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Research on Student Partnership in Welsh Higher Education and Further Education Institutions



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A report for the Higher Education
Funding Council for Wales & Welsh
Government

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Glossary of Terms

Acronym	Meaning
AL	Adult Learning
CCTs	Cross Cutting Themes
Estyn	Education and Training inspectorate for Wales
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
FEIs	Further Education Institutions
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
LVPN	Learner Voice Practitioner Network
MAT	More Able and Talented
NPTC Group	NPTC Group of Colleges
NSOA	National Society of Apprentices
NSS	National Student Survey
NUS	National Union of Students
OU	Open University
PCET	Post Compulsory Education and Training
QA	Quality Assurance
QAA	The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
sparqs	Student Partnership in Quality Scotland
SSLOs	Staff Student Liaison Officers
SSCCs	Staff Student Consultative Committees
USW	University of South Wales
UWTSD	University Wales Trinity Saint David
WBL	Work based learning
WfA	Welsh for Adults
WG	Welsh Government

Executive Summary

1. In May 2019, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and Welsh Government (WG) appointed OB3 Research to undertake research on student partnership in Welsh Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) institutions. The research aims to assess and evaluate the current state of student partnership, engagement and representation in Wales and to inform this agenda in the future.
2. The specific research objectives were to:
 - consider the definition and approaches to student partnership to establish a set of concepts and terminologies to support an integrated approach across the Post-Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) sector
 - assess the effectiveness and impact of student partnerships across Wales
 - consider barriers to effective student partnership working and identify possible solutions
 - highlight best and/or innovative practice in student partnership
 - identify opportunities for partnership working between institutions and the student body
 - explore what student representative bodies in HE and FE want in terms of partnership with the institution
 - make evidence-based recommendations for the development of partnership working in Wales.
3. The methodology included a desk-based review of strategic and policy documentation and relevant reports; analysing information and documentation received from HEIs and FEIs relating to student partnership; conducting a series of nine interviews with strategic stakeholder representatives and arranging a series of triangulated case study visits with a sample of eleven HEIs and FEIs to gather staff and student views and identify examples of innovative or good practice.

Key Findings

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

developed. Student partnership is also **integrated into strategic decision-making** across both sectors.

5. The work of Wise Wales has helped to **embed an ethos of student partnership** within the HE sector, and to a lesser degree perhaps, the FE sector, and it has identified and **shared good practice examples** and supported institutions to **enhance knowledge and understanding of the principles of student partnership**. Similarly, the learner involvement strategy guidance by Welsh Government has also driven activity within the FE sector which has resulted in the sector utilising more innovative approaches to gathering students' views. Across both HE and FE, the ability to record student partnership outcomes achieved continues to be challenging.
6. There was recognition and agreement that the terms used or an agreed definition of what constitutes student partnership was ultimately not important. Student partnership in HE, and learner involvement within FE, convey the same principles and institutions are simply on a different point on the spectrum of student partnership activity. **It is an attitude and a culture that needs to be embedded rather than a prescriptive approach**. In many ways having fluidity and flexibility was deemed more important than the need to define student partnership too tightly – as it enables **student partnership activity to be driven by the needs of the student body and the institution**. There was a strong view across the HE sector in particular that individual institutions must **retain autonomy** to deliver in partnership with their student body, as they see fit.
7. As part of this research, some very good examples of embedded student partnership approaches have been identified across institutions in the HE and FE sector. Student partnership as an approach has been on the radar for a number of years and **a more nuanced approach is now emerging**, driven by many external factors: the prominence afforded to it via Estyn and the QAA, the desire to improve scores on the relevant NSS survey questions (for the HE sector) and due to the priority it has been given by Welsh Government and HEFCW guidance. At an individual institutional level, policies and strategies consistently evidenced student partnership approaches at work. As such, the current state of student partnership, engagement and representation in Wales is relatively strong.
8. Several examples of particularly **innovative approaches** have been identified within the case studies including:
 - 'Tell Glyn' from Glyndwr University as an example of creative branding and strong identity
 - Pembrokeshire College's well embedded course representative structures
 - Several examples provided by the Open University's use of digital methods to gain the views of a representative sample of students, especially via the Online Consultative Forum

- Gower College and NPTC Group's utilisation of VocalEyes to capture student feedback
 - Bangor University's examples of students involved in the co-production of university strategies
 - University of South Wales' SVR structures and the individual projects linked to improving aspects of the university provision.
9. During the research, **pockets of good practice** within specific academic departments or schools or led by individual academics and lecturers were often referred to during our interviews with HE and FE staff and student representatives. However, a **greater impact** from current student partnership approaches could be seen if **mechanisms were in place to cascade good practice** throughout institutions and across the PCET system. Effective student partnership seems too often to happen in silos, and there are currently **missed opportunities to widen the impact** by sharing and replicating best practice within and across sectors.
10. Effective engagement and partnership that provides opportunities for all in an **increasingly diverse and complex population of students** (and in particular with part-time students or students across multi-campus) remains challenging. This was highlighted as an issue in research from over a decade and continues to be a difficult issue that has not been fully addressed in either the HE or FE sector.
11. Both the HE and FE sector generally felt that more work still needed to be done to increase knowledge and understanding of the concept. Across both sectors, whilst 'student partnership' was relatively well understood at a strategic level, **understanding of the concept and its underpinning principles at middle management and amongst academic staff tended to be more ad-hoc**. Similarly, there is a need for institutions and Students Unions/representatives to **communicate the benefits of student partnership** to the wider student body and work with students to build them into decision making processes.
12. The opportunity to **ensure informal opportunities** and an 'open door' approach that allows students to raise issues directly with senior staff and to **access key 'decision makers'** was cited as a key element of effective student partnership. Case studies highlighted several different approaches within FEIs and HEIs to achieve this from learning walks to 'dragon's den' pitch opportunities and online forums. In the same vein, it is imperative that **the feedback loop** is completed and that students are kept informed of how their views are taken on board and implemented upon.

13. Timing is also key to effective student partnership: interviewees consistently raised the **importance of ensuring early student involvement** in the development of new policy or provision with **co-production** seen as the next step in this evolving agenda, building on the ideas of **students as ‘change agents’** and continuously improving and developing new, innovative and collaborative approaches to partnership.
14. This research has demonstrated an appetite within the HE and FE sectors to learn more about good practice in relation to student partnership, **a desire to build upon the good practice** that exists and to **disseminate more widely across the whole PCET system**. A series of recommendations are set out below:

Short- to medium-term recommendations:

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

Recommendation	For:
R1: a set of core principles around what constitutes student partnership should be agreed at a strategic level, in consultation with key partners, and communicated widely.	Wise Wales and its partners
R2: an increase in understanding of the principles of ‘student partnership’ should be encouraged across the sectors with a particular focus on increasing understanding amongst middle-management staff.	WG, HEFCW, NUS Wales, HEIs, FEIs
R3: HEFCW and Welsh Government should create the necessary culture for ensuring that student partnership is prioritised within HEI and FEI institutions. As such student partnership should continue to feature strongly in HEFCW and WG communication.	WG, HEFCW
R4: Institutions and students’ unions should communicate clearly with their student body about the benefits of student partnership to the individual, and to the institution.	HEIs, FEIs, SUs
R5: Distances between campuses and travel costs impact on effective student partnership in several ways. Institutions should consider the practicalities of where and how meetings with students are held, and ensure that there are easy public transport links available, video-	HEIs, FEIs

<p>conferencing options or adequate reimbursement of costs where necessary.</p>	
<p>R6: A ‘what works’ conference should be organised at least every two years, with a view to sharing good practice and learning about international best practice. The Open University could also be invited to demonstrate how they are engaging disparate learners via innovative student partnership methods.</p>	<p>NUS Wales, HEFCW, WG</p>
<p>R7: HEIs and FEIs should consider more digital approaches to engaging with students and gaining their input into strategic developments. Pockets of good practice in this area exist but need to be shared more widely between institutions (this could be a key theme for a ‘what works’ conference).</p>	<p>HEIs, FEIs</p>
<p>R8: Whilst ensuring student representation in governance structures remains a key element to student partnership, informal opportunities for engaging with senior staff are also important. HEIs and FEIs should continue to seek opportunities to do this.</p>	<p>HEIs, FEIs</p>
<p>R9: In some of the best practice examples of partnership, the student is viewed as a ‘change agent’. HEIs and FEIs should look for opportunities for students to co-produce strategies and practical solutions from the outset and to be involved in the process of bringing about change.</p>	<p>HEIs, FEIs</p>
<p>R10: Effective student partnership needs training, support and resources in place to enable all students to fully participate. NUS Wales should continue to be resourced to support the development of students for active participation.</p>	<p>NUS Wales, WG, HEFCW, HEIs, FEIs</p>
<p>R11: As Students’ Unions develop or evolve in order to respond to the changing face of learners, they should continue to implement innovative mechanisms for engaging with the student body, ensuring that equivalent and consistent opportunities exist to access student representatives across multi-campus locations.</p>	<p>SUs</p>
<p>R12: The FE sector is at a very different point in its journey and requires support to build up adequate student representation structures and</p>	<p>FEIs</p>

<p>processes. FEIs should consider various sustainable models for student representation which could include paid sabbatical officers, students' unions and dedicated staff to support and enhance their activities.</p>	
<p>R13: A 'seed fund' to help set up sustainable models of student representation within the FE sector should be considered, with an application process that requires a clear commitment to continuing funding support to the structure thereafter</p>	<p>WG</p>
<p>R14: an 'innovation fund' should be established to fund joint bids across HE and FE that seek to embed student partnership. It should seek to fund innovative approaches into teaching and learning practices; digital engagement; student wellbeing and health and the development of training and resources. The fund should prioritise applications that include co-production elements and/or supports the replication of innovative practice from one institution to another. The fund should also look to prioritise applications that aim to increase cross-fertilisation of ideas across the FE, AL and HE sectors.</p>	<p>HEFCW, WG</p>
<p>R15: The Wise Wales toolkit has been a useful tool to benchmark institutions and provide a baseline. As the next step, a set of indicators that can measure tangible outcomes for and impacts on individuals and institutions as a result of student partnership approaches needs to be developed and adopted across the FE, HE and AL sectors.</p>	<p>Wise Wales, HEFCW, WG</p>

Recommendations for the PCET Commission:

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

<p>Recommendations:</p>
<p>R16: With the establishment of the PCET Commission, there is an opportunity to lead by example. The PCET Commission should ensure that student partnership is fully embedded in structures and processes from the outset.</p>
<p>R17: A key priority for the PCET Commission will be to develop a system-wide overarching student partnership strategy at the earliest possible opportunity. The strategy should set out what effective student partnership looks like and ascertain what benefits can be achieved for</p>

the student body and the institution. The strategy should be underpinned with associated, updated guidance on how student partnership should be embedded in institutional practice

R18: A monitoring and evaluation framework which sets the baseline standard for student partnership and outlines the minimum requirements for institutions (in terms of structures, support and activities) should also be developed, to underpin the overarching strategy, that is adaptable and flexible enough to fit with the requirements of the range of institutions within the PCET system. The evaluation framework should include a set of key performance indicators for reporting on progress against outcomes.

R19: The PCET Commission should consider whether ring-fenced funding to support student partnership across the PCET system should be considered in future. This should be sufficient as to fund some form of student representation proportionate to the nature and size of the institutions across the system. The sparqs model in Scotland could provide a model for this but expanded to fulfil the needs of the whole PCET system.

R20: The PCET Commission should consider a National Ombudsman role as part of its structure, which could provide final arbitration for learner/student complaints or issues.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 In May 2019, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and Welsh Government (WG) appointed OB3 Research to undertake research on student partnership in Welsh Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) institutions. The research aims to assess and evaluate the current state of student partnership, engagement and representation in Wales within HE and FE (including Work Based Learning [WBL]) and to inform this agenda in the future.
- 1.2 The specification set out seven specific objectives for the research which included:
- consider the definition and approaches to student partnership to establish a set of concepts and terminologies to support an integrated approach across the Post-Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) sector
 - assess the effectiveness and impact of student partnerships across Wales
 - consider barriers to effective student partnership working and identify possible solutions
 - highlight best and/or innovative practice in student partnership
 - identify opportunities for partnership working between institutions and the student body
 - explore what student representative bodies in HE and FE want in terms of partnership with the institution
 - make evidence-based recommendations for the development of partnership working in Wales.

Method

- 1.3 This research encompasses five main elements of work (which were undertaken between April 2019 and January 2020):
- attending an initial steering group meeting to discuss the proposed approach, secure access to relevant background documentation and contact details
 - undertaking a robust desk-based review of strategic and policy documentation relevant to the subject area; relevant academic papers or published reports available in the public domain or provided by steering group members and a web-based search for wider good practice across the UK

- preparing a series of qualitative research instruments (semi-structured topic guides) based on the areas of inquiry and research questions
- contacting each HEI and FEI in Wales to request relevant information on their student partnership/learner involvement strategies. Information was received from 18 institutions in total
- arranging and undertaking a series of semi-structured interviews with strategic stakeholder representatives from:
 - Welsh Government
 - HEFCW
 - Estyn
 - ColegauCymru
 - Universities Wales
 - NUS Wales
 - Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol
 - QAA
 - Advance HE
- conducting a series of triangulated case study visits with a sample of eleven HEIs and FEIs to gather individuals' views on the research topic and to identify examples of innovative or good practice. A specific focus of the approach was to identify new examples of student partnership approaches not previously known to the steering group. The sample included the following institutions:
 - Pembrokeshire College
 - Gower College
 - Cardiff and Vale College
 - Grŵp Llandrillo-Menai
 - Coleg Cambria
 - University of South Wales

- University of Wales Trinity Saint David
- Cardiff University
- Aberystwyth University
- Open University
- Adult Learning Wales

These case studies visits typically included face to face interviews with institutional leads, student union staff and student voice representatives. In all, a total of 50 individuals were interviewed during this stage of the work of whom 30 were institutional representatives and 20 were student representatives

- analysing the findings of the fieldwork undertaken, identifying themes to emerge and selecting ‘case study’ examples to illustrate those themes
- preparing and peer reviewing this report.

Methodological considerations

- 1.4 In preparing this report, it has become apparent that the terminology differs between the various sectors covered by the research. The term ‘student’ is a familiar one for HE but the term ‘learner’ is most commonly used within FE and WBL, as a generic term which captures the broader range of individuals engaged in education and training across the sector. Similarly, (as discussed in more detail under the definition section of the Key findings), the term ‘student partnership’ is widely used in HE but ‘learner involvement’ is more prevalent within FE and WBL. In this report we have used the term ‘student’ and ‘student partnership’ throughout except for when we quote directly from existing documents or from a contributor.

Structure of this report

- 1.5 This report is presented in eight chapters as follows:
- chapter one: this introduction to the report
 - chapter two: desk review of existing evidence of relevance to student partnership
 - chapter three to six: key findings from the fieldwork
 - chapter seven: conclusions and recommendations
 - Annex A of the report also includes case studies from the fieldwork.

2. Desk-based review of existing evidence

2.1 This section considers a range of documents provided by key stakeholders of relevance to this research on student partnership. The chapter includes a review of previous reports that have considered student partnership (or specific aspects of it); final reports from various programmes and schemes across HE and FE; and any existing guidance applicable to the research. Finally, this section provides a short synopsis of the responses to the PCET Commission consultation that are related to this research.

