Student engagement consultation key findings

Contents

Key terms used in this report	
Student	Student refers to current school students, current students at a higher education provider and recent graduates (students who graduated in or under three years ago)
Students' unions	Membership bodies which comprise students at universities and further education colleges. The Education Act 1994 defines the role and purpose of students' unions as 'promoting the general interests of its members as students'.
The National Student Survey (NSS)	A national student satisfaction survey across the UK.
Higher education provider	A university or college with higher education provision.
The student panel	An advisory committee of the Office for Students' Board consisting of past, present and prospective students.
The National Union of Students (NUS)	A confederation of students' unions in the UK.
Sabbatical officer	A senior student representative within a higher education provider.
Regulator	A person or body that supervises a particular industry or business activity. The Office for Students is the regulator of higher education in England.

Acknowledgements

1. The Office for Students would like to thank:

Contributors from the following organisations who have participated in the consultation process:

- Brightside
- GuildHE
- Health Watch
- Imperial College London
- Ofwat
- Queen Mary University of London
- RAISE Network
- Student Minds
- The Association of Colleges
- The Association of University Administrators
- The Care Quality Commission
- The Competition and Markets Authority
- The National Union of Students
- The Student Engagement Partnership
- The Quality Assurance Agency
- The University of Surrey Students' Union
- The University of the West of England
- UK Council for International Student Affairs
- Universities UK
- Wonkhe

Student Unions, schools, providers and student panels who hosted workshops:

- Birkbeck Students' Union
- King's College London
- Notre Dame RC School, Plymouth
- The Office for Students Student Panel
- The Northern School of Arts Students' Union
- The Quality Assurance Agency's Student Advisory Committee
- The TEF Student Panel Members
- The University of Bristol Students' Union
- The University of Lincoln Students' Union

All students, student representatives, sector experts and members of the public who attended our workshops or responded to our online survey.

Our staff who have contributed to the consultation.

Key findings and recommendations

2. The Office for Students' (OfS) student engagement consultation ran from May 2019 to October 2019. The consultation was designed to inform the OfS's approach to engaging students at the higher education providers that the OfS regulates.[1] We wanted to know from students, staff and the higher education sector what they think our approach to student engagement should be.

3. This report:

- outlines the key findings from the consultation
- explains the approach we took
- details participation rates.

4. We consulted because:

- For the OfS to act in the student interest, engagement with students and stakeholders with expertise in the student experience is key. This will enable better regulatory decision-making.
- For the OfS's regulation to be robust, its student engagement strategy should be informed by students from across the sector.
- For the OfS to act in the public interest, it should engage effectively with a key stakeholder: students.

Consultation key findings

- Face-to-face engagement, effective use of surveys and clear communication should be prioritised for engaging students. Comments relating to these ways of engaging occurred more regularly than others.

- Students, and other participants in the consultation, think that engaging face-to-face is the most important way to engage. This involves talking to a broad range of students, including elected representatives and students with a diverse range of experiences.

- Not engaging with students is unpopular. In the web survey, we asked whether the OfS should engage with students at all. Over 400 respondents ranked the statement that the 'OfS shouldn't engage with students directly' as their least preferred option. Students themselves and the broader higher education sector are both clear that the OfS should engage with students.

- OfS communications are not fully accessible or of interest to some students.

- Just giving policy briefings to students' unions or representatives is perceived as insufficient to engage students in a way which has an impact.

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[1] Forming a student engagement strategy is part of the OfS's Business Plan 2019-2020 (see www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/our-business-plan/). The development and implementation of the student engagement strategy can be found on page 12 of the plan, work area 18.

- There is a lack of awareness of the OfS and our student panel externally.[2] For many web survey participants, completing the survey was the first time they had heard of the OfS.

