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It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you our Comprehensive Guide to Learning & Teaching, a new resource to support students’ unions and student representatives who are campaigning for better education on their campuses.

NUS and students’ unions exist to improve the education available to our members and harness the collective power of students for campaigning to change their education experience for the better. Some call this the ‘bread and butter’ of our existence. However, improving learning and teaching can often feel complex and overwhelming. Often institutions will tell you that things are too difficult, or not possible, or that it’s students’ fault that they do not find their education engaging. This resource brings together three years’ worth of work that aims to support you to articulate your core principles about learning and teaching and provide practical tools for you to make education better.

Since we launched our Manifesto for Partnership in 2012, we’ve seen unprecedented strides forward in higher education in developing student engagement in teaching and learning, quality enhancement and institutional governance. We have consistently argued that higher fees and marketisation will not lead to improvements in quality, but rather honest conversations and constructive engagement with students. I believe that the popularity of the partnership agenda since 2012 has shown that argument to be correct.

Indeed, whilst there is no evidence to suggest that higher fees and a competitive sector have led to improvements in students’ learning experiences (as was hoped for by the 2010 reforms) and might achieve the opposite, we know that student voice and input is essential. The Higher Education Academy has highlighted how NUS has become central to nationwide initiatives to improve learning and teaching, and how students’ unions are central to institutional initiatives.

Student engagement is about more than pointing out the problems with higher education courses and instead start suggesting solutions, mobilising and working together with staff to improve our academic communities. This resource aims to achieve just that, empowering students’ unions and student representatives to be constructive and helpful voices in their communities. It is not, however, a simple blueprint for effective education. Not all the prescriptions or suggestions will be appropriate or ideal for every higher education institution or course. Just as the market is not the panacea for improving learning or research, neither are one-size-fits-all solutions. Enhancement initiatives need to be contextualised through authentic and diverse student voices.

We need to be more bold, creative, radical and inclusive about how we work to ensure every single student can have the opportunity for fulfilling and rich higher education experiences. NUS and students’ unions need to lead the way on transforming education for the better.

In unity,
Sorana Vieru
Vice-President (Higher Education), 2015-16
Introduction

This publication is a compendium of all NUS’s recent work on learning and teaching enhancement from 2013-2015. As well as being a resource to support students’ unions lobbying for an improved learning experience for their students, it also outlines our views on what needs to be prioritised for enhancement in today’s universities and other higher education providers.

Whilst this booklet is comprehensive and quite long, don’t be overwhelmed. It can be best used by dipping in and out to the parts that are most relevant to the challenges you are facing in at your institution. Understanding the entirety of its content is by no means necessary to being a successful education campaigner.

As we outlined in our 2014 publication, Radical Interventions in Teaching and Learning, there are many barriers to innovative, inclusive and transformative practice in an increasingly market-driven system that values efficiency, quantity and short-termism. As Graham Gibbs has argued, a great deal of teaching practice in higher education is determined by habit and convention rather than developing learning.

Students’ unions and student representatives have a critical role to play in challenging the academy to turn its focus on maximising student learning and incorporating diversity. This is even more critical in the coming years following the conclusion of the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF), where research prestige might (very briefly) take a back seat in many institutions.

In recent years, NUS - in particular through The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) - has worked with students’ unions to advance the policy and practice of student engagement and representation in education. This document aims to support students’ unions to go one step further in their student engagement work: to be an informed, constructive voice for students’ in learning and teaching.

Enhancing learning and teaching practice is often a ‘wicked problem’. It has ill-defined measures of success, a great deal of subjective perspectives, little room for experimentation, and is intertwined with other challenges facing higher education institutions. Students’ unions are therefore vital to ensuring students’ best interests are considered in the complex discussions and trade-offs that determine teaching practice.

We have combined our already established benchmarking tools with commentaries on six different areas: learning & teaching, feedback & assessment, organisation & management, learning resources, and personal development.

Using the Benchmarking Tools

You can use the benchmarking tools at a course, departmental, faculty or whole institution level. Read each of the principles, and decide which of the boxes best describes where you think your institution is.

Once you’ve mapped out your current level, you may wish to choose a couple of priority areas to work towards achieving the next level. The tools are a good starting point for discussions between staff and students about how you can work together to improve.

Make sure you are including the right people in your conversations: academic staff have control over some aspects, whilst much control is held by departmental or central administrative staff. Some practices are easily changed locally, whilst others require a more whole-institution approach.

You may disagree with some of the levels in the benchmarking tools – and that’s OK! The tools were created collaboratively by student officers, based on principles put together from research. This doesn’t mean they will work at every institution. Feel free to tweak them or build on them to make the tools more relevant to the context of your institution.
Teaching & learning – an overview

Is quality learning happening?
There is emerging evidence to suggest that not all students are achieving a truly transformative experience in UK higher education. Overall satisfaction levels and scores for the quality of teaching staff remain high in the National Student Survey, but lag behind in areas defined as ‘high impact’ learning activities: quality and frequency of feedback, academic support and interaction, clarity of expectations, and course organisation.1

61% of students feel that their course is at least in some ways worse than expected, and the most common reasons are poorly organised courses, a lack of support in independent study, and a lack of interaction with teaching staff.2 Survey evidence and attainment data suggests that this is accentuated for BME students, international students and disabled students.3 Evidence from the US suggests that traditional delivery methods of higher education are failing to substantially improve students’ critical thinking, reasoning or writing skills.4 Graham Gibbs has highlighted how there is sufficient evidence to be concerned about the concentration of effective educational processes in UK higher education.