Higher Education

Study of the extent and effectiveness of existing Student Representation Structures within HEIs across Wales (York Consulting, 2006)

- 2.2 The report aimed to provide an analysis of student feedback arrangements across HEIs in Wales. It reported that HEIs had representation systems at both strategic and operational levels (within faculties, schools or departments) to enable students to feed their views and contribute ideas. There was some variability in terms of the extent to which student input was acted upon and in the commitment from staff within those same institutions. The report highlighted that whilst having the necessary structures in place was one aspect of developing a successful relationship between student and institution, ‘cultural commitment and action beyond rhetoric’¹ was of equal, if not greater, importance.
- 2.3 Diversity across student representation was identified as something that had been considered by HEIs but was not easily achieved. All institutions at the time also indicated the challenges of engaging with part-time students. Similarly, the report identified the challenges involved with trying to engage with students studying HE courses at FE settings and found that the effectiveness of any systems in place to engage with this cohort depended on how it was approached by individual FE colleges.
- 2.4 Three factors were identified as influencing the effectiveness of representation structures:
- cultural commitment
 - management and coordination
 - effective engagement of students.

¹ York Consulting (2007), Study of the extent and effectiveness of existing Student Representation structures within HEIs across Wales, page 7.

2.5 The report concludes that some level of nationally coordinated support would be useful to help support institutions and students' unions (SUs) as they face common issues but that consideration would be needed to the required remit of national level support, the role of stakeholder organisations and the capacity available. Four models are presented to move things forward. Model One is to maintain the status quo. Model Two suggests that the QAA in partnership with the HEA takes the lead in developing the student representation agenda. Model Three suggests that NUS Wales takes a lead on developing student representation in Wales through a national programme of support. Model Four suggests that student participation is managed through multi-agency partnership with dedicated resource to work with HEIs so they can develop their structures.

Students as change agents: new ways of engaging and learning in HE (HEA, 2011)

2.6 This report looks at the academic literature to date and recognises that student 'representation' and listening to the 'student voice' are now usually central to HE institutions' way of working. 'Student experience' has also become increasingly embedded within the rhetoric of HE, although it remains 'an ambiguous idea that may lack definition'.² Since 2011, it is recognised that student 'partnership' has become a popular buzzword, with a focus on students working as perceived as collaborators and co-producers with the HE institution itself. This shift is attributed to the fact that students are now increasingly consumers or customers, and that a more participative and collaborative approach would help avoid the more 'passive' and 'detached' approach to their education that could follow.

2.7 The 'students as change agents' research document uses the term 'student engagement' to cover many different areas of activity and looks to the Higher Education Academy (HEA) (now Advance HE) for a description of 'students as active partners in shaping their learning experiences'. The research looks at the role of the student as a 'change agent' – someone who can bring about or help bring about change. The idea of students having a clear view on what needs to be improved, a vision for the future and a desire to be part of the process of bringing about that change is a key finding of the report. The report finds that:

- 'the higher the expectations from students, the more they will achieve;
- the more that students are encouraged to be independent and creative, the more surprising and exciting will be the outcomes;

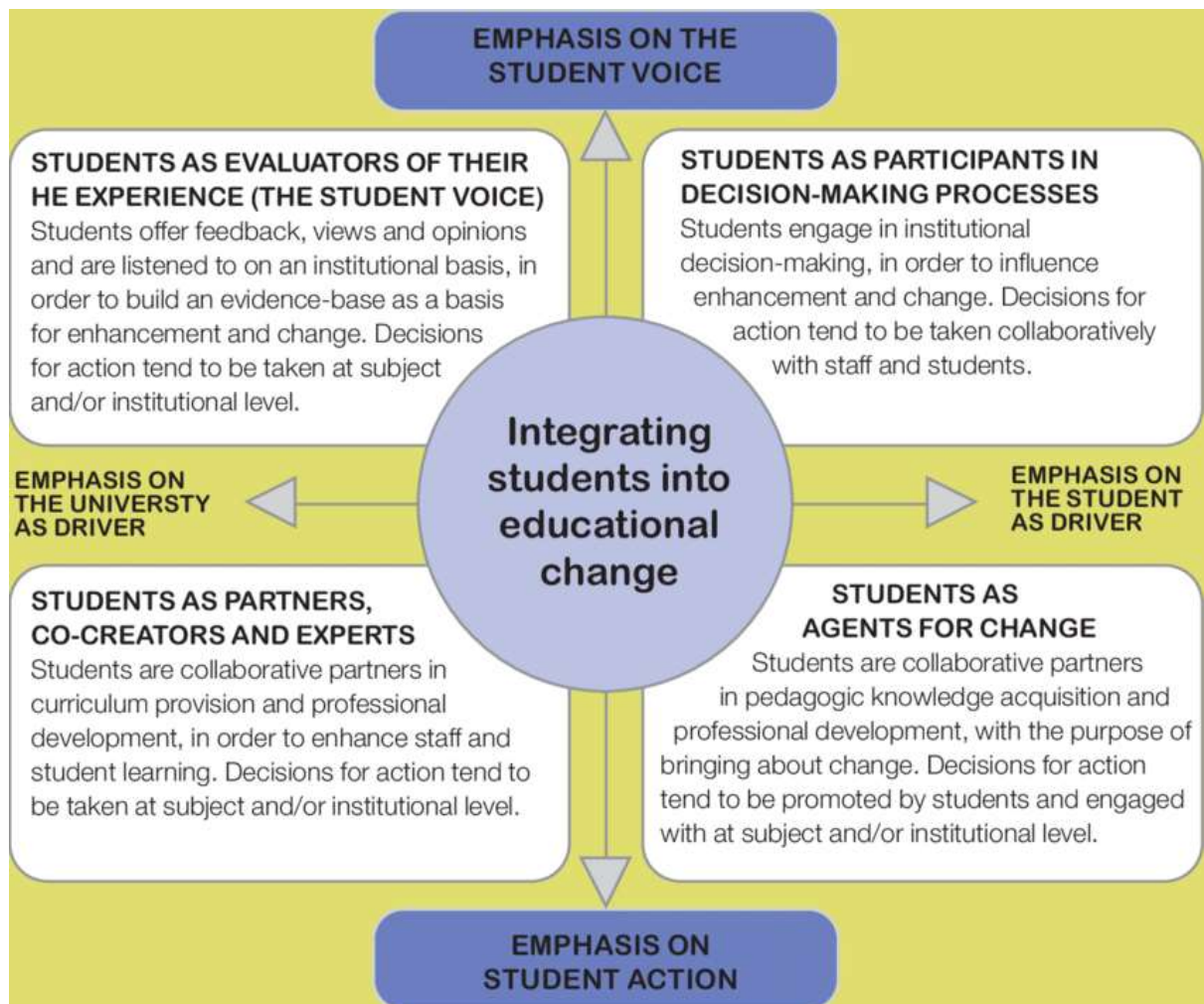
² Dunne and Zandstra (2011), *Students as change agents: new ways of engaging in learning and teaching in Higher Education*, ESCalata/HEA, p.13

- the more collaborative the relationship between student and teacher, or the student and the broader institution, the greater the knowledge and expertise that will be developed by both parties.’³

2.8 The research develops a framework or ‘theoretical model’ (see Figure 3.1 below) that can demonstrate the decision-making approaches that arise from the various modes of student representation and engagements. It is a matrix against which the approach is measured in terms of:

- the extent to which an activity is led by students or led by the institution;
- the extent to which an activity requires more active engagement by students to generate change (student action) or is based on a more passive form of representation (student voice).

Figure 3.1: A theoretical model for students as change agents⁴



³ Ibid., p.4

⁴ Ibid., p.17

2.9 The report's emphasis is on the more active forms of participations, described in the two lower segments of the model, although also notes that there is value in the other segment approaches too.

Wise Wales (2013)

2.10 Wise Wales aimed to achieve meaningful partnership between educators, Students' Unions and students across Wales and conducted work within both HE and FE sectors. The cross-sector collaboration approach of the Wise Wales initiative established in 2013 includes several key partners including HEFCW, QAA, Universities Wales, NUS Wales, HEA, Colegau Cymru, Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol and Welsh Government.⁵

2.11 Wise Wales was tasked with supporting both the HE and FE sector in Wales to 'progress from talking about student engagement to partnership' by working together, sharing good practice and enhancing the knowledge skills and capacity of institutions and students' unions to achieve this.

Wise Wales Student Partnership Statement for Higher Education

2.12 The definition of partnership is included in the student partnership statement prepared by Wise Wales. It is described as follows:

'It is used in a broad sense to indicate joint working between students and staff...based on the values of openness; trust and honesty; agreed shared goals and values; and regular communication between the partners. It is not based on the legal concept of equal responsibility and liability...The term reflects a mature relationship based on mutual respect between students and staff'.⁶

2.13 Wise Wales developed a document to explain partnership for HE in Wales so that it became a tangible concept that would result in 'genuine enhancement', while recognising that 'one size does not fit all' and that partnership will be unique for each university, Students' Union and student.

2.14 In the document it is explained that partnership 'is an ethos, not an activity' that should ensure that students are active participants in the learning process and that it is more than just 'listening to the student voice' but rather an opportunity for students to be involved from the outset so they can set priorities, content and direction in partnership with the HE institution.

⁵ As of 2014/15

⁶ *Wise Wales, Example Student Partnership Statement, p.1*

2.15 The document acknowledges the difficulties associated with defining partnership and that it is ‘impossible to define partnership in one way for the entire sector due to the unique nature of each university, Students’ Union and student’.⁷ However, it does state that true partnership would typically:

- see partnership exist between independent entities (e.g. the university and the student body)
- happen at the level of each individual student and staff member (i.e. as part of the learning and teaching process at course or module level and across wider activities – volunteering, community engagement, employability)
- include a partnership culture where different and diverse voices can discuss and challenge decisions
- see universities and Students’ Unions working to ensure students can engage in quality enhancement processes.⁸

Wise Wales Pathways to Partnership Toolkit Report

2.16 Wise Wales developed a toolkit to support HEIs and Students’ Unions to work towards a ‘culture of meaningful partnership’. Indicators of effective partnership were gathered from HEIs and Students’ Unions as part of Wise Wales’ work during 2013/14 and analysed in this report. Each indicator had a list of ‘essential’ and ‘desirable’ criteria which HEIs could report against.

2.17 The toolkit measured against five key indicators:

- ‘indicator 1: partnership is being regularly debated and discussed between both institution and students’ union representatives
- indicator 2: both parties are able to identify examples of good practice, pertaining to student engagement and partnership, which might be implemented at their own institutions
- indicator 3: an ethos of partnership is being embedded throughout the institution and the students’ union; the message is being actively disseminated
- indicator 4: the practical opportunities for students to become partners in enhancing and shaping their experiences within education are ever increasing and evolving
- indicator 5: greater engagement with a wider student audience.’⁹

⁷ Wise Wales, Example Student Partnership Statement, p.3

⁸ Wise Wales, Partnership for Higher Education in Wales, p.3

⁹ Wise Wales (2014), Pathways to Partnership Toolkit Report, p.5-10

- 2.18 The analysis of the results demonstrated that HEIs graded their course representative systems as being well developed and effective. Opportunities for student representatives to sit on appropriate decision-making bodies was also being implemented effectively across the sector. It was reported that the use of practical ways of engaging students in partnership were also well-developed, increasing and evolving at most HEIs in Wales and that institutions and Students' Unions were sharing partnership practices, ideas and challenges across Wales.
- 2.19 Certain results from the toolkit highlighted areas with room for improvement including the need:
- to communicate more effectively with staff in both the institution and the Students' Unions so that all had a basic understanding of the importance of partnership
 - to ensure a more diverse input from student communities into annual student reports
 - for institutions in collaboration with Students' Unions to improve engagement levels of different student communities and to work together to raise awareness of the benefits of partnership.

Further Education

Learner Involvement Strategies guidance (Welsh Government, 2010)

- 2.20 In 2010, as part of its Quality and Effectiveness Framework, the Welsh Government introduced new requirements for post-16 learning providers to establish formal learner involvement strategies and published guidance to assist providers in their development.
- 2.21 The guidance sets out a framework for learner-involvement strategies and calls on all providers to ensure that their own strategies include:
- 'a statement of commitment from the organisation's senior management to make sure that learners have direct involvement in shaping their own learning experiences
 - clear strategic aims for consulting with learners and for helping them to take part in decisions affecting their learning and environment
 - arrangements for formal and informal learner-involvement activities
 - arrangements for gathering the views of learners
 - arrangements for seeking the views of 'hard to reach' learners
 - procedures for the recruitment and training of learner representatives so that they can fulfil their role effectively
 - arrangements for integrating learners' views into quality assurance systems and

- arrangements for monitoring and evaluating the implementation and effectiveness of the strategy.¹⁰

- 2.22 This new approach of putting the ‘learner voice’ at the core of quality assurance was a change of direction at the time, with a recognition that involving learners in decision-making had proven benefits for both learners and providers. ‘Learner voice’ was also integrated as a key performance indicator into Estyn’s Common Inspection Framework. The guidance also recognised that the sector is diverse and that there will be no one size fits all approach nor should the guidance be seen as prescriptive. The guidance is based on minimum requirements, with an understanding that providers will develop an approach that best meets the needs of its range of learners.
- 2.23 At a strategic level, the guidance advises that the learner involvement strategy should be led at a senior level in the organisation, and that organisations should consider appointing a learner liaison officer (or include the role within a managerial remit) which could facilitate dialogue between them and the provider’s staff.
- 2.24 The guidance also covers learner participation and representation. It outlines the important and appropriate role of Students’ Unions for FE institutions but also recognises that work-based learning providers will require different approaches such as appointing learner representatives, elected learner governors, establishing a Learner Affairs Committee, Departmental or site councils and learner conferences. It highlights the importance of informal mechanisms too such as suggestion boxes, posters and follow-up ‘you said – we did’ displays.
- 2.25 The guidance suggests several ways in which learner feedback can be sought, including learner questionnaires, online surveys, telephone interviews and focus groups. The importance of the ‘feedback loop’ is also emphasised both in terms of addressing the issues raised and in responding to learners to communicate the outcomes.
- 2.26 The guidance highlights the need to ensure equality and that learner involvement strategies should consider how to engage with harder-to-reach learners such as part-time, distance learners, those with low levels of basic skills and other barriers.
- 2.27 The guidance advises that learner representation will need appropriate support structures and resources and suggests that organisations should consider funding for the Students’ Union; allocated time for learner representative activities; creation of full-time sabbatical officer

¹⁰ Taken from Estyn (2013), The effectiveness of learner-involvement strategies in further education institutions and Welsh for Adult centres, p.1

positions; training and the use of technology for dissemination of information to learners and for seeking feedback.

- 2.28 The most tangible area for learner involvement is identified as Teaching and Learning and the guidance also suggests how learner involvement can be embedded into the quality cycle of organisations.

The effectiveness of learner-involvement strategies in further education institutions (Estyn, 2013)

- 2.29 In order to inform the review and further development of the Welsh Government's Learner Involvement Strategy guidance, Estyn prepared this thematic review report which focused on how well further education institutions implement learner-involvement strategies.

- 2.30 The review found that providers in the FEI sector had moved on from using learner surveys as the main way for collecting learners' views and were now undertaking activities which enabled learners to be involved in the shaping of curriculum and in influencing improvements to the quality of teaching, resources and facilities. Learner involvement activities identified by the review included: the use of class representatives, panels involving staff and learners, focus groups and enrichment activities aimed at extending learners' skills. The review did note that providers within FEI continued to find it difficult to measure the impact of learner involvement.