- There are mixed feelings about the OfS's use of regulatory powers to support student engagement. Some students thought the OfS should intervene where providers are not including students in their approach to governance. Others were concerned with our use of regulatory powers to enforce student engagement. Some experts said that anything we publish in this area will be interpreted as a norm for the sector, stifling the diversity of engagement models. Other experts, however, encouraged us to use regulatory levers to set sector standards.

- Specific policy areas (around safeguarding or employability, for example) were not raised as often as expected. This could have been because the consultation focused on effective engagement, rather than on specific areas of policy.

Consultation recommendations

- The OfS should engage on the ground with students, visiting providers for specific consultation activities, and engage students more thoroughly in student-facing project work and governance, at all stages of a project's lifecycle.

- The OfS should work with organisations to engage with students effectively (for example, students' unions, providers and charities working with students).

- Student engagement activity already happening at the OfS (for example, the student panel) should be more effectively showcased in the OfS's communications.

- The OfS should review its approach to responding to data it receives about the student experience (for example, student surveys, the NSS).

- The OfS should consider how to use its convening power regionally, to engage students in different parts of the country and bring together students' unions, providers and other interested groups on thematic issues of OfS policy and areas of sector interest.

- The OfS should review its governance arrangements to ensure students are engaged effectively and appropriately, including looking at how to use student expertise (for example, sabbatical officers), and students who are representative of a certain experience (for example, a representative sample of mature students and part-time students).

- There should be an evaluation framework for the student engagement strategy, which measures the impact that student engagement and involvement has on the OfS's regulation.

- The student engagement strategy should engage the full diversity of students.

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[2] The student panel is an OfS Board advisory group comprised of past, present and future students. To find out more about the membership, see: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/who-we-are/our-student-panel/

- The methodology and findings of this consultation should be considered in the OfS's future general approach to consultations.

Key findings from student and staff workshops

5. Student and staff were similar in recommending from the workshops:

   - the need for clear communication
   - the need for effective use of surveys.

6. Students emphasised more than staff:

   - the need to have a physical presence on campuses and engage on the ground
   - the need to engage with students' unions.

7. Staff emphasised more than students:

   - the use of incentives to involve students
   - the involvement of students in equality and diversity at the OfS and in wider policy.

Survey findings

8. In the web survey, students emphasised that the OfS should:

   - talk to students face-to-face on campus
   - advertise at freshers' fairs and throughout the student lifecycle
   - meet with sabbatical officers to get a representative view and share information
   - engage outside of formal student representative structures
   - arrange public forums for students to comment on the OfS's work
   - work in partnership with other organisations
   - only collect data if it will be used meaningfully and transparently
   - employ recent graduates
   - have a digital platform where students can raise live concerns with the OfS.

9. Others emphasised that the OfS should:

   - talk to students face-to-face on campus to inform the OfS's policies as well as using data
   - run technical and research-led focus groups
   - engage with a wide sample of the student body, including sabbatical officers, and also wider representative structures
   - offer more student representation within OfS governance
   - talk to staff with student engagement expertise as well as students
   - provide student-facing information about the regulatory framework
   - involve students in personal ways (for example, through OfS 'student ambassadors')
   - engage with the National Union of Students (NUS) and students' unions.

Consultation approach and participants

10. The consultation was informed by a ***narrative approach*** to research.[3] A narrative approach is centered around life stories and experiences.[4] It was underpinned by a web-based survey, which returned quantitative and qualitative data.

11. The use of a narrative approach and 'on the ground' workshops alongside a quantitative survey differs from predominant ways of consulting at the OfS, which has historically been confined to survey-based quantitative research.

12. It should be noted that, in line with the Government's Consultation Principle (D),[5] (that consultation should form part, not the whole, of a process of engagement), that there has been wider engagement outside of the formal consultation process. This has included hosting a roundtable with sector experts, and having 1-2-1 conversations with sector bodies, students' unions and other regulators.

