

Enhancing practice

Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience

Student expectations, experiences
and reflections on the first year

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Student expectations, experiences
and reflections on the first year

Bill Johnston, Rowena Kochanowska
Project directors

Preface

The approach to quality and standards in higher education (HE) in Scotland is enhancement led and learner centred. It was developed through a partnership of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Universities Scotland, the National Union of Students in Scotland (NUS Scotland) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland. The Higher Education Academy has also joined that partnership. The Enhancement Themes are a key element of a five-part framework, which has been designed to provide an integrated approach to quality assurance and enhancement. The Enhancement Themes support learners and staff at all levels in further improving higher education in Scotland; they draw on developing innovative practice within the UK and internationally. The five elements of the framework are:

- a comprehensive programme of subject-level reviews undertaken by higher education institutions (HEIs) themselves; guidance is published by the SFC (www.sfc.ac.uk)
- enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR), run by QAA Scotland (www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/ELIR)
- improved forms of public information about quality; guidance is provided by the SFC (www.sfc.ac.uk)
- a greater voice for students in institutional quality systems, supported by a national development service - student participation in quality scotland (sparqs) (www.sparqs.org.uk)
- a national programme of Enhancement Themes aimed at developing and sharing good practice to enhance the student learning experience, facilitated by QAA Scotland (www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk).

The topics for the Enhancement Themes are identified through consultation with the sector and implemented by steering committees whose members are drawn from the sector and the student body. The steering committees have the task of establishing a programme of development activities, which draw on national and international good practice. Publications emerging from each Theme are intended to provide important reference points for HEIs in the ongoing strategic enhancement of their teaching and learning provision. Full details of each Theme, its steering committee, the range of research and development activities as well as the outcomes are published on the Enhancement Themes website (www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk).

To further support the implementation and embedding of a quality enhancement culture within the sector - including taking forward the outcomes of the Enhancement Themes - an overarching committee, the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC), chaired by Professor Kenneth Miller, Vice-Principal, University of Strathclyde, has the important dual role of supporting the overall approach of the Enhancement Themes, including the five-year rolling plan, as well as institutional enhancement strategies and management of quality. SHEEC, working with the individual topic-based Enhancement Themes' steering committees, will continue to provide a powerful vehicle for progressing the enhancement-led approach to quality and standards in Scottish higher education.



Norman Sharp
Director, QAA Scotland

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Thanks to the participating institutions for their efforts in finding students to take part in the pyramid discussions and focus groups - a task which was not without its difficulties - and in providing details of first-year initiatives undertaken at the institution.

We would particularly like to thank the students who gave up their time to take part in the process for taking the exercise seriously and providing constructive feedback. Without their input there would have been no report.

I Introduction

I.1 Context, challenges and concepts

The material presented in this report is a distinctive Scottish contribution to the international body of knowledge on the student experience of first year in higher education (HE). The project reported is one of a set of nine linked investigations sponsored by QAA Scotland as part of its work on thematic quality enhancement in the sector and is one of two sector-wide investigations into aspects of the first year in HE in Scotland.¹ The student population reported here has not been investigated in detail before.

The research methods used are very different to the representative survey questionnaires which are staples of current practice in obtaining student feedback. This report summarises a wide range of discussions held with students in order to inform the Enhancement Theme. These discussions centred on the expectations and experiences of students in the first year and their response to the terms 'engagement' and 'empowerment'. We have developed a new concept of 'evaluative dialogue' to advance the practice of quality enhancement. We suggest its adoption more widely at course/module/class level as a means of obtaining better qualitative feedback that reflects the concerns of students rather than addressing issues identified by the university, faculty or department (see section 8.3 on page 55).

We set ourselves the task of listening to the authentic voice of individual first-year undergraduates from across the Scottish HE sector. Students were asked to share their individual experiences with each other and the research team. This was done through a series of pyramid discussions and focus groups which provided an illuminative snapshot of student views across higher education institutions (HEIs) in Scotland. The tone and shape of the discussions driven by the student participants followed a pattern of initial emphasis on the critical or negative, leading to a more considered and balanced evaluation of their experience. In all cases participants took the discussions seriously and constructively, and showed significant interest in both the topic and our approach.