- 2.31 The review found that learners within FEIs had a positive view of how they were able to shape their learning experience, felt that their views and opinions were taken seriously and that there were appropriate arrangements across all providers to report back to learners what has happened as a result of their involvement.

- 2.32 The review makes a series of recommendations and suggests that FEIs should develop formal systems to record the outcomes achieved by learners as a result of taking part in learner-involvement activities and ensure that their arrangements allow learners to shape decisions that affect all aspects of their further education experience. It also suggests that the NUS should record and recognise the impact of class representatives or student governors on the development of teaching, learning and management within FEIs.

Further Education Student Representation Project (NUS Wales, 2013)

- 2.33 This report was produced as a culmination of a three-year project run by NUS Wales and funded by Welsh Government and describes the impact of the project and options for the

future. The project aimed to develop and support student representation structures and learner involvement in FE colleges throughout Wales.

2.34 As a result of the project, six key outputs were secured:

- student governor training (and a toolkit) was provided to at least one student governor from every college in Wales, and training events had been arranged to bring student governors together at a national level
- Staff Student Liaison Officers (SSLOs) were supported with training
- tailored support was provided to individual FEIs
- good practice mapping was conducted
- an official Learner Voice Practitioners Network (LVPN) was established and
- a national class representative training programme was developed and rolled out to every college in Wales.

2.35 A Learner Voice Quality Framework was also proposed as a sector-wide approach to measure the learner voice in Further Education, but no funding was available for its implementation.

Post-16 Learner Voice Wales survey results (2015)

2.36 The most recent Learner Voice survey covering FE, WBL, Adult Learning (AL) and Welsh for Adults was conducted in 2015. The survey showed that 85% of learners rated their overall experience as ‘very good’ or ‘good’ with positive improvements seen across all sectors, but most notably among FE learners.

2.37 76% of learners felt that their ability to give their views was ‘very good’ or ‘good’ and telling learners what has happened as a result of their views being given had a 66% ‘very good’ or ‘good’ response. However, 14% of learners stated that they did not know how to rate their learning provider on this measure, which suggested that more could be done to raise learners’ awareness of how their views and input were being acted upon¹¹.

Pathways to Partnership for Further Education (Wise Wales, 2018)

2.38 Wise Wales aimed to achieve meaningful partnership between educators, Students’ Unions and students across Wales and conducted work within the FE sector, funded by Welsh Government. It worked as an advisory body offering opportunities and resources so that

¹¹ Post-16 Learner Voice Wales survey results (2015), page 3. *The Learner Voice survey was withdrawn after 2015 as it was not providing useful intelligence on how the quality of teaching could be improved in the FE sector. Individual FEIs are still undertaking their own satisfaction surveys.*

institutions could develop their own partnership practices. In 2015 it was funded by Welsh Government for three years to deliver a Pathways to Partnership for FE project which included the development of a self-assessment toolkit focussed on the learner involvement process and tailored support for colleges.

2.39 Annual Partnership for Wales conferences were held, aimed at celebrating and showcasing good practice, meetings of a Learner Voice Practitioner Network were facilitated twice per year and student governor training was also organised annually.

Scotland

2.40 The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) funds 'sparqs' (student partnerships in quality Scotland) – an organisation tasked with promoting student engagement in the quality of learning and teaching in Scotland's universities and colleges. A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland was agreed and published in 2012 which was endorsed by all relevant organisations representing the HE and FE sectors including Education Scotland, Scottish Funding Council, NUS Scotland, Scotland's colleges and Universities Scotland. Sparqs has an outcome agreement with the SFC to outline and measure the impact of their key activities. Their core activities include:

- providing training to around 4,000 course reps each year
- training faculty representatives and student reviewers
- providing bespoke training for online/distance learning and international students, apprentices and students in supported education
- supporting institutions to develop structures
- providing resources and guidance to institutions on involving students
- supporting the development of students' associations
- supporting student representatives who sit on national committees
- influencing developments around key learning and teaching issues e.g. student engagement in Enhancement Themes
- exchanging good practice through conferences, research and project work.¹²

2.41 The most recent annual report on their website shows that sparqs received £306,850 in core funding to undertake their duties.

¹² About Sparqs leaflet [<https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/About%20sparqs%202016.pdf> accessed 13 January 2020]

Guidance on the development and implementation of a Student Partnership agreement in Scotland

- 2.42 In 2013, sparqs developed guidance on how to implement student partnership in universities. In 2015, a version for the FE sector was also developed. Both the HE and FE guidance documents describe how the term ‘partnership’ implies an equal relationship between two or more bodies working towards a common purpose where ‘decisions are taken jointly...and they cooperate to varying degrees in implementing the consequences of those decisions’. It is more than consultation – students work with the institution not only to identify areas for enhancement, but also help to facilitate implementation.¹³
- 2.43 In both the HE and FE guidance, it is recognised that an effective students’ association¹⁴ is an essential element to developing partnership. It also describes how there has been a sustained effort and significant investment via a transformation fund allocated to colleges to develop their student engagement work, to deal with the lack of learner/student representation and/or under-funded associations in the sector. This often included paid sabbatical officers and staff to help the students’ association enhance their activities.
- 2.44 The guidance sets out the need for a Student Partnership Agreement at each institution driven by five key principles namely to:
- ‘ensure that the model helps to facilitate the effective working relationship between an institution and its students
 - ensure that the model is primarily a tool for Quality Enhancement not just for Quality Assurance
 - allow all parties to monitor and review the effectiveness of student engagement
 - avoid a transactional model
 - enable parties to define and promote the range of opportunities for students to engage in quality processes.’¹⁵

PCET Commission

Summary of responses to the Public Good and a Prosperous Wales – the next steps consultation (2018)

¹³ sparqs FE guidance, p.6.

¹⁴ This is the equivalent of what is known as a Students’ Union in Wales.

¹⁵ sparqs FE guidance, p.8 (a similar version is included on p.10 of the HE sparqs guidance)

- 2.45 The consultation set out details on the reform of the post-compulsory education and training (PCET) system in Wales and invited responses to the technical detail for how a new Commission for PCET in Wales could be structured.
- 2.46 The consultation document asked whether ‘consistent principles and values should be developed for learner voice and representation and that learning providers should be required to adhere to these?’ This was widely supported, and there was a call for ‘a move towards greater consistency across the PCET sector.’¹⁶
- 2.47 Many HE respondents felt that their current practices were already leading the way. There was a word of caution to avoid being too prescriptive, in order to allow innovation and arrangements to fit its context. It was accepted that the HE model would not work across all sectors but that arrangements should provide an equivalent level of representation.
- 2.48 FE respondents called for consistency across all sectors particularly in terms of the principles and values on which meaningful engagement with learners to actively shape provision and support services could be based.
- 2.49 Across the HE, FE and Work-based learning sectors, there was agreement that learners should be involved in the shaping of outcome agreements. FE representatives felt particularly strong about this and suggested that support would need to be given to enable learner representatives to contribute fully in this respect.
- 2.50 There was also widespread agreement to the proposal to develop a national framework for learner voice and representation albeit with recognition that some providers would have ‘further to travel to deliver on this.’¹⁷ To achieve this, it was suggested that the Commission would work with NUS Wales and the National Society of Apprentices (NSOA) to embed the principles and values across the system and identify appropriate models by which learner voice and representation could be delivered for each sector. There was also an almost unanimous view that responsibility for establishing such a national framework should sit with the proposed Commission.

Concluding remarks

- 2.51 The desk-based review shows that student partnership has a strong foundation both within HEIs and FEIs in Wales. HEIs have robust course representation and governance structures

¹⁶ Miller Research (2018), Summary of responses to the Public Good and a Prosperous Wales – the next steps consultation, p.71

¹⁷ Ibid., p.74

in place and FEIs have developed their approaches since the learner involvement guidance came into place. HEIs and FEIs have developed more innovative ways of engaging with students than simply requesting feedback, such as via surveys.

2.52 However, the desk-based review also highlights opportunities to further embed student partnership. Work remains to be done to ensure that there is a strong understanding of student partnership amongst all staff and students. The review of documentation also highlights the need to ensure wider input from the diverse student body. The review of existing evidence suggests that the PCET system as a whole continues to require support to enable its institutions to reach the next level of a true partnership approach, particularly if it is to embrace new ways of engaging and learning which involve students as co-creators and ‘agents for change’.

3. Key findings – definitions and approaches

- 3.1 This section considers the definitions and approaches to student partnership across the HE and FE sectors (including WBL) and seeks to establish a set of concepts and terminologies that could work across an integrated post-16 sector.

Definition of student partnership

- 3.2 There was no shared definition of ‘student partnership’ across or within sectors and various descriptions and definitions were offered during the research. ‘Student partnership’ was understood by stakeholders as meaning ‘going beyond asking students their views and giving them choices’ or ‘students making a difference’. It was felt that the term implies ‘a degree of equality’ in the relationship between the institution, staff and students although there was recognition that there might always be an imbalance in the power relationship.
- 3.3 Student partnership was also described as offering opportunity ‘to challenge’ and to ‘show a degree of mutual respect’. Another stakeholder thought that partnership required students’ influence to be ‘real’ and that it also allowed for ‘the system’ to understand the needs of students. By allowing true partnership to happen, it enabled ‘students working alongside the University to have an impact’.
- 3.4 During HEI stakeholder interviews, the term ‘student partnership’ was commonly adopted and described as ‘meaningful interaction with students where they can input their views and influence developments and decision making at every level of the institution’. As such it was much wider than student experience or student voice, which are also terms commonly adopted across the HE sector. Some stakeholders suggested that perhaps the term ‘student partnership’ within HE was most well-established at a strategic level, and that the challenge lies in translating that to a more operational level and into ‘what happens at the coalface’.
- 3.5 One stakeholder suggested that whilst there was a broad, general understanding of the idea, the subtleties and semantics surrounding ‘student partnership’ were more varied. Stakeholders agreed that the term ‘student partnership’ is not as widely adopted or understood across FE. Rather the most commonly used terms include learner involvement; learner voice and learner representation.

- 3.6 The term learner involvement, commonly used across the FE sector, is often interpreted in a similar way to 'student partnership' in that it is meaningful engagement with the learner body to inform institutional decision making. Again, this was viewed as being broader than learner voice or learner representation. However, there was one example of a large FE college which provided multi-campus provision across the post-16 provision where the terms 'student voice' and 'student engagement' rather than using the term 'learner' was used, regardless of the level (1-6) or method (FE/HE/AL) at which the individual was studying.
- 3.7 One interviewee from an FE-based stakeholder organisation felt that the student partnership term widely used across the HE sector meant that any activity which it encompassed was seen as 'superior' to the FE sector as a result of historically more resources provided and more mature structures in place to deliver. Indeed, the HE sector's approach to student partnership was described as a 'pinnacle' of how to engage students and involve them in meaningful decision making.
- 3.8 Another stakeholder, from HE, suggested that there might well be no real difference between the term 'student partnership' and 'learner involvement', and that it was down to semantics. In this case, the terms were seen as 'equal' in both meaning and the key principles behind them.

Student partnership principles

- 3.9 There was recognition and agreement that the terms themselves are not important – if they convey the same principles across sectors. It was also acknowledged that student partnership in place across HEIs and FEIs needs to be considered as a spectrum and that different institutions are and should be at different levels of that spectrum.
- 3.10 There was also agreement that the approaches to student partnership differ across HE, FE and AL. At HEIs some stakeholders felt that students have greater capacity to take ownership of the agenda and can run their own services and provisions and that within the FE sector, the institution needs to take greater ownership and a more central co-ordination role due to the restrictions and considerations associated with providing education to a more diverse and disparate group of learners which means that the models required to engage them in decision making are likely to be more complex.

- 3.11 It was suggested by one FE stakeholder that the QAA's quality assurance KPIs for the HE sector have driven the need to demonstrate positive student feedback, whereas this has been less relevant to FE given Estyn's inspection approach which typically only asks two to three questions about learner engagement mechanisms. It was also felt that HE had a more structured student representation system that was generally more embedded into quality assurance than FE and that this also contributed to the greater prevalence of 'student partnership' seen in that sector. However, in a recent development, Estyn has trained 12 learner inspectors to work with them as part of future FEI inspection visits and this was often referred to during stakeholder interviews.
- 3.12 One FE stakeholder felt that FEIs are often better at designing 'bespoke student approaches' than HEIs. It was perceived that FE students have 'opportunities to design their own learning journey' and that this was not something that featured heavily within HE. Indeed, this was thought to be a practice that FE institutions inherited from secondary schools.
- 3.13 Several interviewees considered that there might be a case for ensuring greater consistency across HEIs and FEIs in terms of the use of 'student partnership' as a term and in the understanding of the principles that underpin it, given that FE learners often progress into HE and because there is an increasing number of HE learners studying at FE colleges.
- 3.14 It was also argued that terminology in general that conveyed students as 'education activists' or 'active participants' was necessary to generate a cultural shift. Examples of terminology conveyed during conversations included 'collaboration', 'experimental', 'flipping the classroom', 'choice', 'ownership' and 'involved in knowledge production'.
- 3.15 There was an appetite to see not just more consistency in terminology, but more importantly, more debate and engagement about student partnership across the post-16 sectors in Wales. It was thought that this would be wise in preparation for the establishment of the PCET Commission and the approach that will be taken in Wales. It was also argued that Wales should be in a good place to achieve this due to a relatively low and manageable number of HEIs and FEIs in Wales. One stakeholder pointed to Scotland and the work of sparqs, and how they have managed to utilise consistent terminology whilst retaining the necessary autonomy and flexibility in approach to both FE and HE as distinct sectors with differing needs.
- 3.16 There were several notes of caution too. Whilst arriving at a common definition might be helpful, there was a danger that defining it too tightly could reduce innovation and remove the flexibility for different institutions to approach 'student partnership' in the way that best suits the

needs of the students. One stakeholder commented about how it is 'about trying to balance being fluid and reactive, but within a framework of core and common principles.'

- 3.17 Several interviewees also preferred to view 'student partnership' as an 'attitude', a 'mindset' or 'a culture' rather than a procedure. In this way it was less likely to become a 'procedure where we go yes, we've ticked the box now and consulted with students.' Student partnership was described as something much more nebulous, where people within the institution were thinking from the outset about how students would work with them to take something forward: 'It's about feeling part of the same community – it breaks down completely the them-and-us mentality'.
- 3.18 A couple of interviewees mentioned how the work of Wise Wales had been important in that it has demonstrated a commitment to student voice and to partnership and had helped shift HEIs and FEIs towards a partnership culture. Whilst the culture shift had started to happen, the focus now needed to be on the next steps.
- 3.19 To conclude this section, 'student partnership' is an approach and a culture rather than something to be defined in itself as an action: 'we don't define in a document what student partnership is, we have documents that outline how we will do student partnership'. The Student Charter document within the HE sector and similar documents in the FE sector set out guiding principles for how this takes place and what principles are used to embed student voice in a partnership approach to activities.