Models of effectiveness
Below are three separate models of effective teaching and learning practice. What is clear is that they are all remarkably consistent in what they prescribe. All lay down a challenge to the traditional model that continues to dominate in UK higher education: teaching through lectures, excessive summative assessment, slow feedback, and students working almost entirely individually. Many student complaints about the quality of their courses can be tracked back to a lack of these practices.

Challenging traditional methods
Biggs suggests that three common assumptions about education quality need to be questioned: that lectures and tutorials are the default teaching methods, that the focus of quality reviewers should be on teacher activity, and that relevant learning only happens within the classroom. Traditional methods of teaching regularly fail to support students to transfer their learning to activities outside the classroom.

<table>
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<th>Chickering and Gamson, Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Higher Education</th>
<th>John Biggs, Seven Characteristics of Effective Teaching Contexts</th>
<th>Wabash National Study, High Impact Practice areas in Higher Education</th>
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<tr>
<td>Student-teacher contact</td>
<td>Metacognitive Control</td>
<td>Good teaching and high-quality interactions with teachers, which includes:</td>
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<td>Cooperation among students</td>
<td>Relevant learner activity</td>
<td>• Faculty interest in teaching and student development</td>
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<td>Active learning</td>
<td>Formative feedback</td>
<td>• Prompt feedback</td>
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<td>Prompt feedback</td>
<td>Student motivation</td>
<td>• Quality of non-classroom interactions with teachers</td>
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<td>Student ‘time-on-task’</td>
<td>Interconnected knowledge base</td>
<td>• Teaching clarity and organisation</td>
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<td>High expectations</td>
<td>Social learning</td>
<td>Challenge and high expectations</td>
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<td>Respects diverse ways of learning</td>
<td>Teacher quality</td>
<td>Interactional diversity</td>
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<td>Deep learning</td>
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Teaching & learning: common problems

Problem: "Students are complaining about a lack of contact hours"
- There is little evidence to suggest that, alone, increasing contact hours improves course quality or student learning. It is more important to consider whether what happens within those contact hours. Is too much current teaching time spent in passive lectures or large classes?
- If your course is based around limited contact hours and encouraging independent study, ask whether students are actually spending much time on out-of-class work. If not, this might be due to poor assessment and feedback structures which don’t motivate or incentivise students to study, or poor communication of the institutions’ expectations of students.
- If students are seeking more contact time with teaching staff it may be due to a lack of regular support or feeling ‘out in the cold’. Consider whether academic support is accessible and comprehensive enough to ensure students remain engaged.

Problem: "Class sizes are too large"
- The rapid expansion of HE and the removal of student number controls has made lectures an increasingly useful method of delivering teaching to very large numbers of students at low cost. Students’ unions should query the impact of rapid and unsustainable expansion of student numbers without equivalent investment in staff and facilities.
- Students can learn nearly as much through facilitated interactions with their peers as with their teachers. Breaking large classes into smaller groups to facilitate collaboration can help encourage student engagement.
- Digitally based teaching practices such as flipped classrooms and recorded content can circumvent the need for delivery of information to large groups, enabling course planners to use precious time for smaller classes.

Problem: "Teaching quality is inconsistent across modules/departments"
- Effective courses ideally function as integrated and sequential systems, but modular based courses often lead to a disjointed approach, as different teachers emphasise different things. Course designers should aim for modules to make consistent demands of students towards jointly agreed learning outcomes. This is sometimes called ‘constructive alignment’.
- Do departments or the institution have a common pedagogical approach? This can be developed even through very informal methods, such as social gatherings for teachers to discuss and share their practice.
Assessment & feedback

Assessment for learning

Assessment is often seen by students as a purely summative process: that is, it measures what they have learnt at the end of a course or module. This is an aspect of assessment that is often overstated: it is possible for assessment to aid learning, as well as measuring it. Formative assessment and feedback are crucial for students to learn effectively, and well-designed formative assessments allow students to practice the skills they need in order to achieve the learning objectives of the programme.

Shifting the balance of assessment away from summative and towards more formative enables assessment to be for learning, not just of learning. Frequent, detailed, personalised feedback on where students went wrong and how to improve for next time makes assessment a valuable tool for learning.

"The change that has the greatest potential to improve student learning is a shift in the balance of summative and formative assessment.”

Authentic assessment

Authentic assessment is a concept that is growing in popularity. Assessments can be said to be authentic when they 1) relate to problems rooted in the real world; 2) require learning through inquiry and thinking about how you learn; 3) involve discourse amongst a community of learners; and 4) empower students to have a personal stake in the work they are undertaking.

Authentic assessment has numerous benefits for students, from developing real-world skills to encouraging a deep approach to learning, as well as aiding retention and success by giving students some say over what they study, and encouraging peer interaction.

“The higher the level of authentic learning that focuses on higher levels of thinking, disciplined in-depth inquiry, substantive discourse, and connections to the [wider] world, the higher the level of all students’ performance.”