The questions students were asked to address were deliberately open-ended in order to allow individual participants to drive the discussion and choose the particular experiences they wished to focus on. Interestingly, many of the views expressed by participants in this study are also voiced in the 'free-response' comments on the questionnaires administered to approximately 7,000 full-time students in 25 institutions across the UK in *The first-year experience of higher education in the UK*, published by the Higher Education Academy (Yorke and Longden, 2007 and 2008).

While the views expressed may not be representative of those of the student population as a whole, or of those of students in any particular institution, they help to illuminate understanding of the contemporary student experience. They may also act as a catalyst to focus local discussion within HEIs in their efforts to enhance the first year, in line with their individual institutional missions and strategies. If at least some students experience the first year in the ways described here, then readers should take note, while making

¹ Further information on the Enhancement Themes is available at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk

their own judgements about the views expressed in the light of other sources of information available to them at institutional level.

The varied patterns of student response reported here may reflect a mismatch between school and university curricula and standards, disciplinary differences and differences in the ability of individuals to meet the demands of university study. This is clearly an area for further investigation at institutional and degree course level, perhaps through the collection and analysis of data on predicted versus actual performance over the course of an individual's studies. This could support consideration of differences between specific kinds of HE learning environments and the degree of student engagement and empowerment experienced in those environments. The seven practice-based projects in this Enhancement Theme may throw further light on such issues.

The work of the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme should be examined against the backdrop of a challenging period for UK HEIs. Key challenges are the targets set by the Lisbon Strategy and the UK Government for increased participation in tertiary education, and in Scotland for all Scots to be lifelong learners, allied to an agenda for wider social participation, high completion levels, and an expectation that graduates will be able to demonstrate employability. Student expectations and experiences of HE, and the capacity of HEIs to respond to these expectations, are key questions for this period, as HEIs attempt to adjust traditional values, perspectives and practices to meet the new challenges. Equally, students' engagement with, and empowerment by, their HE experience are influenced by the need to finance the costs of study, mixing loans with part-time paid work, and balancing both with full-time study. These factors combine to describe the modern student experience in terms of a mass or universal system, powerfully focused on the needs of the economy, and placing a significant part of the cost on students and their families.

Scottish HE has several distinctive features which differentiate it from the experience of HE in the rest of the UK. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the long-standing four-year honours degree in Scotland, as distinct from the three-year honours degree in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Similarly the quality assurance regime in the Scottish sector is quite distinctive in the UK context, being driven by an ethos of enhancement rather than audit. The financing and governance of the Scottish HE sector, while closely linked to arrangement elsewhere in the UK, have since devolution in 1998 been subject to direction from the Scottish Parliament. This has had several consequences, most notably different arrangements for the financing of student participation. These distinctive features also play their part in shaping the modern student experience of HE in the Scottish sector and are reflected in the student perspective described in this report.

These factors create a complex and challenging agenda for change in Scottish HEIs as they seek to enhance their missions and strategies for a mass system, while adjusting to an increasingly Scottish 'state' apparatus as political devolution develops. Arguably this should offer an exceptional opportunity for HEIs to place the first-year student experience at the centre of their educational strategies, to fulfill their changing missions and to offer the best educational experience to their increasingly numerous and diverse students. Each of the challenges outlined above raises questions about the interactions between policy and pedagogy in HEIs as they relate to student engagement and empowerment. For example:

- How best should HEIs align recruitment and retention targets with demands for a more inclusive and economically relevant HE?
- What learning environments are most effective in engaging and empowering students?
- How are staff to be supported in bringing about change?

Perhaps the key questions are:

- What vision of HE is best suited to the modern Scottish experience?

And, by implication:

- What form of first year is most appropriate to that experience?