4. Key findings - effectiveness of student partnerships in Wales

- 4.1 This section aims to identify effective student partnership approaches across HE and FE in Wales, and considers what features help support this, and what areas makes the most impact.
- 4.2 A common message across FE and HE was that effective student partnership first and foremost needed to be based on trust and genuinely seeing students as equals: 'it has to be a non-power situation – you have to accept the alternative view as being equally valid'.
- 4.3 Sharing a common purpose to improve student experience was therefore seen as crucial for effective student partnership. Several interviewees spoke of the importance of all involved taking student partnership seriously, respecting opinions and valuing input. In many ways, interviewees described how institutional staff often had to have the courage and confidence to be seen to cede control. This is ultimately down to the individual lecturer or staff member but is also influenced by departmental and institutional cultures. Several examples were given of a new senior member of the strategic team (an FE Principal or Pro-Vice Chancellor) dramatically changing the culture and the importance given to student partnership within an institution.
- 4.4 Student representatives mentioned that where student partnership is taken seriously and is genuine, 'our contribution feels valued. I always feel like an equal partner in the room'. Similarly, institutional representatives consistently noted how there was a need to 'believe in your learners and trust them to be sensible and mature in their engagement'.
- 4.5 Students being able to access decision-makers and influence decision-making was also consistently highlighted as paramount to effective student partnership. This was discussed in two main ways.

Robust, formal structures

- 4.6 Firstly, having good formal structures in place was important to ensure that student partnership could thrive: 'good intentions are not enough'. In general, interviewees felt that at a strategic level, student partnership was now increasingly becoming embedded, certainly at HEIs and increasingly so within FEIs too. Within HE, students were consistently represented within governance structures, HEIs had formal student voice structures and course representative systems in place, student involvement in quality assurance processes was robust and there were examples across the board of student voice feedback processes. As one interviewee said: 'there has never been such a focus on student voice in the institution and having structures that work is important'.

- 4.8 Stakeholder views varied in terms of the current effectiveness of student partnerships in Wales. Generally, it was perceived by FE stakeholders that there was a more holistic approach in the HE sector to student partnership, with the student body and institutions working together to help embed a partnership culture and approach but it was also widely accepted that there are wide differences between and within all sectors, with examples of good practice in FE too.
- 4.9 One FE based stakeholder mentioned how it had always been difficult to embed student partnership approaches across the FE sector and that as part of Welsh Government funded work the NUS had wanted to develop a Quality Mark for learner involvement for the sector. Whilst Wise Wales have provided support to individual FE institutions, it was not felt that there was a clear forward work programme or the necessary capacity and expertise to take a strategic role in guiding the sector for the future.
- 4.10 Other FE based stakeholders felt that HEIs had more resource, investment, capacity and well-established infrastructure to enable strong student partnership approaches whereas it was perceived that FEIs were on more of a continuum with some more focused mainly on learner voice mechanisms to simply capture views, and others utilising more ‘mature’ approaches, more similar in nature to HE. HEIs were also thought to have more structured representation bodies, which were more embedded in quality assurance, and it was felt that they had a cohort of learners who were more able and capable to engage with student partnership (in terms of skills and ability to contribute to strategic developments and in terms of being more likely to be campus based).
- 4.11 A HE stakeholder view from outside of Wales was that the basics are done ‘thoroughly’ within the HE sector (student surveys, teaching and learning methods, feedback on actions, representation on staff-student committee type structures and governance). There was also a view that the HE sector in Wales ‘seem to genuinely want to be at the more mature end of the scale in relation to their student partnership approaches’. Again, two HEI based stakeholders referred to Wise Wales and the important role they had undertaken initially in ‘demonstrating a commitment to partnership’ and in shifting Welsh HEIs towards a partnership culture. However, it was now felt that Wise Wales had less of a role now because ‘the culture shift has been made’.

Informal opportunities for discussions

- 4.12 Even though the structures to support student partnership were deemed important, most interviewees also described how there needed to be good informal opportunities for students

and institutional representatives to discuss issues outside formal committee structures. For example, one University described how Students' Union executives and presidents were able to meet informally with the Vice Chancellor and Pro-Vice Chancellors on a monthly basis. Both institution staff and Students' Union representatives spoke about the 'ease of access' and how discussing strategic issues directly rather than through council meetings 'makes the top brass accessible'.

- 4.13 Similarly, an example from a large, multi-campus FE institution highlighted how they had picked up best practice from an Estyn inspection where, rather than the college meeting a group of learners in a classroom-based discussion, 'we now walk around the college and talk to learners in the canteen or library to get a more ad-hoc view on how well the college works. Student governors also adopt this approach during informal walks and talks with fellow pupils'.
- 4.14 Several interviewees also spoke about the importance of allowing a safe space for views to be expressed openly and for students voices to be heard (including those who might express uncomfortable truths) in order to bring about mutually beneficial results for students and the institution.

Embedding student partnership at all levels of the institution

- 4.15 Integrating and embedding student partnership at all levels of the institution – course, school or faculty, academic, student support services and governance - was deemed to be very important in order to make student partnership effective across all elements: 'student partnership has to start from the top and be woven into all levels within an institution'.
- 4.16 Whilst institutions have become better at strategic level, a couple of interviewees felt that there was a lot more that could be done in terms of raising awareness at a more operational level, or at middle-management level. There were also untapped opportunities for changing classroom practice too, with current examples existing in FE and HE institutions where students were involved in co-production of learning in partnership with teaching staff, but all too often these 'pockets of good practice' weren't shared or integrated more widely within their respective institutions.
- 4.17 It was also highlighted that having students involved from the outset of a new service or provision or policy development was important, ensuring that they were involved in identifying issues and designing solutions – working alongside staff at each step of the way. Interviewees felt that there was a lot of good practice at HEI and FEI level in Wales in this – with examples of students being involved in learning and teaching, quality assurance and governance

processes in innovative ways. There was a consistent view that institutions and Students' Unions would like more opportunities to understand and share good practice with others. At the moment this was happening in an ad-hoc and informal way. Wise Wales was again highlighted as having done some useful work in terms of providing examples of best practice, but that there was more to do here in order to maintain momentum and to ensure wider dissemination could be achieved.

- 4.18 To embed student partnership effectively, interviewees mentioned how a wide range of approaches were required to really gain student insight into strategic and operational developments in an institution and that there was a tendency to be too dependent on surveys and focus groups at times: 'effective student partnership is innovative – it is about always looking at new and better ways of engaging with each other'.
- 4.19 A few interviewees highlighted the importance of permanent staff at the Students' Union with responsibility for student voice and engagement – where their focus was on engaging with students effectively. Similarly, with FE representatives, there was a view that learners required a full-time post-holder responsible for gathering and disseminating the students' views – ideally in a funded Students' Union representative role.
- 4.20 For student partnership to be fully embraced within institutions and the student community, interviewees felt that closing the feedback loop was important. Several examples of this were highlighted during the interviews undertaken.
- 4.21 Interviewees felt that student partnership was beneficial for individual students in a number of ways. One interviewee described how it can provide valuable life lessons for students that 'they'll get out what they put in'. Several respondents also mentioned how becoming involved at any level of student partnership within the FEI or HEI will help develop invaluable and transferable employability skills for individuals.
- 4.22 Effective student partnership also provides benefits for the institution. By involving the students' viewpoint from the outset, better solutions are often achieved. Students' Unions also felt that effective student partnership 'prevents institutions getting away with being arrogant' and helps move to a position where a better service is provided within the confines of available resources.

External drivers

- 4.23 Generally, interviewees from across all parts of the PCET system felt that student partnership was increasingly being taken seriously, but some external drivers could help drive the agenda

forward and increase the pace of change. HE fee and access plans were highlighted as one source of evidence that can be used to consider the extent to which institutions regard 'students as partners' although ironically, a couple of interviewees were of the opinion that the plans themselves are not very detailed on the relationship and tend not to prioritise the input of students, with the timing for their submission being particularly difficult as it does not fit well with sabbatical role changeover. Chapter B5 of the previous QAA code¹⁸ was also highlighted by some in the HE sector as having been 'a bit of a driver' over the years.

- 4.24 Within HEIs, attempts to reach NSS thresholds or improve NSS survey scores around student experience had enabled some HE providers to 'get movement on [some elements of] our student partnership work'. In particular, interviewees mentioned that the NSS survey had moved HEIs to focus more on closing the feedback loop. Some FE-based interviewees felt that a lack of a similar national survey for their sector impeded the development of true partnership working or that it did not enable comparison across institutions to drive improvement and change. However, one stakeholder pointed out that whilst surveys can be good at capturing the student voice more generally, it is not a particularly effective way of measuring student partnership, simply because this culture and approach is more ambiguous by nature.
- 4.25 More generally, interviewees felt that 'students as partners' was increasingly appearing in communication materials for the HE sector – from a whole host of organisations and that was helping to influence and set the agenda. Interviewees felt that both HEFCW (for HE) and Welsh Government (for FE) had an opportunity to set the tone and culture and drive effective student partnership at a strategic level. Views from the outside of Wales was that student partnership was a focus here and that there was strength in being a small sector (both HE and FE) and an opportunity at sector level to work in partnership too. One interviewee pointed to Scotland and sparqs – with the enhancement theme work going on there impacting on the work of institutions too.

¹⁸ Chapter B5 is the Student Engagement chapter within the 'Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality' section of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. This was the previous Quality Code which has now been superseded by the version published in 2018.

5. Key findings – barriers to and opportunities for effective partnerships

- 5.1 This section focuses on the perceived barriers to effective student partnership in Wales and highlights any solutions to these barriers raised during the fieldwork.
- 5.2 It also considers the opportunities that exist to develop partnership working between institutions and the student body. It explores what student representatives in HE and FE want in terms of the partnership with the institution in question. Examples of good or innovative practice are also included throughout the chapter.

Diverse and changing student body

- 5.3 University life is changing and the HE sector felt that there was an increasing need to look at less traditional ways of engaging with students. In this respect the issues facing universities are increasingly becoming similar to those facing the FE, WBL and AL sectors. Students are increasingly living at home and travelling into their campus for study only. There is also an increase in part-time students, with a trend towards returning to study in later life at both FE and HE. In addition, it was highlighted that it was particularly difficult to engage with part-time students or those on professional programmes linked to their workplace where there are genuine challenges in engaging with the cohort due to the fact that they are time-poor and juggling various responsibilities. It was perceived that international students also tend to be focused on their education with little interest in engaging with student partnership activities.
- 5.4 FEIs noted how their sector has a less coherent student body and they need to engage with a more disparate group of learners. Within FE it was students studying at HE level that were proving challenging to engage with. More generally, FE and WBL tended to have a more diverse student body and shorter-term study periods. Some FE institutions, particularly those with a strong 16-18 contingent highlighted the need to engage with a higher number of young learners.
- 5.5 A few interviewees also mentioned the challenges that the FE sector in particular faced in ensuring appropriate partnership approaches were utilised so that the views of students with lower levels of literacy or those requiring additional learning support were also taken into account and that opportunities were developed to enable all students to participate fully. reaching those with low levels of literacy and numeracy at FEIs.
- 5.6 A pertinent issue raised by several HE institutions and Students' Union representatives alike was the nature of how the relationship between institution and student was changing. It was thought that students are become increasingly 'consumerist' in their approach to university life

– possibly attributable in part to the fees and funding regime increasing expectations on the part of students' part. As such, it was suggested that making students aware of their contribution and 'their role in working in partnership with the university' to promote the partnership agenda was increasingly important. Interestingly in this context, one Students' Union representative did not think that the term 'student partnership' or 'students as partners' resonated with students. One interviewee suggested that phrasing that communicating a message about 'having a say', an 'opportunity to input' and 'shaping' learning provision and services was more relevant. Another stakeholder was of the view that more effective communication was needed to ensure that students across the PCET system fully understood what was covered under the term 'student partnership' and that it is broader than simply an opportunity to voice an opinion or input a view.

Students' Unions and student representation

- 5.7 Student representatives from the HE sector identified certain barriers too. The annual cycle of sabbatical roles for student representatives is challenging for the individuals to come up to speed on issues and matters that are discussed at institutional level for longer time periods. In these cases, there is a reliance upon institutional staff knowledge at the Students' Union. This is even more difficult at FE level where student representatives' roles often have one-year cycles and there is even less 'institutional memory' and appropriate structures to support representatives.
- 5.8 Student representatives were also of the view that their own structures within Students' Unions was based on a model that was most appropriate for gaining the views of the traditional full-time, residential student. The nature of Students' Unions was deemed to be changing and they were also looking to adapt to the changing face of learners and looking to engage in less traditional ways.
- 5.9 Some interviewees felt that there was a general lack of awareness amongst the wider learner body of the student representation structures (such as SVRs and course representatives) and how these interacted with the Students' Union. It was felt that institutions needed to do more to promote these structures during enrolment and induction. Several interviewees also alluded to the fact that they perceived satisfaction in relation to the NSS survey question 'The students'

union (association or guild) effectively represents students' academic interests'¹⁹ to be low because students did not understand and appreciate the Students' Union's role in this.

- 5.10 This issue was raised by more than one university, with concern that the wording in the NSS Survey about how Students' Unions enhance students' academic progress was the 'wrong question' and that low scores were being seen across institutions simply because students do not see Students' Unions' involvement in this manner. Some institutions were beginning to attempt to address this by moving all responsibility for student representation to the Students' Union's office and communicating regularly with students about this aspect to try and increase awareness.
- 5.11 From the point of view of FEIs, one college representative interviewed felt that a lack of Students' Union presence at their college meant that it was much harder to embed student partnership approaches. The role of a Learner Voice Coordinator was thought to be critical in fulfilling the link between student body and staff at the moment, but that improved student voice support would enable more to happen.
- 5.12 Another FE interviewee acknowledged that more funding was needed if they were to move things forward: 'if we were looking to bridge the gap for PCET we would need to look at the money available to fund a Students' Union.
- 5.13 One FEI visited had a full-time sabbatical officer and this was a strategic priority to ensure that student representation could be embedded into all levels of governance at the college.

Awareness among institutional staff

- 5.14 Interviewees mentioned how universities and FEIs are big employers and that a challenge to effective student partnership is ensuring that all academic staff understand the importance of student-led teaching. Several interviewees could identify pockets of good practice within departments or faculties but there was a general acceptance that student partnership was not fully embedded across all academic or quality assurance practices in the way that it could. Contributors discussed the intense pressures on practitioners' day jobs meant that there is 'temptation to fall back into consultation mode' rather than engaging students in genuine dialogue and partnership and really seeing student-led teaching as a norm'. The multi-campus

¹⁹ The core NSS Survey questions for 2020 are available here: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/d462a46b-0eba-42fd-84a1-c8b6dc883c99/nss-2020-core-questionnaire-and-optional-banks.pdf>.

nature of many HEIs and FEIs also added to the challenge of ensuring awareness and dissemination of good practice.

- 5.15 One FEI described how it had been challenging for them to get course tutors on board with a more partnership approach to teaching and learning, particularly in terms of course representation changes at the institution. Whilst the senior management team saw the importance and value of securing effective learner voice, ‘tutors have been slower to take up the baton’ and the college had several courses with no student representation. Providing resources and a structure for tutors to use to explain and promote the learner course representative process had been important. As a result, it was felt that there was improvement year on year, with more students now willing to take on the course representative roles.
- 5.16 Interviewees at one university felt that they could possibly do more to involve students in designing action plans in response to findings that emerge from module evaluation questionnaires. As it stands, staff (and the module coordinators specifically) are charged with developing module level action plans and these are then rolled into departmental action plans. In their desire to move student partnership ever forward, it was felt that students could be more involved in this process. Similarly, it was highlighted by the interviewee that some departments had ‘dabbled’ with involving students in the development of modules, but that this practice remained ad-hoc and was reliant on the initiative of individual staff members.
- 5.17 Two other HEIs also acknowledged that student partnership approaches were not part of teaching and learning as much as they would like. They felt that academic staff felt worried that they didn’t know how to go about it and were reticent to try as a result: ‘You’re making me think. Maybe we need to think about some training for staff in terms of increasing understanding of the value of student partnership and sharing our own good practice in various faculties and departments’.

