliberate' steps might be, in the context of the definition of quality enhancement?
- How 'demonstrable' is quality enhancement, as it may take a substantial time to demonstrate that the student experience has been enhanced?
- An attempt should be made to identify what we are trying to improve, and to identify the stakeholders: students are the key stakeholders, but employers, the community and the economy could also be considered as stakeholders.
- In order to achieve enhancement it is important to know, with a high degree of confidence, exactly what students (or other stakeholders, if appropriate) want.
- Should QE relate to learning opportunity or learning experiences, with the former being much broader than the latter? In FE the learning experiences have been the focus.
- There is diversity even within institutions regarding quality enhancement, and so the 'on the ground' approach might differ to the institution's strategic direction. Additionally, activities perceived as innovative in one discipline may be commonplace in another – good practice varies with discipline;
- It could be difficult to identify best practice, as institutions tried to integrate best practice into normal practice.

*We include the definition we use to describe 'quality enhancement but recognise that institutions may adopt other definitions. We also make clear that we are supporting the enhancement of learning opportunities for students. We recognise enhancement activities will vary with discipline and institutional mission, priorities and markets.*

## **Structure**

Points noted by delegates were as follows:

- There is a danger of quality enhancement becoming 'top down', which can limit the impact of QE. Some delegates reported experience of quality enhancement through a bottom up approach, and some thought that both a top-down and a bottom-up approach were needed;

- The quality enhancement framework should be developed to address circumstances in Wales, rather than adopting models from elsewhere;
- Diversity was perceived to be positive in the context of quality enhancement, and it was important to be wary of a 'one size fits all' approach
- All institutions should have effective processes to identify enhancement themes. These processes should be based on validated evidence, rather than on perceptions.

*We recognise that diversity is important and will encourage approaches to enhancement at sector, institutional and individual levels. This acknowledges that enhancement should come from the bottom up, but, in our liaison with institutions we are also looking for strategic approaches.*

### **QAA and HEA**

- There was some confusion expressed regarding the specific roles of the QAA and the HE Academy, and how their roles overlapped.
- There was concern that the QAA could not be both referee and coach, with regards to quality enhancement. However, there were also risks in not involving the QAA in quality enhancement.

*We have taken account of these points in developing our approach to enhancement.*

### **Making the best use of resources**

Issues identified by delegates included the following:

- Using the HE Academy more strategically, including working more closely with the QAA on certain aspects;
- Encouraging HEIs to work more closely together, eg through joint initiatives on best practices. This could be done through the HE Academy holding events or an all Wales conference.
- Sharing good practice could involve HEIs which are champions in 'theme' areas, and which might otherwise not engage.
- It was important not to quash innovation at lower or individual levels.
- There needed to be a balance between agreeing on key themes, and innovative practice in other areas.

*There appeared to be support for the identification of key themes in order to maximise resources, but this should not replace activities at other levels. The approach we have developed encourages some coordination across institutions and bodies involved.*

## **WISE – Wales Initiative for Student Engagement**

A defining feature of Higher Education in Wales is an approach that engages students as active participants in the development, delivery and management of their own educational experience. Such participation involves engagement at many levels, in many different forms and will primarily take place at individual universities, as students seek to inform and contribute to the development of their own methods of learning.

The aim of this approach is to make Wales the best place for students to study and continually empower students to engage with the processes that will enable them to participate in the enhancement of their own learning experiences.

Higher education in Wales works closely and collaboratively to achieve joint aims and goals. A cross-sector group has been formed in Wales consisting of Higher Education Wales (HEW), the National Union of Students in Wales (NUS Wales), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) that aims to work together to reinforce, share and build upon current good practice that has been identified in approaches to student engagement in Wales<sup>4</sup>, and to learn from partners across the UK and Europe to help Wales' HEIs and sector bodies to enhance and improve our approaches.

**Valuing Feedback** - *output from an event or occurrence in the past will positively influence the same event in the present or future*

Giving feedback is the most common way students participate, engage and contribute to the development of the student experience. There is a wide diversity of how, when and what kind of feedback students give. Effective structures are in place at universities in Wales to gather and consider feedback from students at all levels of decision making; this is supplemented at a nationwide level by student involvement and representation at senior decision making forums of sector bodies and agencies in Wales.

Universities are always looking at ways to build on this approach by:

- Exploring ways that students are consulted and involved with decisions about future developments in HE provision in Wales
- Building on the excellent partnership arrangements that exist between the institutions in Wales to identify and share effective practice

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<sup>4</sup> (2006) Study of the Extent and Effectiveness of Existing Student Representation Structures within Higher Education Institutions across Wales, York Consulting

- Considering the outcomes of surveys and reviews such as the National Student Survey, to improve engagement to enhance the whole student experience
- Discussing ways in which students are presented with opportunities to contribute fully to quality reviews and audit processes
- Considering new and innovative means of communicating and gathering feedback from the diverse student body

**Harnessing Expertise** – *to control and use something or someone of extensive knowledge, ability or experience*

The focus of student engagement should be about enhancing the quality of learning for current and future generations of students. Students know what they want when it comes to their own learning and student experiences and needs. They know how they have reached their learning outcomes, how the teaching has assisted them in this process and how different approaches affect their success in different contexts.

In Wales, creating a culture where students are treated as expert contributors to the student experience is a strategic commitment in many universities, with strong leadership and a positive attitude both from the staff and from the students.

To promote and support this approach, the cross sector group will work with universities to explore ways of:

- Facilitating the sharing between universities of guidance handbooks, policies and strategies for student representation and engagement
- Working with the Quality Assurance Agency and universities to enable students to become fully involved in external review processes
- Assisting universities and sector bodies to develop effective approaches to closing the feedback loop with students to show how their expert contributions have effected change

**Working in Partnership** – *the concept of working together for the greater good*

Higher education learning is achieved through close cooperation between universities throughout Wales and students. The development of the concept of partnership between students and their university and between university and university can therefore be seen as a natural consequence. In Wales, there is a commitment to partnership working between students and the staff at universities that opens up possibilities for authentic and constructive dialogue. This, coupled with the university to university partnership working, offers the opportunity for more holistic and reflective feedback and enhancement of learning.

To encourage discussion and debate on approaches to engaging students as partners, the cross sector group intends to:

- Stimulate discussion amongst key stakeholders about the role and identity of students in a rapidly diversifying HE sector
- Organise opportunities for HEIs to discuss and disseminate innovative ideas and concepts about the role of students in Higher Education
- Facilitate the creation of networks of trained course representatives through the 'Have Your Say' campaign to encourage constructive student involvement and promote channels of communication to improve feedback mechanisms between students and their institutions