Assessment literacy

Assessment literacy is concerned with the extent to which students (and staff) understand the purpose and process of assessment. Linked to assessment for learning, assessment literacy requires students to understand why they are being assessed, what they need to do in order to succeed, and, crucially, how the assessment contributes to their overall aim of becoming a graduate in their discipline.

Developing students’ assessment literacy requires a shared community of practice between staff and students, ensuring that “tacit understandings of assessment standards and criteria…are shared through social processes involving practice, observation and imitation”. Examples of activity aimed at improving assessment literacy include the use of exemplars, peer marking or practice marking, and small-group or tutor-led discussions of the assessment criteria and standards.

“If students are to be effective co-producers in higher education, it is imperative that they are knowledgeable about education and about assessment in particular.”

Assessment & feedback: common problems

Problem: “I don’t receive feedback in time to do anything useful with it.”
- Look at the “feedback timeliness” principle on the benchmarking tool and discuss what you could do to move up a level of practice.
- Work with staff to ensure that for every type of summative assessment a student undertakes, there is a formative version with feedback given back before the summative assessment takes place. This way students will have a better understanding of the assessment type and what is expected of them before they receive a mark.
- Encourage staff to plan assessments on courses holistically: formative feedback from one module could be helpful for an assignment on another if the module leaders communicate.

Problem: “I write loads of feedback but students don’t pick it up – they’re only interested in the grade.”
- Review the students’ assessment literacy: do they fully understand what feedback is for, as a core part of learning? As part of learning to learn effectively, it is important that students are supported in order to understand the importance of feedback, and how to reflect critically on their work in light of comments from tutors and peers.
- Consider the format in which you provide feedback. Is it easy for students to access as part of their everyday lives, or do they have to make a special trip to pick up a handwritten form? Exploring alternative formats such as online, audio or video feedback could improve uptake.
- You could consider removing grades from formative feedback, or introducing self- or peer-assessment at the formative stages. Research on assessment literacy (see previous page) suggests that such steps give students a better understanding of the assessment criteria as well as the utility of feedback as part of learning.

Problem: “The feedback I get doesn’t really help me to understand why I got the grade I did, or how I could improve for next time.”
- Look at the “feedback quality” principle on the benchmarking tool and discuss what you could do to move up a level of practice.
- Review the support that staff are given to give good feedback. Is there time allocated in their workload model to give quality feedback? Do they see feedback as a core part of learning, or a time-consuming add-on? More support from the institution could be just what your staff need.
- Consider working with staff to develop a template or joint guidance on the type of feedback students would like to receive. This may be course- or discipline-specific, or you may choose to take an institutional approach. It is important for students to let staff know the type of feedback they need in order to learn effectively, and discuss ways of providing this.
- Consider how well students understand the learning outcomes of the course, and see if you think the assessment criteria accurately reflect these outcomes. Students who have a better understanding of what they are being assessed against will have a clearer picture of what their grade means, as well as how to improve. (see assessment literacy on previous page).
## Assessment and feedback benchmarking tool

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>First steps</th>
<th>Developing</th>
<th>Developed</th>
<th>Refining</th>
<th>Outstanding/Stage</th>
<th>Partnership</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Diverse forms of assessment designed to assess a range of skills and knowledge</td>
<td>Assessment criteria are vague and poorly informed about deadlines at the start of their course. Feedback is late.</td>
<td>Assessment criteria are made clear and detailed enough to be effective. Students receive at least one piece of formative feedback.</td>
<td>Assessment criteria are clear and detailed enough to be effective. Students receive at least one piece of formative feedback.</td>
<td>Assessment criteria are linked to learning outcomes and informed to the course. Assessment is not clearly linked to learning outcomes and little thought is given to the use of assessment.</td>
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<td>2. Submissions</td>
<td>Submission procedures are simple, straightforward and accessible, usually electronic and online. All summative work is anonymous as far as is practical.</td>
<td>Submission procedures are relatively simple, especially for large and complex assignments.Some departments may still use paper copies to the institution. There is no provision for students to discuss their work in any way, even if they are on a peer review.</td>
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<td>3. Deadlines</td>
<td>Deadlines are accurately set out in the assessment schedule. Deadlines and submission dates may vary depending on which modules students choose.</td>
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<td>4. Anonymity and externality</td>
<td>There is no provision for students to discuss their work with peers. There is little evidence of marking being done in partnership with students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Moderating consistency and distribution</td>
<td>Marking is consistent within departments. Some marks are known to be &quot;easier marks.&quot;</td>
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<td>6. Feedback</td>
<td>Feedback is poor and does not help students to improve. Some students do not receive feedback at all. There is some evidence of feedback being used to improve performance. Some students do not receive feedback at all.</td>
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<td>7. Active assessment and feedback</td>
<td>There are no opportunities for peer assessment and feedback. There are no opportunities for peer assessment and feedback. There are no opportunities for peer assessment and feedback.</td>
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<td>8. Self-reflection and peer learning</td>
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Academic support

Academic support vs pastoral support
It is common within universities and colleges to split student support into “academic” and “pastoral”, regardless of whether or not the two forms of support are provided by the same people. Some institutions separate the two, giving academic staff the academic support role and locating pastoral support with non-academic staff; whereas others blend the two together in a single role (especially with postgraduate supervisors). There is little evidence as to which works better: on the one hand, removing pastoral support from an academic’s role may reduce some of the perceived burden of undertaking a support role and thus result in better academic support; on the other hand, students may not separate the two forms of support and may be confused by having multiple staff to discuss their issues with.