Closing the feedback loop

- 5.18 Another issue raised in both institutional and student level interviews at HEIs and FEIs, was that there was a tendency for student partnership processes which asked for feedback and input from the student body to be better at identifying practical ‘issues’ such as lack of car parking or issues with photocopiers rather than academic learning issues .
- 5.19 One FE institution described the challenge in relation to getting the learner body to move on from only discussing fundamental issues such as ‘the canteen’s food prices’ to more meaningful issues where learners can affect change within the college. In order to try to

address this, the college facilitated a discussion between learners and the canteen unit so that learners could understand why food was priced as it was. The co-ordinator observed 'it was a real turning point...they understood why things were as they are and accepted it...they moved on'. Since then, the topics of conversation which the learner body wants to address have broadened to things such as the environment, knife crime and period poverty. The main lesson has been the need to manage expectations and inform learners where they can and can't have an influence. It remained difficult to engage and capture student feedback about issues to do with teaching and learning. Because of this, the college is planning to break down college council sessions to place a greater focus on teaching and learning in the second term, once students have had some time to get used to their courses and to think about issues or improvements that might be made.

- 5.20 Managing expectations by closing the feedback loop, was also a common theme from HE and FE interviews. Whilst there are many requests for refurbishment, additional provision or services from students, these are not always possible to implement – for several reasons including the availability of funding or due to legislative or regulatory constraints outside the influence of the institution. In such situations it was important to ensure that feedback was provided to students not only on how suggestions and requests had been taken on board and implemented, but also to explain why some were not able to be delivered or had to be delayed.

Physical barriers

- 5.21 A physical barrier to effective student partnership was the dispersed nature of the communities of students across multiple campuses, and this was raised as an issue within both HEIs and FEIs. Student representatives were aware that they needed to be more visible across campuses and were working to ensure that students could access their representatives at all campuses. One small, campus-based institution was certain that their pastoral care and strong student partnership was manifold and deeply embedded simply because it was easier for them to develop strong student partnerships in such a set-up.
- 5.22 Distances between campuses and travel costs impact on effective student partnership in several ways. Student representatives felt strongly that students should not be expected to be out of pocket to attend meetings but felt that institutions often didn't think of the implications on students in having to travel to offices where there was no easy public transport links available. The Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol were very aware of this issue for their students and utilised

video-conferencing facilities or reimbursed travel costs to allow students to attend strategic meetings.

- 5.23 One institution described how they were making a more conscious effort now to ensure senior staff went out and about to visit various campuses and locations regularly to speak with students. Another institution described their 'speakeasy' approach where senior staff would visit locations where students could engage with them.
- 5.24 A consistent message from HE and FE interviewees was that there were opportunities to use more digital approaches to student partnership than was currently the case, and a few offered good practice examples in this respect which are included across this report. However, generally respondents continued to feel unsure about what digital approaches would work and would be grateful for guidance on this in future.
- 5.25 It was also felt that there needed to be opportunities to attend face to face meetings at times, and that barriers to such attendance should also be removed. Wales also has very remote areas with limited internet connection, and digital connection cannot be expected to be the answer for all student partnership engagement issues.
- 5.26 Finally, lack of confidence amongst students was also raised as an issue which hampered partnership approaches. Interviewees reiterated how important it was that training was available to students so that they could contribute effectively at meetings: 'Effective student partnership needs training, support and resources in place. Otherwise that stops things from happening. You need to get students to campuses, to offices. Just the practical things – students should not be out of pocket and they should have the tools they need to take part.'

6. Key findings - future development of partnership working in Wales

6.1 This section seeks to identify the priorities for the future development of partnership working in Wales that could be undertaken in the short-term. It also looks at how the main findings of the research could be taken forward into the PCET Commission at a strategic level.

Enabling student partnership in Wales in the short-term

6.2 For the future development of student partnership approaches in Wales, interviewees felt that there needed to be a cross-sector understanding of what student partnership entails and its key common principles – even though it was accepted that it is likely to be delivered differently and tailored to each setting. The visibility of students was deemed key in the future development of partnership working in Wales, with an expectation that individual institutions and national organisations working within the PCET system should be fully accountable to the wider student body.

6.3 Some practical solutions were offered during the fieldwork. Several stakeholders suggested that it would be useful if guidance could be developed that could act as a ‘framework’ or an ‘ambitious but realistic baseline standard’ for student partnership. This could also include a model for measuring the impact of student partnership working (particularly across the FE sector). However, it was thought such a framework should not be overly prescriptive as individual institutions wish to retain their autonomy to apply these principles as they see fit.

6.4 Several suggestions were made in terms of ensuring that student partnership approaches adapt to the digital age – particularly given the growing number of disparate groups such as part-time, distance learners, parents and flexi-learners involved. In this respect, greater consideration to digital communication was suggested, with opportunities for students to use modern technology to convey their views. It was also suggested that video conferencing and Skype options and face to face opportunities should be made more often with organisations such as HEFCW and Welsh Government so that the strategic decision makers were ‘leading by example’ by engaging and involving students as partners in their processes when developing strategy and guidance.

6.5 In the FE sector, a coherent and comparable learner voice survey was called for, in line with the NSS approach, given that the previous FE, WBL, AL and WfA learner survey commissioned by the Welsh Government had been recently withdrawn. The current Learner Voice strategy for the sector was also described as ‘outdated’ with a need to develop new

guidance on good practice in the sector. In addition, one stakeholder called for a National Ombudsman to provide final arbitration for learner complaints or issues.

- 6.6 Finally, stronger students' union/association structures across the FE sector was identified as a need. There was recognition that HE students have greater capacity and ability to support students and that there needs to be a stronger support system in place in terms of staffing in the FE sector. One FEI based interviewee suggested that Welsh Government might look to fund a dedicated learner voice coordinator at each institution to ensure that there is a dedicated effort to keep learner voice and participation at the forefront of the agenda.
- 6.7 Several interviewees also suggested that the development of Students' Unions with paid sabbatical officers was now a necessity and that some form of student representation, proportionate to the size of the institution needed to be considered under the PCET system. Again, the issue of funding was raised as a barrier here, particularly due to the variation in the funding provided by individual FEIs for student partnership related activities. One interviewee based outside of Wales commented that whilst Welsh HEIs and FEIs may not be 'as financially well-endowed as their English counterparts' it was even more important that funding and resources were provided by HEFCW to HEIs and from Welsh Government to FEIs 'to institutionalise student engagement'. Both HE and FE stakeholders in Wales also called for greater expectations from HEFCW and Welsh Government respectively on this matter, and that ring-fenced funding for student partnership across the PCET system should be considered in future.
- 6.8 A few FEI based interviewees suggested that an opportunity to bid for money as 'seed fund' to set up structures would be helpful and pointed to HEFCW's historical approach where money was ringfenced to develop structures to support student mental health and wellbeing. It was felt that a similar approach, across the PCET system, to fund activities that could push the student partnership agenda forward would be welcomed.
- 6.9 Many interviewees were keen to share good practice and felt that there needed to be opportunities to learn collectively from experts in this area or from each other, as well as exploring co-production opportunities across institutions. One interviewee suggested that setting up expert task and finish groups for specific work strands could be a good approach to look at various student partnership themes in order to develop resources and generate specific outputs.

- 6.10 The LVPN (for FE) was offered as possible mechanisms for introducing opportunities to network, share good practice and move the agenda forward in a more specific way for certain aspects of student partnership than is currently the case. However, one interviewee stated that this network did not meet regularly anymore and that the support they used to receive from NUS Wales was reduced, possibly because the funding for Wise Wales had stopped.
- 6.11 For student partnership to be sustainable, it was suggested by several institutions that more accountability for the work was needed: 'if partnership is going to be real, HEFCW [or Welsh Government] need to make institutions accountable' by requiring robust evidence of genuine student involvement through current mechanisms such as the fee and access plans. It was felt that this could be more robustly challenged. It was also felt that this accountability needed to be carried forward into PCET in future, and whilst it was recognised that this might be 'uncomfortable' for the sector and could mean more regulations or greater reporting there was also a general desire for more clarity on what the expectations might be and how institutions might be required to deliver on those expectations.
- 6.12 Training for student representatives was another area where it was felt that there could be better opportunities for the various institutions to work together: 'at the moment every institution is training their student governors in different ways' for example. Whilst various ideas were suggested the preferred method was to bring representatives from institutions together to co-produce online training programmes for student representatives e.g. on committee attendance or training for staff to learn how to embed good student partnership approaches into their teaching and learning. One FEI representative interviewed mentioned how NUS Wales had trained their student representatives to run campaigns, and that this had been helpful.

Future PCET Commission

- 6.13 Questions about the future PCET Commission proved difficult for interviewees to answer during the fieldwork. A lack of knowledge as to what the organisation might look like and how it might be structured made it difficult to offer concrete suggestions.
- 6.14 Despite this, the formation of the PCET Commission was seen to provide 'a huge opportunity' for 'joined up thinking' in relation to student partnership arrangements and support structures as well as for parallel funding mechanisms (for FE and HE) to be put in place. Stakeholders felt that it was important that student partnership is considered and embedded at a strategic

level, and that it needed to be a key consideration from the outset when setting up the PCET Commission: 'if it was a strategic aim, it would have to flow down through the organisation'.

- 6.15 Interviewees called for student partnership to be fully embedded in the PCET Commission's structures and processes from the outset (one interviewee mentioned how this had not happened when the Office for Students had been set up for example). Interviewees felt that the PCET Commission could play a role in changing and setting the culture.
- 6.16 Students from each sector within the PCET system must be involved at every level of the Commission and consideration should be given as to how student involvement could be built in structurally rather than being an add-on. It was suggested that the PCET Commission could look to utilise on-line methods to ensure that students could feed into strategic developments in a representational way (with the Open University's online forums highlighted as an example that could be followed). The early development of an overarching strategy for student partnership by the Commission would also be a very powerful message to the sector in Wales.
- 6.17 One stakeholder suggested that the PCET Commission should develop a governing document that adequately reflected the diversity of the sector and included student partnership outcomes tied to funding. These outcomes could be about having appropriate student partnership structures in place or evidence that the student body was influencing decision making at the institution. There was general agreement that the PCET Commission needed student choice and voice at its heart.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

- 7.1 This section sets out the main conclusions from the research and provides a series of strategic and operational recommendations for the development of student partnership approaches in Wales in the short and longer-term future.
- 7.2 From the desk-based research and the interviews held with stakeholders, staff and student representatives from HEIs and FEIs in Wales, it is clear that there is **regular discussion around student partnership** between institutions and their student bodies. Representation systems at both strategic (governing body) and operational levels (faculties, schools, departments) are widely developed. Student partnership is also **integrated into strategic decision-making** across both sectors.
- 7.3 The work of Wise Wales has helped to **embed an ethos of student partnership** within the HE sector, and to a lesser degree perhaps, the FE sector, and it has identified and **shared good practice examples** and supported institutions to **enhance knowledge and understanding of the principles of student partnership**. Similarly, the learner involvement strategy guidance by Welsh Government has also driven activity within the FE sector which has resulted in the sector utilising more innovative approaches to gathering students' views. Across both HE and FE, the ability to record student partnership outcomes achieved continues to be challenging.
- 7.4 There was recognition and agreement that the terms used or an agreed definition of what constitutes student partnership was ultimately not important. Student partnership in HE, and learner involvement within FE, convey the same principles and institutions are simply on a different point on the spectrum of student partnership activity. **It is an attitude and a culture that needs to be embedded rather than a prescriptive approach**. In many ways having fluidity and flexibility was deemed more important than the need to define student partnership too tightly – as it enables **student partnership activity to be driven by the needs of the student body and the institution**. There was a strong view across the HE sector in particular that individual institutions must **retain autonomy** to deliver in partnership with their student body, as they see fit.
- 7.5 As part of this research, some very good examples of embedded student partnership approaches have been identified across institutions in the HE and FE sector. Student partnership as an approach has been on the radar for a number of years and **a more nuanced approach is now emerging**, driven by many external factors: the prominence afforded to it via Estyn and the QAA, the desire to improve scores on the relevant NSS survey

questions (for the HE sector) and due to the priority it has been given by Welsh Government and HEFCW guidance. At an individual institutional level, policies and strategies consistently evidenced student partnership approaches at work. As such, the current state of student partnership, engagement and representation in Wales is relatively strong.

7.6 Several examples of particularly **innovative approaches** have been identified within the case studies (see Annex A). We would highlight the following in particular:

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

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

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

7.9 Whilst we have highlighted the good practice in the system, both the HE and FE sector generally felt that more work still needed to be done to increase knowledge and understanding of the concept. Across both sectors, whilst ‘student partnership’ was relatively well understood at a strategic level, **understanding of the concept and its underpinning principles at**

middle management and amongst academic staff tended to be more ad-hoc. Similarly, there is a need for institutions and Students Unions/representatives to **communicate the benefits of student partnership** to the wider student body and work with students to build them into decision making processes.