1.2 Key ideas in the literature

The first-year experience of HE, and the transitions involved, have been a focus of research, scholarship and practice for many decades in the USA and elsewhere. The work of specialists in the field is reflected in a substantial international literature related to the modern situation. This scholarship provides a guide to the nature of the student experience and the factors which exert both negative and positive influences on that experience. Interested readers can familiarize themselves with the substantial published literature on the first-year experience by consulting:

- Harvey, Drew and Smith (2006), *The first-year experience: a review of literature for the Higher Education Academy*
- Koch (2007), *The First-Year Experience in American Higher Education: An Annotated Bibliography*, fourth edition
- Gordon (2008), *Sector-wide discussion: the nature and purposes of the first year*
- Bovill, Morss and Bulley (2008), *Curriculum design for the first year*
- Nicol (2009), *Transforming assessment and feedback: enhancing integration and empowerment in the first year*
- Black and MacKenzie (2008), *Peer support in the first year*
- Miller, Calder, Martin, McIntyre, Pottinger and Smyth (2008) *Personal Development Planning in the first year*
- Knox and Wyper (2008), *Personalisation of the first year*
- Alston, Gourlay, Sutherland and Thomson (2008), *Introducing scholarship skills*
- Whittaker (2008), *Transition to and during the first year.*

Comparative information about our choice of method is given in section 7 on page 48.

Some key points have emerged from the substantial literature reporting research and practice which help to define what might constitute a 'good' first-year experience, and to identify the key characteristics of effective first-year curricula, pedagogy and support. These guiding points have been discussed at some length in recent contributions from around the world (full citation can be found in the references section on page 57):

- Cook (2003)
- Kift (2004, 2005)
- Krause et al (2005)
- Macinnis and James (1995)
- Tinto (2002)
- Yorke and Longden (2007)
- Yorke and Longden (2008)

The main points highlighted in the literature can be summarised as follows:

Nature of first year in higher education (FYHE) and transition:

- a critical formative period described in terms of challenge and change in academic, social and domestic/financial circumstances
- change involves issues of cultural adaptation, social integration and self efficacy
- specific difficulties are identified in adapting to academic rigour, writing conventions, numeracy, time management and self regulation
- difficulty attributed to inadequate preparation, mismatch in student/staff expectations, and the effectiveness of communication/feedback
- diversity in backgrounds and the needs of special populations regarded as significant features
- notions of student assimilation, adjustment, engagement and empowerment are proposed as concepts to explain and drive enhancement and evaluation of FYHE.

Responses and measures:

- orientation events and information dissemination
- induction programmes to introduce staff/student roles, rights and responsibilities
- familiarisation of students with academic rigour, for example preparation for examinations, nature of critical thinking and differences from school/college
- skills building programmes, particularly C&IT, academic writing and numeracy
- student collaboration within courses and development of learning communities
- supplemental instruction/peer-assisted study sessions
- ongoing advice on course choice and change options
- 'at risk' monitoring
- personal tutoring and mentoring
- remedial tuition
- increasing interest in 'whole course' redesign using the idea of 'constructive alignment'.

Institutional factors:

- emphasis on retention and progression rates
- advocacy of commitment to holistic enhancement of the student experience, as opposed to fragmented initiatives
- focus on pre-entry, preparedness for study and systematic, and year-long induction
- advocacy of strong links between academic, student support and educational development processes.

Curriculum factors:

- advocacy of curriculum renewal to develop powerful learning environments with clear relevance to students' lives rather than ad hoc modifications of courses
- need to treat courses as social settings to engage collaborative learning and overcome disengagement
- emphasis on clear performance expectations and early formative assessment
- allocation of significant resources to the first year.

Pedagogical implications:

- emphasis on students learning by constructing meanings, and developing reflection and academic self-regulation
- emphasis on personal development and self efficacy
- increased interest in assessment generally, and peer and self-assessment in particular.

Taken together these ideas suggest a multi-level approach to the first year involving institutional leaders and academics as well as service professionals, with a significant uplift in the status of the first year in institutional decision making and resource allocation. In effect these approaches advocate a step change in the attention paid to the first year at all levels within institutions.

This brief distillation of the major points highlighted in the literature is intended to aid reflection on the picture of the first year in Scottish HE, which we detail in this report. The question is, do the student voices reported here suggest that the points outlined above chime with the current experiences of first-year students?

2 Aim and method

2.1 Aim

The primary aim of this study was to investigate how best to encourage student engagement and empowerment by gaining a clearer understanding of students' expectations and experience of the first year of undergraduate study - both at an institutional and at national (Scottish) level - in order to assist the sector in improving that student experience.

