

# INTRODUCTION

## Foreword

We are, all of us, living and working “in an age of abundant data” (Daniel, 2015, p917).

This abundance is profoundly reshaping policy and practice across higher education, from the growth of learning analytics to the proliferation of student voice initiatives to emergence of the ‘sticky campus’, and much else besides. Data, or more accurately, the ability to engage critically with and generate evidence from it, is the price of entry into the debates and decision-making mechanisms driving (or resisting) change within institutions and across the sector. What we have seen in recent years is a “datafication of higher education” (Williams, 2018, p4).

The Evidence for Enhancement Theme (2017–20) is positioned to assist staff and students across Scotland’s higher education institutions as they respond to this rapid growth in the availability of, and demand for, data and evidence. The Theme has helped individuals and institutions reflect on how they are engaging with this swell of data and evidence, on important gaps and inconsistencies to be addressed, and on where new data-driven approaches to enhancing learning, teaching and the student experience might be developed.

As part of this work, it is crucial that attention is paid to how data and evidence matter (or could matter) in the work of the students and students’ association and union staff enrolled in systems of academic representation and service across the sector. Given their crucial role it is vital that these individuals and groups are supported to better understand and utilise the data and evidence they are generating and encountering through their work on institutional projects and committees, and as part of their efforts to maintain and develop representative structures and services.

This Guide to Using Evidence has been designed to do just this, to support and encourage students and students’ association and union staff to actively engage with data and evidence. It offers an accessible introduction to a range of key ideas and concepts and a range of activities which allow readers to develop their own thinking and confidence in key areas. The ambition of its authors, QAA Scotland and the students who reviewed early drafts, is that students and students’ association and union staff will reach for this resource as they prepare for committees, devise new campaigns, deliver services, and do all of the other things they do to enhance students’ experiences and outcomes.

Underpinning all of this is a belief that students themselves, the institutions they are working with, and the sector as a whole, are better served when students are, and are seen to be, agents in the ‘data landscape’, not just subjects of it. Engaging with this Guide will help students and students’ association and union staff to develop that sense of agency in themselves and foster it in others.

This Guide is a product of a student-led project coordinated by QAA Scotland as part of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme (2017–20).

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## Why is this Guide necessary?

Higher education is currently gripped by an ‘ethos of measurement’ (Spence 2019) which is directing institutional activity and guiding policy and practice both locally and across the sector. This is primarily driven by market forces, competition and the metrification of student supply and demand (Creative Arts Cluster 2018), which positions the evidencing of impact on student experiences as critical. Running parallel to this there has also been an increase in attention to the ways that data and evidence can be harnessed for the enhancement of learning, teaching and student support through institutional and collaborative initiatives, such as the current [Evidence for Enhancement](#) Theme. As such, those working or studying within higher education institutions are now exposed to continuous waves of data and evidence and have access at the click of a mouse to a plethora of reports and dashboards showing and analysing this in myriad ways. This includes students, especially those working with students’ associations/unions in the representative system and with institutions on projects and initiatives.

The phrase ‘evidence of impact’ is now well-known beyond the realms of scholarly research, and this is not necessarily a bad thing. Beyond consumerism, there are fundamental moral and ethical motivations for understanding what works well and what doesn’t, and importantly, how to make evidenced-informed decisions for positive change. However, the dominance of numerical measurement data (which is too often read in isolation from other kinds of evidence and interpreted in overly simplistic ways) within the sector has now spread beyond high level institutional comparisons and has infiltrated almost all areas of higher education. Evidence of impact must consider the variety of data sources which are available and can be used in relation to areas under investigation.

As the importance and variety of data becomes normalised within higher education discourses, the range and scope of potential data-users also expands. It is too often assumed that student engagement with the higher education data landscape is skewed to pre-entry and that data is only used to make informed choices. Once enrolled, institutions brief students on their engagement in data collection as data-subjects but dedicate less time to exploring how students routinely use institutional data sources, their own analytical data, or how student-generated data could be used strategically.

In recognition of the many ways in which students are positioned within the HE data landscape: as representatives; stakeholders; consumers; teachers; evaluators and informants; partners; storytellers; and change-agent (Trowler et al, 2018), this Guide will actively seek to disrupt the more limited notions of metrification of the student experience. It will highlight a range of evidence-informed approaches that can both empower student-led decision-making and also inform institutions of how to work more effectively with their students as collaborators for positive change.

## Who is this Guide for?

This Guide is written for students – undergraduate and postgraduate – enrolled in systems of academic representation, or as other institutional agents, involved in processes such as:

- institutional (university and students’ association/union) research and evaluation projects
- formal or ad hoc academic committees and student voice mechanisms
- developing and maintaining students’ association/union representative structures and services as Student Representatives or Sabbatical Officers
- internal and external quality assurance and enhancement processes (e.g. course validation and ELIR narratives)
- sector-level initiatives and projects (e.g. Enhancement Themes).

Additionally, this Guide will be useful to students and students' association/union staff who:

- are considering their engagement in such processes, who wish to find out more about what good practice 'evidence-informed' collaboration can look like and achieve
- want to influence their representatives/student voice mechanisms to help their institutions to use evidence more effectively
- are involved, or interested, in academic governance, who would find it beneficial to consider contrasting perspectives which go beyond established convention
- want to access or generate institutionally relevant data for dissertations.

There are also developmental outcomes for students, students' associations/unions and institutions which follow from engaging with this Guide. These outcomes emerge from supporting the leadership and positionality of students as 'agents of the data landscape', including enabling:

- students embarking on organisational change (strategic and political)
- personal and professional development of students (evidence of higher-level skills for employability)
- development of students critical thinking approaches to enable challenge at all levels.

This Guide will also be of use to staff members who may be engaging in data use in higher education and those supporting students through training (e.g. Academic Representation Coordinators).

## How should this Guide be used?

This Guide is designed in a series of eight sections which can be used individually or as a whole, dependent on previous knowledge and skills.

Each section includes content, activities and case studies to help develop your learning and encourage you to think critically about the content and its application. The aims of each section, along with the techniques to extend and apply your learning are outlined at the beginning of each section. A summary of each section called Evidence Essentials is provided towards the end.

There is an accompanying appendix with a glossary that explains the key terms that are highlighted in bold throughout the Guide. You will also find references and further resources, quiz answers and a 'Case Studies Revisited' section, which provide additional support.

Section 8 summarises key aspects of the Guide and will make the most sense when accessed after all other sections have been considered.





## References and further Reading

Daniel, B. (2015) Big Data and analytics in higher education: Opportunities and challenges, *British Journal of Educational Technology* 46 (5): pp 904–920.

Williamson, B. (2018) The Hidden architecture of higher education building a big data infrastructure for the 'smarter university', *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education* 15 (12): pp 1-26.