- 7.10 The opportunity to **ensure informal opportunities** and an ‘open door’ approach that allows students to raise issues directly with senior staff and to **access key ‘decision makers’** was cited as a key element of effective student partnership. Case studies highlighted several different approaches within FEIs and HEIs to achieve this from learning walks to ‘dragon’s den’ pitch opportunities and online forums. In the same vein, it is imperative that **the feedback loop** is completed and that students are kept informed of how their views are taken on board and implemented upon.
- 7.11 Timing is also key to effective student partnership: interviewees consistently raised the **importance of ensuring early student involvement** in the development of new policy or provision with **co-production** seen as the next step in this evolving agenda, building on the ideas of **students as ‘change agents’** and continuously improving and developing new, innovative and collaborative approaches to partnership.
- 7.12 This research has demonstrated an appetite within the HE and FE sectors to learn more about good practice in relation to student partnership, **a desire to build upon the good practice** that exists and to **disseminate more widely across the whole PCET system.** A series of recommendations are set out below:

Short- to medium-term recommendations:

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

Recommendation	For:
R1: a set of core principles around what constitutes student partnership should be agreed at a strategic level, in consultation with key partners, and communicated widely.	Wise Wales and its partners
R2: an increase in understanding of the principles of ‘student partnership’ should be encouraged across the sectors with a particular focus on increasing understanding amongst middle-management staff.	WG, HEFCW, NUS Wales, HEIs, FEIs

<p>R3: HEFCW and Welsh Government should create the necessary culture for ensuring that student partnership is prioritised within HEI and FEI institutions. As such student partnership should continue to feature strongly in HEFCW and WG communication.</p>	WG, HEFCW
<p>R4: Institutions and students' unions should communicate clearly with their student body about the benefits of student partnership to the individual, and to the institution.</p>	HEIs, FEIs, SUs
<p>R5: Distances between campuses and travel costs impact on effective student partnership in several ways. Institutions should consider the practicalities of where and how meetings with students are held, and ensure that there are easy public transport links available, video-conferencing options or adequate reimbursement of costs where necessary.</p>	HEIs, FEIs
<p>R6: A 'what works' conference should be organised at least every two years, with a view to sharing good practice and learning about international best practice. The Open University could also be invited to demonstrate how they are engaging disparate learners via innovative student partnership methods.</p>	NUS Wales, HEFCW, WG
<p>R7: HEIs and FEIs should consider more digital approaches to engaging with students and gaining their input into strategic developments. Pockets of good practice in this area exist but need to be shared more widely between institutions (this could be a key theme for a 'what works' conference).</p>	HEIs, FEIs
<p>R8: Whilst ensuring student representation in governance structures remains a key element to student partnership, informal opportunities for engaging with senior staff are also important. HEIs and FEIs should continue to seek opportunities to do this.</p>	HEIs, FEIs
<p>R9: In some of the best practice examples of partnership, the student is viewed as a 'change agent'. HEIs and FEIs should look for opportunities for students to co-produce strategies and practical solutions from the outset and to be involved in the process of bringing about change.</p>	HEIs, FEIs

<p>R10: Effective student partnership needs training, support and resources in place to enable all students to fully participate. NUS Wales should continue to be resourced to support the development of students for active participation.</p>	NUS Wales, WG, HEFCW, HEIs, FEIs
<p>R11: As Students' Unions develop or evolve in order to respond to the changing face of learners, they should continue to implement innovative mechanisms for engaging with the student body, ensuring that equivalent and consistent opportunities exist to access student representatives across multi-campus locations.</p>	SUs
<p>R12: The FE sector is at a very different point in its journey and requires support to build up adequate student representation structures and processes. FEIs should consider various sustainable models for student representation which could include paid sabbatical officers, students' unions and dedicated staff to support and enhance their activities.</p>	FEIs
<p>R13: A 'seed fund' to help set up sustainable models of student representation within the FE sector should be considered, with an application process that requires a clear commitment to continuing funding support to the structure thereafter</p>	WG
<p>R14: an 'innovation fund' should be established to fund joint bids across HE and FE that seek to embed student partnership. It should seek to fund innovative approaches into teaching and learning practices; digital engagement; student wellbeing and health and the development of training and resources. The fund should prioritise applications that include co-production elements and/or supports the replication of innovative practice from one institution to another. The fund should also look to prioritise applications that aim to increase cross-fertilisation of ideas across the FE, AL and HE sectors.</p>	HEFCW, WG
<p>R15: The Wise Wales toolkit has been a useful tool to benchmark institutions and provide a baseline. As the next step, a set of indicators that can measure tangible outcomes for and impacts on individuals and institutions as a result of student partnership approaches needs to be developed and adopted across the FE, HE and AL sectors.</p>	Wise Wales, HEFCW, WG

Recommendations for the PCET Commission:

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

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

Annex A – Student Partnership Case Studies

These are a series of case studies generated as a result of discussions held with staff and student representatives in a sample of HEIs and FEIs as part of this research. Further case studies have also been developed from documentation sent in by individual HEIs and FEIs following a request for background documentation relating to student partnership activity in the institutions.

This is not a definitive list – it is a series of case studies aimed at illustrating some examples of good or innovative practice in relation to student partnership that were identified during the course of this research. We expect that similar examples exist at other institutions.

Case Study: University of South Wales – Students’ Union ‘Change Week’

Stage 1: Feedback

On a single day in December, the Students’ Union officers, representatives, Student Council officers and course reps help the Student Voice team to gather feedback from students across all campuses. There are ‘change walls’ where students can leave their comments, and there are opportunities to provide face to face feedback directly to Students’ Union representatives and volunteers. Ideas and feedback is also collected online – on the students’ union website via an anonymous online system – uswsu.com/changeweek

Stage 2: ‘Lockdown’

The ideas are collated, and Students’ Union officers, and the Student Voice team analyse the feedback and choose the four most prevalent and demanding problems. These four problems are then looked at by teams of students who gather together to ‘hack solutions’ during participation in a ‘lockdown’. The students have 12 hours to solve the problems and design a pitch. (The additional feedback that is received is actioned out later to Students’ Union officers and staff).

In 2018/19 a total of 596 ideas were submitted by students. Of these, the four ‘problems’ chosen for discussion were:

- Students’ Union presence at all campuses – students wanted more SU presence in the two smaller campuses – students wanted more from their SUs, better signage and a space to socialise

- Microwaves on campus - students wanted to be able to access food heating facilities and water
- Make USW greener – students wanted to see more effort by the university to be environmentally friendly
- Employability opportunities – students wanted more relevant career opportunities.

Stage 3: The Pitch

Students then pitch their master plan to ‘a panel of senior University staff.

The SU website provides an update on progress for all four of the themes that were addressed in 2018/19. All the other ideas that were submitted are also listed, with details of who is responsible for the idea and when they last updated on progress – see: uswsu.com/changeweek/update. A traffic lights system is used to show when ideas have been implemented, are in progress or can’t be achieved (with reasons why).

Case Study: Coleg y Cymoedd – Embedding learner voice in corporate activities

The college has made a significant investment in time and resources over the last few years to ensure learners are included in the development of and investment in college policies, reviews, improvement strategies and activities. The Learner Involvement Strategy is the key document that outlines the approach of the college in this area and focuses on gathering views and perceptions of learners to inform change and enhance the learning experience.

Learner Voice is a principle focus for this and engagement is generally led by the four Campus Directors (Nantgarw, Aberdare, Ystrad and Rhondda campuses). However, all managers of the college are actively encouraged to make decisions and improvements with and through consultation with learners. Senior Leadership Team members also increasingly use access to learners to focus efforts on moving from Good to Excellent in their Estyn inspection and frequently access learners to inform Quality Improvement reviews and initiatives.

Examples of good practice include:

Corporate Strategies developed using learner involvement

- Strategic Plan 2019-2022 – development of Vision, Mission, Core Values and Aims
- MAT (More Able and Talented) – Strategy for unlocking and supporting potential in all learners (June 2019)
- Welsh Strategic Development Plan – developing and encouraging the use of Welsh, at whatever level, by everyone
- Quality Improvement

Engagement of senior staff members and other key roles

- learners have been regularly involved in the recruitment and selection of staff within the college including the Principal, Vice Principals and other key staff members

Corporation Board and Committee on which learners sit with Governors:

- Academic Board
- Curriculum and Quality Committee
- Equality and Diversity
- Sustainability

Learner involvement activities

- Ambassadors – meeting and informing future learners and parents of the benefits of college education and the offers of Coleg y Cymoedd
- Class Reps – easy reporting of concerns and access to staff who can intervene to develop change and new processes as applicable
- Learner Services Panel – direct access to report to senior staff on issues affecting learning within the college
- Learner Voice Parliament – linking in with NUS and Welsh Government organisations and their agendas for learners and learning
- Learner Voice Annual Conference – learner led debate on issues affecting Coleg y Cymoedd learners
- Student inspectors for Estyn – exposure to wider work experience as well as greater knowledge and understanding of learning and how it can be delivered
- Attendance improvement and reward initiative – learner input into moving away from attendance as a measure (impact of personal health and caring responsibilities) and a move towards progress made

- Induction process and content – reshaped the college induction programme to reflect what learners stated they needed to know as against what the college thought they needed to know

Case Study: Bangor University – Student-led Teaching and Learning Strategy

Through student consultation and partnership working, a student-staff steering group was set up to oversee development of the Strategy. For each theme in the strategy staff and students were identified to lead discussions and develop content. The strategy, from beginning to end has been authored in complete partnership with the Students' Union and student leaders.

The strategy includes several examples of where a partnership approach will continue to be embedded. For example:

- Each Staff Student Liaison Committee at the academic departments will take ownership of student input into curriculum design, ensuring students are trained and supported to actively contribute and make informed decisions about curriculum development
- Introduce regular Course Representative 'partnership working' sessions with School Directors of Student Engagement prior to each Staff Student Liaison Committee to increase support for course representatives and encourage diversity within meetings
- Widen student involvement in the interview processes for appointing student administrators, directors of student engagement and permanent full-time academic staff to further embed partnership working.

Students continue to play a key role in the monitoring processes via the Students' Union. The document is seen as an innovative example of their partnership approach at work and is unique in the UK.

Case Study: Glyndŵr University – Tell Glyn

Tell Glyn is an online feedback tool used by students to report back to the university upon any areas they are happy or unhappy with. It is facilitated by the Students' Union and enables

students to feedback on a wide range of areas. If students choose to give feedback on areas relating specifically to their programme, then that feedback is sent directly to the email address of the course rep on their programme. It is then the responsibility of that course rep to deliver this feedback at the next Student Voice Forum.

If students decide to give feedback on anything relating to operational departments then that feedback is sent directly to the email address of that operational department. Academic matters are automatically sent to the appropriate Associate Dean and the course representatives for that programme. This encourages Associate Deans and course reps to work in partnership to act on feedback. It is the responsibility of that department to respond directly to that student in order to close the feedback loop. Each operational department has a Tell Glyn coordinator who is responsible for responding to feedback and ensures the feedback is discussed at departmental team meetings.

Since Tell Glyn launched at the beginning of November 2017 it has received 425 pieces of feedback and a summary of the feedback is discussed at the Learning and Teaching Quality Committee and the University's NSS Working Group, co –chaired between the Deputy Vice Chancellor and the Students' Union President. The majority of feedback received through Tell Glyn was the need for improvements to the I.T facilities on campus. Working in partnership, the following positive outcomes arose from Tell Glyn feedback:

- Improved WIFI access points, with better performance & coverage
- Enhanced discovery and accessibility of Learning Resources through the Library Resource Finder
- Increased spend on books and electronic resources

Case Study: Pembrokeshire College – Learner Voice Coordinator

The FEI appoints a Learner Voice Co-ordinator from the student body to take on the role for the following academic year. The individual is appointed following an advert to all students and a formal application and interview process. The co-ordinator is tasked with engaging with learners across all curriculum areas and driving learner voice activity to ensure that the views of learners are heard and acted upon.

The role is a part time role (3 days per week) funded by the college itself and is considered a vital resource to drive forward the learner voice agenda, sustain momentum and ensure that the approach is embedded and maintained over time. The college has funded the role since AY 2018/19 i.e. this is the second year of its funding.

Having it as a dedicated role is critical – particularly given that other employed staff at the college get pulled into so many different directions and demands. The Learner Voice Co-ordinator has several duties, including supporting course representatives and facilitating the Learner Voice Committee.

The postholder has responsibility to promote and engage with the learner body directly and aims to do this in several ways, including via monthly events in the atrium on campus. These events are arranged in response to activities identified and agreed upon by the Learner Voice Committee. Past events have included mental health awareness events, climate change and knife crime awareness.

The role also involves getting involved in charity events. It is important for the co-ordinator to be seen by the learner body on a regular basis and to use creative and innovative tools to draw an audience at events. To aid this process, the college invested in a photobooth and a popcorn machine which are used at all events – the co-ordinator commented that these attract learners to the event ‘the photo-booth stands out ... and they smell the popcorn’, and associate both with a ‘learner voice’ activity now. There is a need to constantly think of new, creative ways to grab students’ attention be that a large visual attraction or something that is a bit quirky.

It’s important for the co-ordinator to have excellent relationships with both the learner body and staff within the college and can therefore be considered as a ‘go-between’ these two groups. It’s also important that the co-ordinator is a young person, someone who comes from the ‘learner body’ or has a background in youth work. Furthermore, the co-ordinator has an important function to broker relationships between external agencies and the learner body, including community groups, associations and membership groups e.g. LGBT community.

Case Study: Coleg Gwent Learner Panels

The Learner Panel meetings are chaired by the Principal and take place three times a year on each campus. A minimum of two Class Representatives from each School will be identified to attend the Learner Panel meetings. A preparatory meeting is held with Class Representatives on each campus, one week prior to the Learner Panel meeting in order to help them prepare. Care is taken to ensure, as far as possible that the Learner Panel has representation from a broad range of learners as possible e.g. full time, part time, higher education, work-based learning and 14-16 learners. During the meetings learners are encouraged to feedback openly on their experiences. The Principal and other members of staff then agree appropriate actions in response to this feedback. A Learner Panel Dashboard to display existing actions and tackles is utilised and 'You Said We Did' posters completed for each campus for display.

Benefits to learners

- Provides an opportunity to inform decision making within the college and contribute to the self-assessment process
- Provides an opportunity to talk about their experiences at college, which can help to improve their own and other learners' experiences in the future
- Contributes towards the development of their personal and social skills

Benefits to the college

- Helps the Principal to keep close links with learners, their views and experiences, and to strengthen our ability to deliver an excellent learner experience
- Uses learner views and experiences to influence important decisions
- Enables the Principal to check with the learners that agreed actions from previous Learner Panel meetings have been carried out.

Case Study: Gower College Swansea – Governance structures

Gower College Swansea has strived to strengthen student representation within the formal governance structures of the institution and has introduced a new role and decision-making body to support this objective. During this academic year, the college has put in place a Student Management Group to improve learner involvement. The college has also introduced the role of President of the Student Union.

The introduction of the role of President and the Student Union Management Group builds upon previous structures which were already in place where class representatives fed into the Learner Council as the college wanted to incorporate learner voice within everyday decision-making.

The first President of the Students' Union sabbatical role has been elected this year. has taken a year out from their studies to undertake the newly created role. The college recognises the challenges of distinguishing between operational and the strategic responsibilities during the early phases of the new structure. It also anticipates challenges in engaging with some learners and that further work is needed to represent the views of other key groups including WBL learners.

Unlike HE institutions, the role of the President and the Students' Union are integrated within the institution. There is no separate body or funding stream for this area of work. While there are strengths associated with such an embedded model, there is a danger that the role and functions of the President and Management Group are not seen as truly independent or separate from the rest of the institution. Staff recognise that the model needs to be slightly different to that of HE institutions, however.

Case Study: Open University – Student Consultation online forums

The student consultative structure is one of many ways in which the university listens to the student voice, making use of online forums and face-to-face meetings. By becoming a volunteer and participating, students can directly influence changes to university strategy and policy. The student consultative structure includes the following components:

University students' consultative forum

This online forum seeks and considers views of UK and international, undergraduate and postgraduate students on matters affecting their study and student experience.

- It is made up of around 300 student volunteers (aimed at being representative of the wider student body as whole) as well as 11 OU Students Association representatives.
- Staff, including tutors, are 'in attendance' to listen and respond to any comments.

- Student volunteers are recruited for one year.
- The consultation schedule for those volunteers can be quite busy - there is around one consultation a month.
- Each consultation has a dedicated forum, open for around two weeks.
- Normally only one consultation runs at any one time. Holiday and exam periods are avoided where possible.
- Student volunteers will be notified first that the forum is planned, then when the forum opens, is about to close and when the summary and response are posted.
- Students will be asked to respond to a series of questions and wider discussion on a particular topic. It is not expected that every volunteer posts to every consultation
- After the consultation a summary of student feedback is posted, followed later by a response detailing how that feedback is being acted on. The forum re-opens at these times for students to comment on the summary and response.

There are also one-off online ‘special’ forums targeted at particular groups of students to volunteer to take part who may have a specific insight into a topic.

A series of face-to-face and Adobe Connect meetings provide an opportunity for students to discuss key topics. These are a great opportunity to meet other OU student and staff and are held periodically across multiple locations across England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. There are between 20 and 50 places available for students at each meeting and face-to-face gatherings are conducted by staff in workshop style.

There is also an annual Online International Students Consultative Meeting - an online forum to seek the views of international students on matters affecting their studies.

The agenda for consultations is set by a group made up of University staff and representatives of the Open University Students Association. Any student can suggest a topic for consultation.