13. **There were over 700 contributors to the consultation**. It involved:

    - eight workshops with students, across four regions (attended by 85 students, including school students)
    - an online survey (542 respondents of which 256 were students or recent graduates)
    - six workshops with OfS staff (attended by 85 staff)
    - two workshops with academics and sector experts
    - six consultative phone calls and meetings with other regulators
    - a literature review
    - desk research into how other regulators carry out engagement
    - one sector expert roundtable.

14. Some participants in both the workshops and web survey did not volunteer their demographic information on our feedback forms, meaning that the recorded number of 712 total participants is lower than those who participated.

15. Some participants did not volunteer all their demographic information, meaning that the demographic breakdowns below are those that were volunteered, rather than a total breakdown from participants.

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[3] https://atlasti.com/narrative-research/

[4] See Technical Note 1 for more information.

[5] The Principles can be found at www.gov.uk/government/publications/consultation-principles-guidance. It should be noted that while this process was informed by the Government's principles, it was not an official government consultation.

**Overall student, OfS staff and web survey participants**
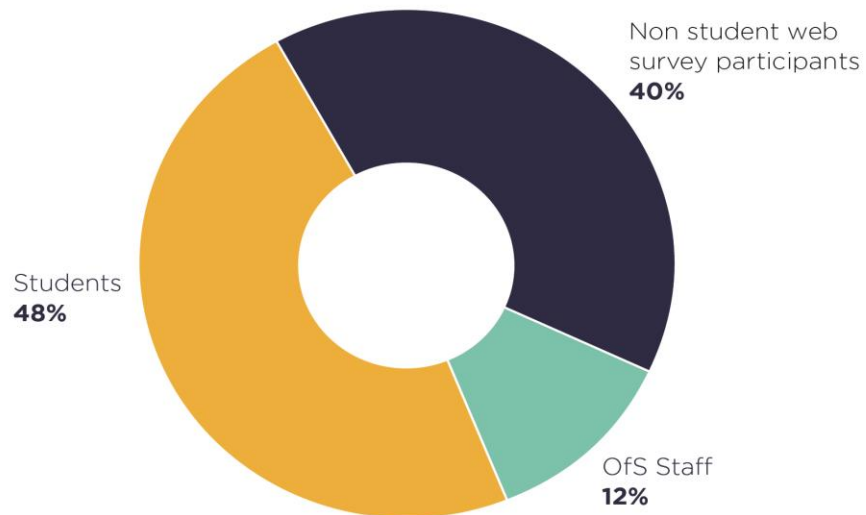
16. The number of participants in the consultation were:

- 341 students – the majority of these were current undergraduate or postgraduate students
- 85 OfS staff who attended workshops
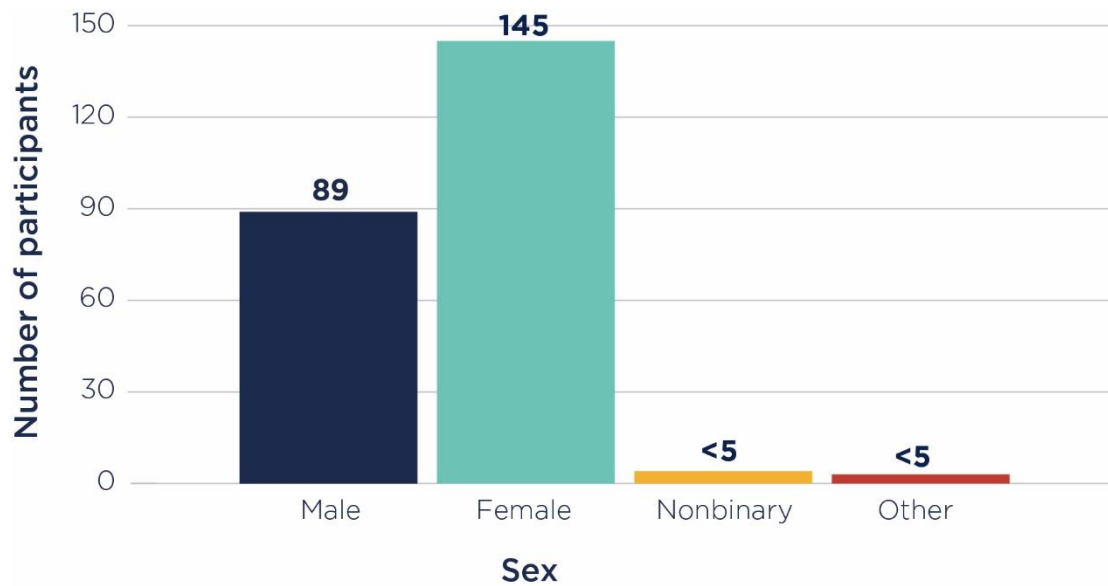- 286 non-student participants who filled in the web survey.