It is also worth remembering that academic and pastoral issues often overlap: personal issues can cause a downturn in academic performance; and academic issues can impact on students’ wellbeing and personal life.

Metacognition and learning to learn
Metacognition is “knowledge about one’s own knowledge; thinking about one’s own thinking, and learning about one’s own learning”. It means taking active steps to provide students with the skills they need in order to learn effectively. Knowing how best to learn, how to reflect on feedback and how to critically reflect on your own work are not skills that all students who enter higher education will naturally possess: it is crucial that universities and colleges take responsibility for ensuring that all students are supported to develop these skills.

Often, the development of metacognitive skills is provided as remedial support to students who seek it out, through generic “study skills” training often provided by a central department. It is important that learning to learn is seen as a skill to be developed like any other; that it is integrated into academic support provision for all students; and that it is situated within subject disciplines.

"Learning to learn at university means a fundamental change in students’ beliefs, is a complex process and requires support measures that go beyond ad hoc initiatives”.

Belonging, retention and success
The primary role of academic and pastoral support is to improve student retention and success. By this we mean reducing the number of students dropping out of their course, and enabling students to achieve their best whilst at university or college. Retention and success initiatives are a crucial part of the widening participation agenda: “non-traditional” students are at a higher risk of dropping out due to a variety of factors. Liz Thomas argues that we should not ask why certain students “fail”, but rather: “In what ways can institutions support non-traditional students to succeed?”

A key aspect of retention and success is the concept of belonging, which encompasses both academic and social factors. It is important, therefore, that academic and pastoral support is viewed more holistically than as the provision of a personal tutor and supervisory system: creating a sense of belonging amongst students is the responsibility of the institution as a whole, and strategic thought needs to be put into the facilitation of communities amongst students and staff, inside and outside departments and the Students’ Union.

“The findings of this programme present a compelling case that in higher education, belonging is critical to student retention and success”.
Many students do not have a named point of contact, and do not know how to access academic support. Gaps remain in the availability of academic support at induction and year end, and this reflects the needs of those students not on annual course. Some students are aware of the existence of academic support, but they are not sure how to access it. Most students have a named point of contact, but they do not know that they have access to academic support. Gaps remain in the availability of academic support at induction and year end, and this reflects the needs of those students not on annual course. Some students are aware of the existence of academic support, but they are not sure how to access it.

Academic support is designed to be student-centred and as accessible as possible. It is not easy to identify what is available, and students are not aware of the role they play in providing academic support. Academic support is designed to be student-centred and as accessible as possible. It is not easy to identify what is available, and students are not aware of the role they play in providing academic support.

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Academic support: common problems

Problem: "I don’t know who my personal tutor is, or why I’m meant to meet with them."
- Look at how personal tutors are introduced to students at the very start of first year. Is their purpose explained clearly? Are initial meetings scheduled, or is the tutor just a name in a handbook?
- How aware are staff of the purpose and function of their role? Look at the "staff support, reward and recognition" line on the benchmarking tool and discuss whether staff need more support in being proactive personal tutors.
- Look at the institution or department’s personal tutoring policy (if it exists). Discuss with staff whether you feel the expectations of the role are sufficient to offer high quality support to students.

Problem: "I don’t feel comfortable talking to students about personal issues: I’m employed as an academic member of staff. Besides, I really don’t have time with all my other commitments."
- Review the "staff support, reward and recognition" line in the benchmarking tool. Discuss with other staff whether you feel adequately supported to undertake the role, or whether the institution needs to do more to support you.
- Consider a separation of the academic and pastoral support roles. Ideally, pastoral support will be offered by a member of staff in students’ home department, but employing non-academic staff to take on this role can reduce the pressure and burden on academic staff. Caution should be taken not to increase the workload of existing non-academic staff.
- Consider introducing a peer mentoring scheme, or other activity that forms communities amongst students. A lot of personal issues are about a sense of belonging, or students feeling they don’t fit in (see above); facilitating students to form communities is likely to reduce the number of personal issues students face.

Problem: "I keep being bounced between different people and departments and nobody is actually solving my problem."
- Look at the "integrated approach to academic support" line in the benchmarking tool. Discuss with key staff how your institution’s support services could be better joined up.
- Look at your institution or department’s academic support policy (if it exists). You may wish to consider making it explicit that one person is responsible for liaising between the various parts of the institution and the student, in order to simplify the process for the student. This may be the student’s personal tutor, or it may be the first member of staff the student approached with their problem. This is additionally complicated for postgraduate students registered at multiple institutions through a Doctoral Training Centre (DTC), which are often unclear about who should take ownership for student support.
- Consider the training and information provided to members of staff with academic support roles. Are they signposting to the right places? Is there more that could be done to ensure that students have a greater knowledge of where to go for specific types of help and support?
Organisation & management

Course organisation, inclusivity and retention

The way a course is organised and managed has a fundamental impact on students’ ability to learn and succeed on that course. Organisation and management is like one of the lower levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs: in order to benefit from the transformational effects of quality learning, students first need to be able to access the information they need, get to the rooms they need to be in and know who to contact with questions.