Case Study: NPTC Group– VocalEyes

VocalEyes is powerful digital platform that enhances stakeholder engagement and generates data which can be used by the college to improve practices. VocalEyes enables the college to

put its students and stakeholders at the heart of prioritising its decision-making and allows the College to protect its reputation online.

VocalEyes, which was described ‘almost like a social networking site’ for students and was identified as an innovative tool to collate viewpoints. The college uses the tool to ask certain questions (e.g. How was the induction process?) and then students can provide direct feedback ‘24-7 and 365 days a year’.

VocalEyes is used to:

- amplify the student voice through action orientated engagement
- enhance students’ experience and satisfaction by identifying and actioning their priorities as they occur
- deliver experience of active citizenship
- incentivise students to become more involved.

Students can also introduce their own ideas and allow others to rate (through the use of stars) whether they are good ideas or not. For example, if students say that they want more smoking shelters then they can gauge how popular the request is. While the college will need to find the right balance with the site, they want it to be a site run by students for students. The President of the Students’ Union and the Student Union Management Group therefore administrate the site. VocalEyes is there to be used to empower students to express their ideas continuously and collectively.

The real time platform that VocalEyes gives means that campuses divided by geography and location such as work based learners, apprentices, AL students presents no obstacle to involvement.

Case Study: University of South Wales - Student Voice Representatives (SVRs) structure and 'projects'

The SVRs work to enhance learning, teaching and student experience at Faculty level for current and future students. They have an equal say at Faculty level meetings, and give feedback to staff, propose solutions to problems and play an active role in the organisation and management of the faculty. It is the Students' Union that is responsible for training and supporting the Student Voice Reps across the entire University. The SVRs work closely with course representatives and the elected officers at the Students' Union.

Since 2018, each SVR decides on a project to complete during the year. These projects can look at a topic of their choice. Their projects are uploaded on to the Students' Union website and the outcomes achieved as a result of their work is also highlighted there.

In 2018, projects included a diverse range of topics such as:

- Evaluation of Loop (student feedback system)
- The International Student Experience
- Isolation and loneliness on campus
- Contract cheating
- Student union spaces and how to turn one into a 'sticky campus' (where students choose to spend time)
- Student participation in staff research studies.

As an example, the contract cheating research has resulted in the SU's Education officer running an academic campaign this year which will focus on the issue, and the student who conducted the research has presented the results of their project at two QAA conferences, and has been asked to sit on their Academic Integrity group as a student member, where they will contribute to the development of guidelines relating to social media advertising of contract cheating.

Case Study: Cardiff and Vale College – Feedback from students

The staff team at CAVC seek feedback from students through a mixed approach. By distributing leaflets and placing posters on different sites with QR codes, students can scan the poster with a digital device (e.g. mobile phone or tablet) before providing feedback through a short survey. With students attending different sites, this method has proved effective.

There is also a newsletter that is sent to every apprentice where they can again scan a QR code and provide immediate feedback on various aspects of their studies. While this was considered one approach for overcoming barriers, the college also facilitates focus groups with the 'school groups' and WBL learners that attend college occasionally.

Case Study: Cardiff and Vale College – Student engagement

CAVC have been effective in raising awareness through events and student representatives. The role of Liberation Officers was considered innovative, with the BAME and LGBT Officers notable roles. These officers lead on the areas of work and ensure that the students' voice is heard.

The LGBT Officer was proactive in establishing the LGBT Group this year for example. They also had an LGBT conference last year and a stall as part of World Aids day. They also started a transgender group last year for learners who were either transgender or about to transition.

It seems that this 'learner-led' approach encourages students to come together and support each other and talk about issues. One member of staff said, 'A lot of the groups are learner-led. If they come to us and ask us for something, I've not known us to say no. We work with the Wellbeing and Enrichment team. Events such as the Wellbeing Week include a lot of sessions delivered by staff and people that come into the college'. Staff described such activities as innovative examples, especially considering that students receive free fruit for a week. Students can also enjoy yoga, gardening club, sessions on managing stress, dance, and can even visit the college salon to get their hair and nails done.

The discussions with the team suggest that they are successful in meeting the needs of students and cover important topics. The college, for example, run three campaigns a year - they've just had their democracy campaign and will have one on the environment in January and another one on exam stress in May, when students are preparing for their exams.

Case Study: Cardiff University – Formal Partnership Project

In 2017, Cardiff University established a formal partnership project between the institution and the Students’ Union which is a student-led partnership approach focused on improving student experiences.

According to members of the team, the Students’ Union would gather around 8,000 pieces of evidence from students through the National Student Survey and a series of events during the university’s Speak Week. Each year the Student Union writes a submission based on their enhancement agenda – these might be things that are mainly not working for students as well as they want it to be.

The evidence is collated and themed according to priority needs and informs the Student Written Submission. This submission is then presented to Council, which sets out what the student body thinks the institution should focus on the following year. This is an interesting way of bringing the evidence and plans to life, especially as institution staff are accountable to Council for delivering the activities.

Following the approval of the projects, the university would then deliver the projects in partnership with the Students’ Union. The following table provides a flavour of the areas of work since the project was established:

2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancing the study environment • Improving the PGR experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate effectively with our students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Catering • Pastoral support for PGR • Transport and travel

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving the experience of students in BLS Schools at the Heath • Study-life balance • Academic representation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancing the personal tutor system • Academic support for learning • Developing student assessment literacy • International student journey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment taskforce
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Case Study: Cardiff University – Student Summer Placement Programme

Cardiff University run two student summer placement programmes through the Centre for Education Support and Innovation.

The Cardiff Undergraduate Research Opportunities (CUROP) offers students work experience, paid on an hourly rate basis, for up to eight weeks – to take part in a summer placement within any of the Academic Schools, working on supervision of research projects. The programme is considered one of the largest undergraduate research schemes in the UK. Almost 800 students have taken part in placements since 2008, working on diverse projects such as historical archival work, searches for new planets and cancer research. The Cardiff University Education Innovation Projects (CUSEIP) offers students the opportunity to work with academic and professional services staff on innovative projects that seek to improve the student experience.

Representatives from the Centre for Education Support and Innovation explained that CUROP is about students working on a research project throughout the summer whilst CUSEIP is a learning and teaching project. The discussions suggest that CUROP and CUSEIP help embed students within academic teams. One representative said, ‘It’s about students working in partnership with academics throughout the summer. It might be a research paper, or it might be a different type of project’. The project has proved popular with the number of students involved growing from 15 people in 2008 to 171 in 2019.

The team recognise that engagement can be a choice. By advertising the programme, the opportunities available through the CUROP and CUSEIP projects are open to all. In an effort to widen participation, the team have made subtle changes to CUROP in recent years. For example, they have increased pay, which wasn't much more than minimum wage initially. According to one member of the team, they have tried to make the project an attractive offer for those without a lot of money but need to work through the summer.

There is also a conscious effort to engage further learners by changing the way opportunities are advertised. Acknowledging that this area of work is still work in progress, member of the team added that they try to avoid having students that are 'cherry-picked' by the staff. Both projects are open to any students who haven't graduated. At the end of the project, CUROP and CUSEIP students are invited to showcase their work at a poster exhibition in City Hall.

Cardiff University have made excellent progress with CUROP and CUSEIP. There could, in future, be an opportunity to use such projects to lead to co-create and enhance teaching. This, in turn, could provide the opportunity for students to help shape/design what is happening in the Academic Schools.

Case Study: Pembrokeshire College – Course Representatives and Learner Voice Committees

The college operates a structure which sees learners appointed to the role of course representatives. These are elected positions whereby learners are appointed by their course peers to gather and represent their interests and views via Learner Voice committee meetings at the college. The Learner Voice committees are forums for elected course representatives to share learner views, identify issues and provide feedback to the college's SMT.

During Learner Voice committee meetings, course representatives agree upon the topics to be discussed at the next meeting and are expected to gather learner feedback prior to attending the next committee meeting. The Learner Voice committee is facilitated by a Learner Voice Co-ordinator and is also attended by senior College managers as well as other managers depending upon the issues being discussed. Course representatives are expected to provide the college with feedback, ideas and suggestions gathered from their peers.

At the start of the academic term every class elects a course representative. This process involves course tutors giving a presentation and handout to all learners. It is expected that all courses will have elected a course representative by the end of September. Course representatives are trained and provided with a handbook to help them fulfil their role. They are also given an orange lanyard to identify them to staff and fellow learners. They are expected to attend their Faculty Learner Voice Committee meetings on a termly basis where they present the views of their peers.

Feedback from course representatives suggests that this process works well. Learners thought that the overall structure for appointing, supporting and facilitating the role of course representatives at the college was well developed and strongly embedded into the institution's approach: 'it's all very organised ... from the initial talk given by our tutor ... to the election, the training, the learner voice meetings. It works really well.'

They take their responsibilities seriously and consider it a vital part of their role to ensure that they are gathering the views of all their peers. One was aware for instance that his co-

learners were in attendance on different days of the week and would make a point of consulting with them on different days of the week so as to capture their views: 'it's a massive issue for us ... we're all out on work experience'. They were also aware of the need to encourage learners who were possibly less vocal and less confident to contribute. One course representative explained that 'I'll tell them ... write it down ... otherwise you don't get anything'.

Learners also thought that course representatives were effectively utilised by the college in that they were asked to consult with their course peers and gather their views about a wide range of issues before taking those viewpoints back for discussion at termly learner voice meetings. One such recent exercise had involved course representatives being asked to gather the opinions of their peers on the college's proposal to designate the FE campus as a smoke free zone. Course representatives gathered opinions verbally and in writing from their peers, using paper-based questionnaires supplied by the college.

Another exercise led by course representatives during the last academic year had focused on gathering the views of learners on actions which the college could take to reduce its impact on the environment. Course representatives gathered learners' feedback, and this led to the college taking action to reduce its use of single use plastic and increase its recycling facilities. Representatives from the college's catering unit were asked to come and talk with course representatives at their learner voice meetings to discuss how its Starbucks franchise could reduce its use of plastic cups and adopt more environmentally friendly practices. Following discussions with learners, the catering unit agreed to customers being able to use reusable containers.

The Learner Voice committee also plays an important role in identifying and agreeing upon the activities and events which should be held within the college for learners. These events have included Pembrokeshire's Got Talent competition and a mental health awareness week.

Case Study: Pembrokeshire College – Student Governors

The college recruits two student governors per annum to contribute to the Board of Governance and some of its sub-committee meetings. These are non-paid roles and learners are expected to apply for the role.

The college's Learner Voice Co-ordinator plays an important role in promoting these opportunities to all Course Representatives. They are appointed by the college following an application process. This usually involves an informal meeting with those who express an interest in the role as well as a presentation to FEI senior managers and learner representatives, following which staff and learners vote to appoint the new student governors. Training is provided to student governors by Colegau Cymru and the College Board of Governors. Student Governors are also expected to undertake 'Student Walks' to informally meet with learners and gather their views about their course and the college.

Both current student governors are A level students in their second year at the college. They were both previously course representatives and had put themselves forward to be considered for the role last year. They noted that they had been required to present their case to the learner voice committee and had been appointed thereafter to the role. To date, they have attended one Board meeting. Their contribution at this meeting was to advise the Board on the most effective methods of communicating with the learner body – how best to get messages to them, what they noticed and what they were not inclined to notice. They have also attended one Board sub-committee meeting and were asked to provide some context around the college's A level results at this meeting.

Case Study: Coleg Cambria – Student Voice

Last year, Coleg Cambria was looking at the possibility of introducing T-level courses for Hair and Beauty. The practicalities of organising this with employers proved too great, but it became apparent during classroom viewpoint sessions that students liked the idea of a more synoptic approach to assessment rather than 'chunked' assessments of modules. Class representatives were able to feed this back directly to the course tutor.

Although the college did not pursue T-level qualifications, the course tutor amended the structure of the existing course to time assessments at the end of the year/course rather than their being undertaken at various points during the year.

Similarly, the idea of elite sport was being promoted at Coleg Cambria but the focus was very much upon sports such as football and rugby. Through the course representative and 'have your voice' facility, female students questioned why sports such as netball were not being promoted in the same way. Following improvements to the college infrastructure, more attention was given to netball and the college now has a team that competes at a national level.

Case Study: NPTC Group – Student Ambassador Programme

There are 28 Student Ambassador Scholarships available for new first year students. This is an exciting opportunity for students to develop leadership and communication skills.

Ambassadors are the student face of the College sharing their student experience by working with local schools, communities and organisations. To make sure that there is representation across all subject areas two Ambassadors are appointed per academic school and all campuses are represented. Students interested in becoming an ambassador will be able to submit an application form in October and if the application is successful will be invited to attend a short interview in November. The application form and details of how to apply are available from Student Services.

The Student Ambassadors that are selected will carry out their role from December in their first year to March in their second year. Ambassadors are accountable to their Head of School and will enter into a contract regarding satisfactory academic progress, contribution to College life, commitment, attendance and continuing on programme. Ambassadors will receive £200 will be paid in two instalments of £100, subject to a positive progress report from the Head of School.

Ambassadors will work alongside their Heads of School, Campus Managers, marketing and admissions team to promote the College in the following ways:

- Promoting their subject area internally and externally

- Supporting the delivery of promotional presentations
- Being available on open days/evenings, prize giving, taster days, school visits
Ambassadors are accountable to their Head of School and will enter into a contract regarding satisfactory academic progress, contribution to College life, commitment, attendance and continuing on programme and talks
- Working with the bursary, scholarship, trust winners and More Able and Talented (MAT) students
- Working with the Student Representatives and Student Union
- Welcoming guests and employers to the College
- Taking part in consultation and student involvement activities
- Mentoring and supporting new first year Ambassadors

Case Study: UWTSD – Student Case Conference

Despite having a formal governance structure in place where student voice is embedded, the University of Wales Trinity St. David introduced the Student Case Conference to help deal with certain issues. The session involves representatives from the Students' Union and the university coming together to review on-going student cases on Monday afternoons.

The conference was set up to deal with certain cases immediately. There is a clear focus on 'keeping everyone informed' and ensuring that issues don't 'snowball'. A representative from the institution stated: 'I think it was set up because things could be discussed in the open so we would have more consultation, communication and joined up thinking'.

Whilst the conference was borne from the institution's organisational restructure, it was interesting that there was a focus on identifying the key themes from the 'most complex cases' so that 'systematic issues' or 'underlying issues' were being addressed. One representative commented: 'Every student case should be an opportunity to address something and ensure that we don't allow it to happen again'.

Whilst the first Student Case Conference meeting was only held in July, the team have already noticed that it is something that adds value. With most committees meeting three

times a year, the team acknowledge the importance of establishing something that helps deal with issues almost immediately. Interviewees acknowledged that issues can become entrenched when taking things through the formal structures. One representative added: 'If you really want to affect the outcome, you can't wait for the committee meetings'.

Case Study: Bridgend College – Learner Walks

Learner Walks take place at various times during the academic year, with the purpose of sampling the views of learners in settings both within and outside of the classroom.

Learner Walks often focus on a particular theme that has been drawn from learner feedback (including Learner Surveys) or from the College's Strategic Objectives. Governors, managers and staff members in Curriculum Area Leader roles participate in Learner Walks, and findings are recorded on a proforma before being collated and analysed at both Curriculum Area and College levels. Any issues or examples of best practice that arise are then discussed at both management meetings and within course team meetings.