The study also surveyed how institutions sought and used feedback from their students, and sought information on first-year initiatives and examples of good practice at institutional level which could be shared across the sector.

A brief introduction is given to national student surveys conducted in the UK (National Student Survey), the USA (National Survey of Student Engagement) and Australia (Course Experience Questionnaire).

2.2 Method

Meetings were held with undergraduates from across a wide range of disciplines in 16 of the 20 HEIs across Scotland. The meetings with students were intended as an opportunity for in-depth discussion with individual students about their perceptions of first year. As such our discussions provided a snapshot in time of the first-year experience across the Scottish HE sector. Discussions were intended to provide qualitative rather than quantitative information on the student experience of the first year in Scottish HE, as seen from the student perspective. Each meeting consisted of both pyramid discussions and a focus group session.

In the pyramid discussions, students were asked to respond in writing to three prompt questions. They then joined together in groups of between four and six students to discuss the issues further and to produce an agreed group response. These written small group responses were discussed by the whole group and a record was taken of the whole group discussion by one of the project team members. In this way we sought to mitigate the effects of group discussions (where the voice of particular individuals can dominate) by ensuring that the views of individual students were also recorded. Written individual and group responses were colour coded to assist in the collation and analysis of the information. The pyramid discussion phase took approximately 45 minutes to an hour.

Students were then invited to take part in a focus group discussion on engagement and empowerment. The focus group discussions also took approximately 45 minutes.

2.3 Ethical approval

The Teaching and Learning Committee of Universities Scotland agreed that, for the purposes of this study, ethical approval could be sought from the University of Strathclyde and that the outcome would be accepted by the sector as a whole. Ethical approval was therefore sought from, and granted by, the Ethics Committee of the University of Strathclyde prior to the start of the full study.

2.4 Project team

The project team was based at the University of Strathclyde and was directed by Bill Johnston of the Centre for Academic Practice and Learning Enhancement and Rowena Kochanowska from the Academic Office. The other team members were: Darren Matthews, Democratic Services Coordinator at the University of Strathclyde Students' Association (USSA), Katy McCloskey, immediate past president of USSA and current student at the University of Strathclyde, and Tim Cobbett from the University of Edinburgh Students' Association.

3 Institutional visits

3.1 Participating institutions and timing of visits

The initial pilot meeting at the University of Strathclyde was conducted in November 2006. A first round of meetings was held at the following institutions during the second semester of the 2006-07 academic session, between March and May 2007²:

- Edinburgh College of Art
- Glasgow School of Art
- Perth College (UHI)
- Queen Margaret University College³
- Scottish Agricultural College
- University of Aberdeen
- University of Abertay
- University of Edinburgh
- University of Stirling

Meetings were conducted in the first semester of the 2007-08 academic session, between October and December 2007, with students at:

- The Robert Gordon University
- Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama
- Glasgow Caledonian University
- University of Dundee
- University of Glasgow

Unfortunately it was not possible to arrange meetings with students at the Open University (Scotland), the University of the West of Scotland (at the start of the study the University of Paisley and Bell College were still separate institutions), Heriot-Watt University, and Napier University.⁴ Heriot-Watt, Napier and both the University of Paisley and Bell College did, however, provide information about the opportunities within the institution for feedback on the first-year experience, the use of this information within the institution and on particular first-year initiatives which had been developed within the institution. The Open University had used some of the institutional funding provided by the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme to conduct an in-depth online survey of the experience of its first-year students. It allowed us to see its report on *The first year experience of ODL students: a review*, prepared by Susan Levy and Janet Macdonald in July 2007.

² The University of St Andrews asked for the responses from its students not to be included as the participation rate was felt to be insufficient.

³ Now Queen Margaret University.

⁴ Now Edinburgh Napier University.

3.2 Meetings with students

Each meeting consisted of:

- pyramid discussions on the students' expectations and experience of HE (lasting approximately 45 minutes)
- focus group discussion (lasting approximately 45 minutes) on what students understand by the terms 'engagement' and 'empowerment'.