Total number of student participants by demographic

Student participants by submitted age
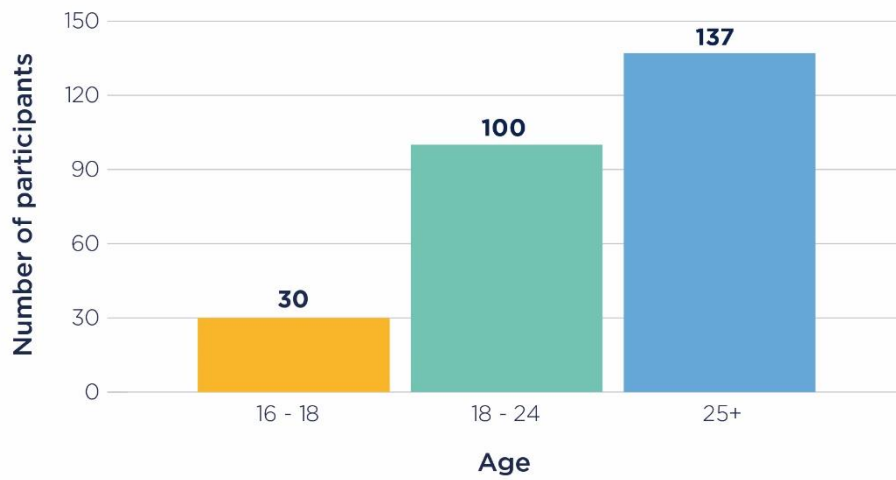
- 72 students did not submit this demographic data.
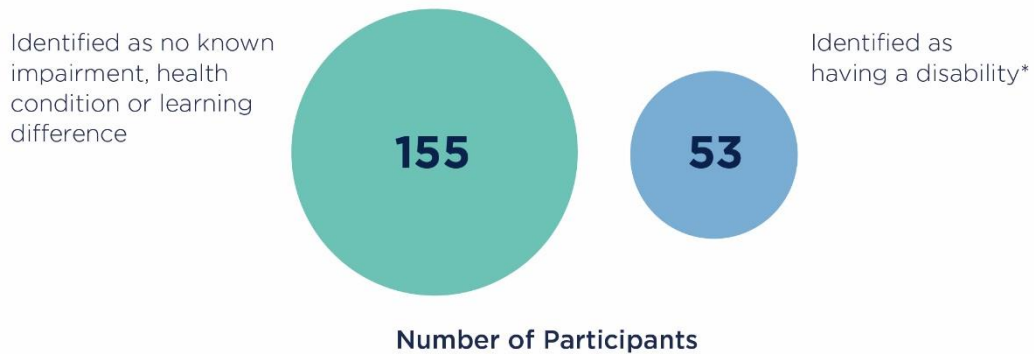
Student participants by submitted sex

- 100 students did not submit this demographic data.