Case Study: Merthyr College – Learner Assemblies

The Learner Assembly provides a cross college forum where learners can contribute and have their say on the development of the college, their learning and their well-being.

Representatives for the learner assembly are elected in September of each year. The membership comprises representatives from each course group to help provide a fair representation across the college.

All Learner Assembly representatives receive training through NUS Wales and the college. Being a Learner Assembly representative enables learners to:

- Give their views on all aspects of college life.
- Represent the views of their fellow learners and class friends.
- Get involved in taking forward recommendations and actions for improving aspects of college life.

- Have an opportunity to contribute to key decision making, activities and events across the college, including providing feedback on the questions for the college's annual Learner Voice and First Experience Surveys, and any further ad hoc surveys, organising the college Prom and much more.
- Enhance their communication, team working and organisation skills.

Outcomes from the Learner Assembly meetings are collated and fed back to the relevant college staff, with subsequent action plans developed. Very often, this will also involve the relevant member of staff attending a Learner Assembly meeting to feedback to learners on the actions that have been undertaken in response to the matters they have raised.

An annual review of the Learner Assembly is undertaken at the end of each academic year. All representatives are actively involved in this review and evaluation process.

In addition, regular Learner Assembly update reports are provided to the College's Executive Team meetings and Board of Directors meetings.

Case Study: Bangor University – Student Experience Strategy

Bangor University has developed a strong partnership approach to the enhancement of the student experience to ensure that all student-related activity is reviewed and developed from the perspective of its diverse and changing student body.

The Student Experience Strategy has been co-authored by Bangor Students' Union and draws on evidence from their Annual Statements and data from the NSS and Postgraduate Experience survey. A university-wide consultation was also conducted so that feedback from staff could be included, and detailed discussions were also held with Directors of Student Engagement in academic schools. The Student Experience Strategy is also aligned to the University's Strategic Plan.

Bangor University has a Student Engagement Unit which coordinates student engagement activities across the University. The staff at the Unit work with Directors of Student

Engagement at the academic schools to develop and enhance student engagement through the development of innovative projects and student surveys. The Unit also works on the student feedback campaign 'TogetherWe' which highlights to students the importance of their feedback and explains how the University has worked in partnership with students and course reps to respond to student feedback.

Case Study: Open University – Kitemark Project

The Kitemark project is part of the Students' Association's 2017-20 strategy and proposes to introduce a University-wide Kitemark signalling that a project or programme has completed meaningful engagement with students.

A Students' Association volunteer and a team of students have been recruited to spend time on 'defining and refining' a measure to test several OU and Association pieces of work. The work on developing a kitemark continues to gather momentum.

Case Study: Aberystwyth University - Module Evaluation Questionnaires

Both staff and Aber SU representatives interviewed spoke of the importance of the Module Evaluation Questionnaire (MEQ) in garnering student feedback.

MEQs are administered online (accessible in various formats including via tablets and smartphones), 'in class' for each module, with tablets provided on the day for students who do not have a suitable device to access the questionnaire. This helps the university achieve a response rate of 'about 68 per cent' to the MEQ.

The MEQ process is administered centrally and responses are anonymised before being shared with departmental module coordinators. Core questions are modelled on the NSS and

are, therefore, consistent across modules, thus allowing 'forensic' analysis and comparison across modules. Departments are also able to add module specific questions.

Module coordinators set aside time around week 11 of each semester to discuss the headline statistics relating to their modules to emerge from the MEQ. This provides an opportunity to 'flush out any ambiguity' and identify options for improvement.

MEQ findings are also discussed at Staff-Student Consultative Committee meetings.

It was thought that students' becoming used to the MEQ process gets them accustomed to the style of questions asked in the NSS (with Aber, of course, doing well year on year).

Annex B – Stakeholder Discussion Guide

NOTE TO INTERVIEWERS

This topic guide is intended to be used flexibly and will not be used to ask questions verbatim: it will be tailored according to the participants' knowledge about student partnership, and whether their knowledge is in relation to the HE or FE sector.

Please note that the term 'student' is most widely used in relation to HE and 'learner' for FE throughout. This work has been commissioned using the term 'student partnership' but be mindful that other terms might be referred to, especially for the FE sector (which might be more used to the term 'learner involvement' and the topic guide will need to be adapted accordingly.

Context

OB3 Research has been appointed by HEFCW (jointly funded by Welsh Government) to undertake research on Student Partnership in Welsh HE and FE institutions.

The aim of the research is to carry out exploratory research to assess and evaluate the current state of student partnership, engagement and representation in Wales within HE and FE, including those who also deliver work based learning. The research will inform how this agenda is taken forward in the future.

The specification sets out seven specific objectives of the research as follows:

- consider the definition and approaches to student partnership in both HE and FE sectors inclusive of WBL in order to help establish a set of common concepts and terminologies that can support an integrated approach across the post-compulsory education and training (PCET) sector;
- assess the effectiveness of student partnerships across HE and FE in Wales, features that support this (e.g. staffing structures), and areas where it makes the most impact;
- consider any barriers to effective student partnership working and identify solutions to those barriers;
- highlight best and / or innovative practice in student partnership working in higher education and further education providers, including through students' unions or associations, and how this could be taken forward into PCET at a strategic level;
- identify any opportunities for partnership working between institutions and the student body;

- explore what student representative bodies in HE and in FE want in terms of partnership with the institution; and
- make evidence based recommendations for the development of partnership working in Wales, including in the development of the PCET Commission.

It is also recognised that the study needs to consider students and learners in all settings, including those in the workplace and community settings in addition to those based on campus.

Can I check that you have received the privacy notice in relation to this research and you are happy to continue? Yes No

Before I start the interview can I ask you if you agree to let me audio-record our discussion. The recordings will be kept secure and shared only with other members of the research team. We will do everything we can to observe your confidentiality / anonymity, and we will not quote you by name or business in any report.

Are you happy for me to record the rest of the interview? Yes No

Do you have any questions before we begin? Yes No

Questions

Definitions

1. What does the term student partnership mean to you? (*possibly: learner involvement=FE*)?
 - What does the term 'student partnership' include/encapsulate?
2. How does the definition differ, if at all between the HE and FE sectors?
 - What other term or definition would you use/prefer?
3. How do you differentiate between the following terminologies (if at all) between student/learner engagement...voice...representation...experience...involvement...partnership?
 - Probe for any other terms and explanations.
4. Which term/s are most widely used and understood within your sector?
5. How well understood is student partnership in your particular sector?
 - Probe for levels of understanding at strategic and operational level within the institution
 - Probe for levels of understanding within staff/students/learners
6. How (if at all) do student partnership approaches differ across HE, FE and WBL? What accounts for this?

7. Should student partnership approaches differ across HE, FE and WBL?
- Why do you say that?
 - In what way should it differ? Where should the focus be?

Effectiveness of student partnerships across HE and FE in Wales

8. (*adapt wording according to HE/FE focus*) How effective would you say student partnership approaches are in HE/FE institutions in Wales?
- What works well? (Probe re: student/learner representation mechanisms, collecting and measuring information regarding learner satisfaction, celebrating achievements, employability support)
9. What areas of student partnership approaches are most/least developed?
- Why is this?
 - Where are the main gaps?
 - What needs to be developed further?
10. What national guidelines and best practice guidance is there (if any)?
11. What constitutes effective student partnerships in your opinion?
- What are the key ingredients for effective student partnership approaches?
 - What are the benefits of effective student partnerships?
12. What support structures are required to embed effective student partnerships at institutional level?
- How effective are these structures in your sector within Wales?
 - How could these be strengthened?
13. What impact does student partnerships have on meeting the needs of students?
- (Probe for impact on student/learner outcomes/satisfaction/ experience)
 - Do you have any evidence to support this view?
14. What impact does student partnerships have on institutions?
- (Probe for impact on changing or feeding into institutional practices)
 - Do you have any evidence to support this view?
15. (*HE only*) How has the work of WISE Wales supported and developed student partnerships in the HE sector in Wales?
16. (*FE only*) How has the support from NUS Wales supported and developed student partnerships in the FE sector in Wales?
17. What else would help develop effective student/learner partnership approaches in Wales?

Barriers to effective partnerships and possible solutions

18. What are the main barriers to effective student partnership working in your sector?
19. Do you think that there is a difference in the type of barriers facing HE and FE institutions?
- Why is this?
20. How does your sector engage with 'hard to reach' learners within their student partnership approach?
- Probe for ways of engaging part-time/distance learning/disabled students and learners
 - Which institutions do this well?
21. How well are the needs of students/learners currently being met by the approach to student partnership in your sector?
- What could be done to improve student/learner voice in the approach to student partnership within your sector?
22. How can the barriers to effective student partnerships be overcome?
- What solutions can you suggest?

Innovative and best practice

23. What best practice examples of student partnership working are you aware of?
- Probe for:
 - institutional level in Wales
 - sector level (HE/FE/WBL) and
 - examples from the rest of the UK
 - examples that are student or learner-led
 - lesser known examples
24. What innovative examples of student partnership working are you aware of?
- Probe for:
 - institutional level in Wales
 - sector level (HE/FE/WBL) and
 - examples from the rest of the UK
 - examples that are student or learner-led
 - lesser known examples

Future development of partnership working in Wales

25. How should sustainable student/learner representative structures and processes within your sector be supported and funded?
- Probe for role of the institution vs. funding body
 - Probe for future approaches under the proposed PCET Commission
26. What type of structures for learner engagement and partnership would be suitable for the proposed PCET Commission itself (Probe for needs of HE, FE and WBL)?

27. How can lessons from best practice/innovative approaches be incorporated at a strategic level into the work of the PCET Commission?

- Probe about what would work and what wouldn't, and why?
- Probe for the key principles that should be considered

28. How could a consistent approach to learner engagement and student partnership be developed across the PCET system in Wales (i.e. across FE and HE)?

Ask for contact details for scoping interviews at specific HEIs and FEIs from Learning and Teaching Staff and from Student/Learner representation.

Ask for relevant contact details of any best practice/innovative case study examples of student partnership working that were raised during the interview.

<End: THANK THE INTERVIEWEE FOR THEIR TIME>

Annex C – Case Study Discussion Guide

NOTE TO INTERVIEWERS

This topic guide is intended to be used flexibly and will not be used to ask questions verbatim: it will be tailored according to the participants' knowledge about student partnership, and whether their knowledge is in relation to the HE or FE sector.

Please note that the term 'student' is most widely used in relation to HE and 'learner' for FE throughout. This work has been commissioned using the term 'student partnership' which is widely understood within the HE sector, but 'learner involvement' is the term used within the FE sector. The topic guide will need to be adapted accordingly.

Context

OB3 Research has been appointed by HEFCW (jointly funded by Welsh Government) to undertake research on Student Partnership in Welsh HE and FE institutions.

The aim of the research is to carry out exploratory research to assess and evaluate the current state of student partnership, engagement and representation in Wales within HE and FE, including those who also deliver work based learning. The research will inform how this agenda is taken forward in the future.

The specification sets out seven specific objectives of the research as follows:

- consider the definition and approaches to student partnership in both HE and FE sectors inclusive of WBL in order to help establish a set of common concepts and terminologies that can support an integrated approach across the post-compulsory education and training (PCET) sector;
- assess the effectiveness of student partnerships across HE and FE in Wales, features that support this (e.g. staffing structures), and areas where it makes the most impact;
- consider any barriers to effective student partnership working and identify solutions to those barriers;
- highlight best and / or innovative practice in student partnership working in higher education and further education providers, including through students' unions or associations, and how this could be taken forward into PCET at a strategic level;
- identify any opportunities for partnership working between institutions and the student body;

- explore what student representative bodies in HE and in FE want in terms of partnership with the institution; and
- make evidence based recommendations for the development of partnership working in Wales, including in the development of the PCET Commission.

It is also recognised that the study needs to consider students and learners in all settings, including those in the workplace and community settings in addition to those based on campus.

Can I check that you have received the privacy notice in relation to this research and you are happy to continue? Yes No

Before I start the interview can I ask you if you agree to let me audio-record our discussion. The recordings will be kept secure and shared only with other members of the research team. We will do everything we can to observe your confidentiality / anonymity, and we will not quote you by name or business in any report.

Are you happy for me to record the rest of the interview? Yes No

Do you have any questions before we begin? Yes No

Questions

Background

1. Tell me a little about:
 - Your role
 - Your involvement with student partnership/learner involvement
2. (for Learning and Teaching staff) Can you briefly describe your institution's approach to student partnership (HE) / learner involvement (FE)?
 - What does the term include/encapsulate?
(Probe re: relationship with student unions (HE), engagement in course representative process; communication with learner body, representation on governance structures; digital engagement, student/learner wellbeing and mental health)
3. (for student body representatives) How does the student body approach student partnership/learner engagement?
 - What does the term include/encapsulate?
(Probe re: relationship with student unions (HE), engagement in course representative process; communication with learner body, representation on governance structures; digital engagement, student/learner wellbeing and mental health)
 - How does the student body engage with the institution?

Student partnership/learner involvement at the institution

(Research Objective 3 & 4)

4. What constitutes effective student partnerships in your opinion?
 - What should it include?
 - What are the benefits of effective student partnerships?

5. How effective is your student partnership (learner involvement) approach?
 - What works well and what difference does it make?
 - What doesn't work well and why?
 - What best practice would you identify at your institution?
 - What innovative approaches are there within your institution?

(Probe re: representation mechanisms, collecting and measuring information; learner satisfaction, celebrating achievements)

6. What areas of your institution's student partnership approach are currently less developed/more challenging?
 - Where are the main gaps?
 - Why is this?
 - What are the barriers to developing these areas more effectively?
 - How can this be addressed?

7. What support structures are in place to embed effective student partnership/learner involvement at your institution?
 - How effective are these structures?
 - How are students/learners supported to enable them to be fully involved?
 - How could these be strengthened?

8. How well are the needs of all students/learners currently being met by the approach to student partnership in your institution?
 - Probe re: 'hard to reach' cohort – e.g. part-time, distance learners, mature learners, learners with a disability
 - What training/induction is provided to support student representatives?
 - What could be done to improve student/learner involvement?

Opportunities for partnership working between the institution and the student/learner body *(Research Objective 5) & Future development of student partnership/learner involvement at the institution (Research Objective 6)*

9. How well is the institution and the student body working together here?
 - (HEIs and relevant FEIs only) How would you describe the relationship with the Students' Union staff and student representatives?
 - What is working well?
 - What could be improved and how?

10. To what extent are current approaches ensuring that students/learners are fully involved in decision making processes?

- At governance level (e.g. representation at board)
- At course level (representation, student-led teaching)
- In terms of health and wellbeing

11. What opportunities are there for additional or improved partnership working between the institution and the student/learner body?

Future development of partnership working in Wales (*Research Objective 4*)

12. (*HEIs, Llandrillo-Menai and Gower only*) How can NSS survey results for Wales be maintained/further improved?

- What support would enable this?

13. How should sustainable student/learner representative structures and processes within your sector be supported and funded?

- Probe for role of the institution vs. funding body
- Probe for future approaches under the proposed PCET Commission

14. How can lessons from best practice/innovative approaches be incorporated at a strategic level into the work of the PCET Commission?

- Probe about what would work and what wouldn't, and why?
- Probe for the key principles that should be considered

15. How could a consistent approach to student partnership/learner involvement be developed across the PCET system in Wales (i.e. across HE, FE and WBL)?

<End: THANK THE INTERVIEWEE FOR THEIR TIME>