Because of this, course organisation and management has a strong bearing on the inclusivity (or not) of courses, departments and institutions; and thereby the retention rate, particularly amongst students with additional organisational challenges such as student parents, part-time students and commuting students.

“Early provision of timetables is critical for students with children who need to arrange suitable childcare.”

Vocational, NHS and placement students

Due to the nature of their course, students with placements or other forms of work-based learning face additional challenges when it comes to organisation and management. NSS scores for organisation and management are lower amongst vocational students than those studying non-vocational courses, with particularly sharp differences notable in nursing and veterinary science.

“When the communication flow breaks down things can go wrong quickly. The challenge is trying to manage this flow between three different bodies – the institution, the student and the placement.”

Hidden course costs

A key part of the organisation and management of a course is the provision of information to students. All information about the course should be up to date, relevant and easily accessible, but a particular area of focus for NUS and many students’ unions has been information regarding additional costs. It is vital that no student’s degree mark is impacted by their capacity to afford additional costs, and institutions should minimise these as far as is possible. Where costs do exist, they should be made clear to students well in advance, with clear signposting to sources of advice and support such as the students’ union.

“Every year, students find themselves out of pocket by having to pay for extra resources and activities in order to carry out their studies. These ‘hidden costs’ are on top of any tuition fees and are often not advertised to students when they apply for a course.”

Organisation & management: common problems

Problem: “The timetable isn’t designed around students’ needs: there are lots of clashes, big gaps between lectures and some adjacent sessions are at opposite ends of campus.”

• A lot of institutions will be restricted by a central room booking system that allocates teaching spaces in accordance with set criteria. Adding a human eye to the process can help minimise issues: if departmental staff look at timetables from a student perspective, they may be able to identify problems before the timetable is finalised.

• Some institutions have extended the teaching day in order to reduce timetable clashes. If there are limited teaching spaces of a certain popular type (e.g. high capacity lecture theatres) this may be the only option. However, the impacts on staff and students of extending the teaching day to 6 or 7pm should be thoroughly considered.

Problem: “I can never get my first choice of optional module: it’s always over-subscribed and I don’t know why some people get on and others don’t.”

• The process for selecting optional modules should be fair and transparent to students, including the way students are selected for over-subscribed modules. If it is not currently clear to students what this process is, raise this with staff and ask them to clarify.

• If there is a module that is repeatedly over-subscribed year on year, there could be a case for repeating the module or adopting a team-teaching approach to increase its capacity. Similarly, if there are modules that do not attract students, it may be worth considering whether the staff time put into keeping the module running might be better spent elsewhere.

• It may be possible to alter the mode of delivery to increase capacity on the module, for example by moving towards bigger group sessions or more peer-to-peer learning. It is important that the quality of learning is not affected: bear in mind that small-group learning is often more effective than sitting in a 500-capacity lecture theatre.

Organisation & management

The challenge is trying to manage this flow between three different bodies – the institution, the student and the placement.”
## Organisation and Management Benchmarking Tool

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Under-developed</th>
<th>Developing</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Enthusiastic</th>
<th>Outside-performance Partnership</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principle 1: Professional development by students</td>
<td>Students are expected to work independently and take responsibility for their own learning.</td>
<td>Students are treated as partners with academic staff and are genuinely involved in every decision that affects them.</td>
<td>Students are encouraged to participate in discussions and provide feedback on their learning experiences.</td>
<td>Students' inputs are actively sought and their contributions are valued.</td>
<td>Students are actively involved in the design and delivery of their courses.</td>
<td>Students are partners in the development and implementation of their programmes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principle 2: Clear and accessible organisational and management</td>
<td>There is some strategic collaboration between the institution and its students' organisations.</td>
<td>There is some level of consultation and communication between academic staff and students.</td>
<td>Academic staff and students share a common understanding of the structure and process of the institution.</td>
<td>Academic staff and students work closely together to identify and address issues that arise.</td>
<td>Academic staff and students collaborate on a regular basis.</td>
<td>Academic staff and students are fully integrated into the decision-making process.</td>
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<td>Principle 3: Access to learning resources</td>
<td>Accessibility is considered during the design stage of each programme, although some processes may be &quot;standard&quot; and not easily modified.</td>
<td>Information is usually clear and available, although not always easily accessible for students.</td>
<td>Information provided is regularly reviewed by staff and students.</td>
<td>Information is easily accessible and well signposted.</td>
<td>Information is openly available and widely promoted.</td>
<td>Information is freely available to all students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principle 4: Management of changes</td>
<td>Management of changes is well planned and communicated to students.</td>
<td>Changes to timetabling of contact sessions and assessment activities are communicated in advance.</td>
<td>Changes to timetabling are clearly explained to students.</td>
<td>Changes to timetabling are managed in an open and transparent way.</td>
<td>Changes to timetabling are actively sought and implemented.</td>
<td>Changes to timetabling and other activities are managed in consultation with all stakeholders.</td>
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<td>Principle 5: Support for students with personal, professional, or academic needs</td>
<td>Students are supported by a tutor throughout the placement, who not only helps to resolve issues but actively facilitates the student's learning whilst on placement.</td>
<td>Students are supported by a tutor in their placement, who helps to resolve issues and facilitate learning.</td>
<td>Students have a named point of contact in the university/college who makes regular proactive contact with the student.</td>
<td>Students have access to a range of support services during their placement.</td>
<td>Students have access to a comprehensive range of support services.</td>
<td>Students have access to all support services they need.</td>
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<td>Principle 6: Flexibility and support from the institution</td>
<td>Learning resources and course documents are available online in a dynamic way.</td>
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### Notes
- The benchmarking tool is used to identify areas for improvement in the organisation and management of institutions.
- The tool can be used by institutions to self-assess their performance against national standards.
- The tool is designed to help institutions identify and address areas where they may be falling short in their organisational and management practices.
- The tool is intended to be used in conjunction with other assessment tools and techniques to provide a comprehensive picture of institutional performance.
- The tool is available to institutions through a national union of students (NUS) website.
Learning resources