Student participants by submitted ethnicity

Ethnicity	Number of participants
Arab	Less than 5
Asian or Asian British – Indian	Less than 5

Black or Black British – African	9
Black or Black British – Caribbean	Less than 5
Chinese	Less than 5
Gypsy, Roma, Traveller	Less than 5
Mixed – White and Asian	Less than 5
Other Black Background	Less than 5
Other Ethnic Background	Less than 5
Other Mixed Background	6
White	180
Did not submit this demographic data	127
Total	341

Student participants by declared disability

Identified as no known impairment, health condition or learning difference
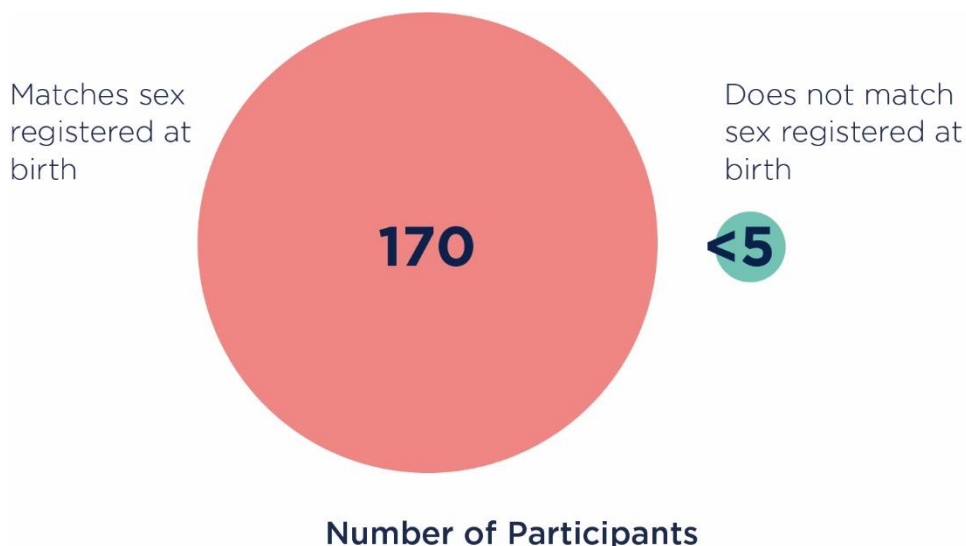
155

Identified as having a disability*

53

Number of Participants

*(long standing issue or illness, mental health difficulty, a physical impairment or mobility issues, a social/communication impairment, specific learning difficulty, an impairment, health condition or learning condition, blind or visually impaired, deaf or having a hearing impairment)

- 133 students did not submit this demographic data.

Student participants by declared gender identity

Matches sex registered at birth

170

Does not match sex registered at birth

<5

Number of Participants

- 167 students did not submit this demographic data.

Technical note 1: consultation methodology and questions

17. Across student engagement literature, there are different definitions of student engagement. We have not tried to provide an exhaustive definition; we recognise that the way we understand it as a regulator will differ from the approach providers take. However, there is a common theme in the literature: engagement is *relational.* Trowler (2010)[6] in her literature review of student engagement identifies three commonly occurring axes of engagement:

- individual student learning, student attitudes to learning and activity in learning spaces
- structure and process, such as student representative processes (for example, academic representation, students' union representation)
- identity, which involves how individuals can generate a sense of belonging or engaging with 'non-traditional' students (see Trowler 10-11).

18. A common feature of all these themes is that engagement is only meaningful in the context of a student's environment. This might concern their learning environment, which is determined by decisions made by their lecturer or in their provider, or how a student identifies with their institution or peers. Student engagement is complex and multi-faceted, intertwined with identity, place, learning and histories, and students are not defined by one relationship or aspect of their identity. Recognising this, we used our consultation approach to explore student relationships with their own identity and different student communities.