The ‘support ecosystem’ of learning

Effective student learning does not happen independently of external stimuli. Learning resources provide the medium through which students engage with knowledge, skills, their teachers and each other. Resources frame and dominate students’ experiences of learning. They are the ‘support ecosystem’ of student learning.

The Online Computer Library Centre has identified six particular functions of effective learning resources and environments:

- A place to get work done (e.g. desks, space, comfort).
- Tools to get learning done (e.g. books, lab equipment, computers, internet).
- Information (e.g. digital literacy, data, reading).
- Support communities (e.g. help, discussion, expertise).
- Incentives (e.g. distraction-free environments, qualifications, purpose).
- Tracking progress (e.g. learning plans, support, feedback).

Towards a digital future

Much has been made of the inevitability and potential of digital technologies to transform education. Some of the most exciting developments include:

- Enabling the ‘flipped classroom’ model of lectures.
- Learning analytics tracking student engagement and formative progression.
- ‘Augmented reality’ simulating practical learning situations such as labs.
- Video and instant messaging used for collaboration, discussion and instruction.

New students are entering higher education having grown up in digitally dominated environments and expect technology to be integrated into their studies in ways that will enhance their success. However it is a substantial challenge to implement innovative digital practice in a consistent and coherent manner, and archaic analogue practices continue across higher education. Another challenge is ensuring that e-learning initiatives remain focused on the ‘learning’ as much as the ‘e’. More work needs to be done to support academic staff (and students) in developing digital literacy and practice.

Inclusivity, accessibility and flexibility

Lack of access to learning resources is a common barrier to thriving in higher education. NUS research has shown that books, printing, lab equipment, instrument hire and bench fees are some of the most common hidden costs. These are accentuated for disabled students who require specialist computer equipment, as well as the added burdens that many have in waiting for reasonable adjustments to be approved and implemented. Effective learning requires smooth, flexible and equitable access to resources, and disruptions are more than a mere inconvenience; they are barriers.

Another factor impacting on learning resource provision is the accelerated pace of information gathering that young people are used to. Students expect to be able to flexibly access their learning resources from multiple locations and at any time, in and around multiple commitments. This has led to the emergence of 24-hour facilities. The challenge for institutions is to engage students to understand their learning resourcing priorities and to agree a reasonable balance of availability that makes best use of funding.
### Learning Resources benchmarking tool

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Practice area</th>
<th>Undeveloped</th>
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<th>Satisfactory</th>
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<th>Ongoing learning practice: Partnership</th>
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### Learning Needs

- Student and staff technical support
- Digital and information literacy
- Learning resources
- Programmes and aims
- Strategic management
- Accessibility
- Student costs
- Purpose assessment
- Inequality and diversity
- Online access
- Learning resources
- Facilities
- Access to learning materials
- Learning resources
- Learning resources
- Student technical support
- Digital and information literacy
- Information resources
- Supporting students
- Feedback
- Student learning partnerships
- Innovation and development
- Expanding horizons
- Increasing student's work
- Creating new contexts for learning
- Learning spaces
- Collaborative learning communities
New learning spaces

Developing more collaborative and interactive teaching methods requires appropriate learning spaces in which to conduct them. The traditional lecture hall is being identified as increasingly unsuitable for collaborative and active learning, and new frameworks for designing teaching space are emerging. These spaces are designed to incentivise pre-class learning, collaboration and teacher-student dialogue, even with relatively large class sizes.

Source: Faulkner Browns Architects

Learning resources: common problems

Problem: “There aren’t enough books/computers/desks/labs”

• Consider whether your institution has matched expansion in student numbers with appropriate investment in learning resources. Even if your institution has not expanded aggregate numbers, adjustments in the proportions of students on different courses or different campuses can lead to shortages of learning resources.

• Learning resources are often provided by separate departments from those that deliver teaching and design curricula. Failure to properly allocate resources can often be due to a lack of coordination between these different parts of an institution.

• Enhancing or expanding the scope of learning resources available can sometimes take large scale investment over time. Institutions often need to be clearer with students about where they are investing in improving facilities and resources.
Personal development

Employability and development

With the success of higher education increasingly tied to employment outcomes in public policy debates, employability has been an emerging part of higher education providers' sense of purpose. Employability is actually a contestable concept based upon assumptions about human capital theory and the so-called 'knowledge economy'. Employer groups such as the CBI regularly complain about graduates' perceived lack of transferable skills and commercial awareness.

In this way employability is often depicted by both its advocates and its critics as something distinct from the traditional subject-based academic curriculum. This is unnecessary. The capabilities and skills often identified as transferable skills (such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking) or adaptive problem solving are integral to a wider agenda of personal development that all higher education courses can and should practice. However, often employability is falsely equated with 'recruit-ability' or actual graduate employment rates.

"Employability implies something about the capacity of the graduate to function in a job, and is not to be confused with the acquisition of a job, whether a 'graduate job' or otherwise." 1

Transferable skills and adaptability

The concept of transferable skills is contested in research, but it concludes that effective transfer of skills requires them to be deployed in similar contexts. For skills gained in education to be truly transferable they have to be taught and assessed in similar contexts to how they might be expected to be used. This is best developed through more authentic assessment (see a 10) and active learning.

Nonetheless, higher education should also enable graduates to have adaptive expertise; the ability to approach unfamiliar and open-ended problems. This can be developed through approaching problems from cross-disciplinary perspectives and greater diversity in the curriculum rather than overly specialising.

“Employability goes well beyond the simplistic notion of key skills, and is evidenced in the application of a mix of personal qualities and beliefs, understandings, skilful practices and the ability to reflect productively on experience." 7

Graduate outcomes

It is vital that higher education institutions have a clear idea of what qualities, attributes and skills students should aim to develop on their courses. Overleaf we have printed our own model of outcomes that courses should aim to develop in students, emphasising how subject, personal, and wider-world outcomes are interlinked and co-dependent.

"Higher education cannot, and should not, guarantee a job on the completion of a course. What it should do is ensure that the knowledge, skills and competencies it is developing are relevant and [can change] the society of today, and of the future" 9

- Personal development: common problems

Problem: “Students are gaining skills, but are unable to articulate them to employers”

- This is often posited as a failure to clearly state course learning outcomes to students. More fundamentally, it betrays a lack of reflection upon one’s personal learning journey, something that is developed through effective academic support and feedback on assessment.

- Official recognition and recording of skills development - such as Personal Development Planning (PDP) and the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) - can often be a means to support reflection and metacognition. However, it is important that this is focused reflection on skills and learning acquired rather than merely activities completed.

Problem: “Students find employability days/weeks/sessions/modules pointless and unengaging”

- If students aren’t supported to understand why they are undertaking a task then there has likely been a failure of aligning learning outcomes to learning activities. Specific employability modules or teaching time are often part of a ‘bolt-on’ approach to personal development. Consider integrating the content and learning outcomes into the core curriculum and assessment.

- If integrating the development of students’ post-study aptitudes into the core-curriculum is too challenging, this might suggest that a course’s content, curriculum and assessment are struggling to provide effective learning transfer to post-study life. A more fundamental discussion between staff and students about course learning outcomes might be necessary.

NUS Personal Development Outcomes Model

1. Understanding of Self
   a. Critical awareness, reflection, and independent thinking
   b. Agency, self-confidence, and efficacy
   c. Transferable and general skills

2. Understanding a Subject
   a. Knowledge and understanding of a discipline
   b. Skilful practice related to a discipline

3. Understanding the World
   a. Ethical and moral awareness
   b. Understanding of diversity
   c. Knowledge and engagement with the wider world (economic, political and social awareness)
Students are empowered to co-design, co-plan, co-present and co-peer assess the learning and knowledge in line with their personal projected journey.

Work-based placements are offered to most students, are clearly linked to the learning outcomes of students' development goals and are developed in partnership with their institution's core mission of the institution and of all courses. Students' awareness of the wider world is challenged and developed to go beyond commercial awareness towards social awareness. Education for sustainable development and intercultural awareness may be embedded into courses, but only intermittently through many disciplinary perspectives, or to students' activities both in and outside the curriculum, in order to develop into independent, critical and global citizens.

Co-curricular and authentic learning

Work-based learning

Apprenticeships and internships are available to students, are closely linked to their learning outcomes, give students the opportunity to reflect on their own learning, skills gaps and study strategies, and are developed in partnership with their institution's core mission of the institution and of all courses. Students' awareness of the wider world is challenged and developed to go beyond commercial awareness towards social awareness. Education for sustainable development and intercultural awareness may be embedded into courses, but only intermittently through many disciplinary perspectives, or to students' activities both in and outside the curriculum, in order to develop into independent, critical and global citizens.

Assessment design and content is not all linked to work-based learning and development outcomes. Assessment design and content is tangentially related to learning outcomes and are guided by employers and experts. There is a wide variety in the quality and depth of students' experiences when placed.

Attempts to encourage student reflection in development are reflected in core curricula and student activities. Students are given isolated opportunities to understand the links between the curriculum and work-based learning. Assessment design and content is tangentially related to learning outcomes and are guided by employers and experts. There is a wide variety in the quality and depth of students' experiences when placed.

Students are given isolated opportunities to understand the links between the curriculum and work-based learning. Assessment design and content is tangentially related to learning outcomes and are guided by employers and experts. There is a wide variety in the quality and depth of students' experiences when placed.

Students are given some support to develop personal and development goals that are in line with their aspirations and develop their skills. Some students set development goals through 'Peer coaching', and are given the opportunity to work on development but only late on in a course.

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Academic support mechanisms are developed in partnership with students' study capabilities, transferable skills and their post-study employment. Students struggle to articulate their achievements in and outside the curriculum, but with little overall coordination or resourcing within the institution.