19. A narrative approach is '…closely linked to life history and biography, because like them it involves telling stories, recounting – accounting for – how individuals make sense of events and actions in their lives with themselves as the agents of their lives' (McAlpine 2016, 34).[7] As we wanted to find ways of engaging students effectively with the OfS, and recognised

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[6] See https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/hea/private/studentengagementliteraturereview_1_1568037028.pdf

[7] http://eha.ut.ee/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/6_02b_alpine.pdf

the multi-faceted nature of engagement, we felt that a narrative approach would work best since it explores biography, individual context and identity.

20. Eight student-facing workshops were the primary source for the narrative research. These workshops involved a range of students, including school students, undergraduates, postgraduates and recent graduates. They also involved different levels of sector 'insider' knowledge, with some students' union sabbaticals and 'expert' student representatives, as well as students who had little awareness of the OfS or of the wider higher education context.

21. All students involved were asked the following questions:

- Why did you become a student/student representative/someone who works with students? What specific benefit did you think you would gain from being one? (Story of Self)
- When have you felt listened to around an issue you care about? What were the features of this experience? (Story of Us)
- When have you felt rejected or not heard around an issue you care about? What were the features of this experience? (Story of Us)
- From your experiences, which positive things should OfS prioritise in its student engagement strategy from your experience? (Story of Now)
- From your experiences, what things should OfS avoid in its student engagement strategy from your experience? (Story of Now)

22. The questions employed were informed by Marshall Ganz's public narrative approach in community organising. Ganz argues that: '…when you do public work, you have a responsibility to offer a public account…' (Ganz 2007). The narrative questions Ganz argues should be answered for a public narrative were used to set the above five questions. Ganz argues that a public narrative requires:

- A story of self: why you were called to what you have been called to do.
- A story of us: what your constituency, community, organisation, has been called to and its shared purposes, goals or vision.
- A story of now: the challenge this community now faces, the choices it must make, and the hope to which 'we' can aspire.

23. Questions were informed by this approach to explore individual student narratives and apply them to student communities, and then to apply these experiences to how students should be engaged by the OfS.

24. An external web-based survey was also undertaken, which was open to students and external stakeholders interested in higher education. This was completed by over 500 respondents. The questions asked were based around effective mechanisms of engagement and the extent to which students should know about the OfS. The questions were:

- 'Of the following statement, which best represent your views? Please select all that apply in order of descending preference:
    o All students should know about the OfS.
    o All students should have some awareness of the OfS.
    o Students should be able to find out about the OfS if they have a specific interest in a piece of work.
    o Students should not know about the OfS.

       o   Other, please specify.

- How should OfS involve students in how it regulates? Please select all that apply in order of descending preference, with 1 being most preferred and 5 being least preferred.
    - o Talking to students on the ground while visiting universities/colleges
    - o By collecting data on student opinions e.g. through surveying, polling, online webinars, social media, to inform work happening across the OfS
    - o By hiring students/recent graduates to work on student facing policy areas
    - o By giving briefings to student representatives across key policy areas
    - o The OfS shouldn't engage students directly

- Is there anything else that the OfS should do to engage students? (Free Text Box)

25. The answers to these questions supplemented and reinforced some of the narrative-based questions about effective engagement mechanisms which students were asked in the workshops. They were used to understand views around the levels of awareness the OfS should aim for among students.

Technical note 2: analysis methodology

26. All workshop and survey qualitative raw data was analysed using MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis tool. Each consultation comment was individually coded from a set list of key themes. The key theme list was iterative, evolving from a pre-set list that the team developed to a longer list, informed by reoccurring themes. This meant the list could be developed from participant feedback, rather than organisational assumptions. As such, the consultation process itself, as well as its outcomes, has been informed by participants:

- An approach based on the exploration of personal narratives was used to shape the student-facing workshops, meaning our findings were informed by their stories and experiences rather than organisational assumptions.
- The thematic analysis evolved through consistent participant feedback, rather than organisational assumptions.

27. The words were then aggregated in the qualitative software into predominant themes, which form the key findings and recommendations of this report.