For students to develop authentic and accurate self-assessment, they need both the course learning outcomes to support their self-asessment and outside support mechanisms to improve their self-awareness and self-evaluation.

Higher education institutions have a clearly defined academic mission and there is a strong alignment between the core mission of the institution and of all courses.

They offer a range of placements such as CV writing workshops, psychometric tests and mock interviews.

Students are regularly supported by tutors whilst on placement in workshops and guest lectures or alternative forms such as educational seminars, peer assessment sessions and seminars.

Academic support mechanisms are develop in partnership with key stakeholders such as personal tutoring team, all courses' are designed to support students' personal development or post-study choices. Students must turn to outside support for assistance with personal development or post-study choices. Students must turn to outside support for assistance with personal development or post-study choices.
Engagement, partnership and change

Engagement, partnership and change

Influencing change and enhancement

One of the greatest challenges for students’ unions seeking to effectively influence enhancement is that there is far greater diversity in educational effectiveness between subjects and departments than there is between institutions. Wicked problems for improving learning and teaching are often specific to departments or courses, and effective cultures of practice that cause enhancement to happen exist at the local rather than pan-institutional level.

This means that course reps matter a great deal when campaigning for enhancement, engaging with academics who design and teach particular courses. Students’ unions need to assist and empower course reps to engage constructively with course developers in issues of learning and teaching.

Using evidence

Having a strong evidence base is vital for making a persuasive case for change and enhancement. Often we assume that evidence needs to consist of a survey showing ‘what students think’ or ‘what students do’, but this is time consuming and costly. It can also overly simplify the rich and diverse texture of students’ experiences.

Extensive survey data of student attitudes to learning and teaching already exists through the NSS and countless other national surveys. This can highlight potential issues on courses, but the real evidence for change can come from other existing sources such as the many documents referenced in this booklet, the benchmarking tools, and other sector and institutional policy documents that make the case for effective practice. NUS can assist in directing you towards helpful evidence, research and resources that is particular to the issue you are working on. The role for students’ unions and student representatives is to critically engage with this evidence and your institutions in order to enhance the education experience of your particular students.

Partnership

Just as the purpose of evidence in enhancement is so much more than reflecting ‘what students think’, so the purpose of student representatives goes beyond notional consultation about ‘what students want’.

Partnership is more than the sum of consultation and representation mechanisms, but rather an ethos of education practice that brings students into an equal community of learning and continuous development.

Diversity, innovation and radicalism

It is worth bearing in mind that UK universities have been criticised for being fundamentally conservative institutions that struggle to innovate. This is partly due to a ‘if it ain’t broke don’t fix it’ culture that relies on the continued worldwide prestige of the sector, and also rigid and complex governance structures. It is also due to the lack of diversity of decision makers, which NUS has challenged in its work on democratising the university and liberating the curriculum.

All these are barriers to bear in mind for students’ unions campaigning for change and enhancement.

Further support

We hope that this guide has been a useful resource for students’ unions campaigning for better education provision for their members. If you are working on learning & teaching enhancement and would like further support from NUS, please don’t hesitate to contact the Vice-President (Higher Education) or a member of staff in the Policy team.
Many universities have webpages with resources for teachers that can be equally helpful for other institutions and for students' unions. Some good ones include:

- Plymouth https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/your-university/teaching-and-learning/guidance-and-resources
- Oxford Brookes’ Assessment Standards Knowledge Exchange (ASKe) https://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/
- Bath http://www.bath.ac.uk/learningandteaching/index.html
- Anglia Ruskin http://www.lta.anglia.ac.uk/

**Resources freely available online**


HEA (2012), A Marked Improvement: Transforming assessment in higher education.

HEA (2014), The Role of HEFCE in teaching and learning enhancement.

HEPI and HEA (2015), The 2015 Student Academic Experience Survey.

Jisc (2013), Students expectations and experiences of the digital environment.

OCLC (2012), At a Tipping Point: Education, learning and libraries.

PA Consulting (2015), Lagging Behind: are UK universities falling behind in the global innovation race?

NUS (2009), Meet the Parents: the experience of students with children in FE and HE.

NUS (2011), Liberation, Equality and Diversity in the Curriculum.

NUS (2012), A Manifesto for Partnership.

NUS (2012), Hidden course costs toolkit.

NUS (2012), The Pound in Your Pocket.

NUS (2012), The Professionals: students on placement.

NUS (2013), Democratic Universities: A guide to improving university governance.

NUS (2014), Radical Interventions in Teaching and Learning.

NUS (2015), Quality higher education for the next generation of students.

NUS and QAA (2012), Student Experience Research.


SCONUL (2011), The SCONUL Seven Pillars of Information Literacy.


Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, High-Impact Practices and Experiences from the Wabash National Study.

Yorke, M (2006), Employability in higher education: what it is – what it is not.
Resources not freely available online


Chickering, A. W. and Gamson, Z.F. (1987), Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education.


Endnotes

1. HEA (2014).
3. Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education.
5. Ibid. Also see your institution’s NSS and attainment data for demographic variations.
10. Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education.
15. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
22. NUS (2009).
23. NUS (2012), The Professionals: students on placement.
24. NUS (2012), Hidden course costs toolkit.
27. Ibid.
29. Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education. Gibbs (2014). Also see NSS data.
33. NUS (2013). NUS (2011)

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