Our aim was to engage with students on a voluntary basis so that they offered their time and efforts out of a genuine interest in contributing to the project. At all points it was made clear that this was a voluntary exercise from which they could withdraw at any point. Each student was asked to sign a consent form in advance of the discussion. While not all students who participated in the pyramid discussions stayed for the focus group discussion, most chose to do so.

Both the pyramid discussions and the focus groups sought to elicit the issues of greatest concern to the students themselves, rather than seeking a response to issues which had been identified by the Steering Committee, ourselves or the other project directors. Consequently the prompts used as the starting point for the pyramid discussions were very open-ended:

- What influenced you to come to university?
- What keeps you going?
- What are the differences between your expectations and the experience?
- Give three suggestions for improving the first-year experience.

Similarly, in the focus group discussions, no explanation of the terms 'engagement' and 'empowerment' was offered by the project team. Participants were invited to define these terms for themselves. By and large, participants in the focus groups found it easier to talk in terms of what is 'disengaging' or 'disempowering' about their university experience and discussion of the two areas tended to overlap.

3.3 Profile of participants

Institutions were asked to invite participation from first-year students from across a wide range of disciplines and with a wide range of backgrounds (gender, ethnicity, disability, mode of study, school/college leaver, mature student and so on). Some students from subsequent years of study were also included in the study to provide the benefit of hindsight. All participating students took the process very seriously and shared their views and experiences frankly and openly.

Participants were given an opportunity to comment on the initial draft of the sector-wide report and the comments received were taken into account in the final version.

A total of 170 students took part in the discussions. The smallest group consisted of five students and the largest of 20 students. The average group size was of 11 students.

3.3.1 Gender

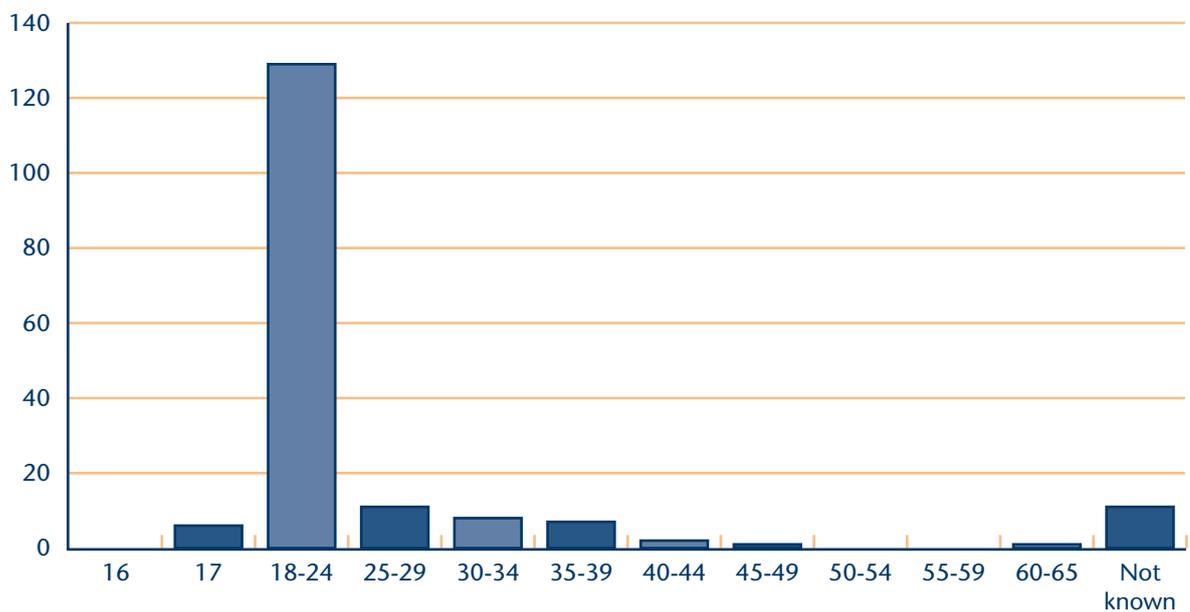
97 of those who took part in the discussions were female, 72 were male. One student did not provide this information.

3.3.2 Mode of study

165 of the participants were full-time students, one was a part-time student. Three students did not provide this information.

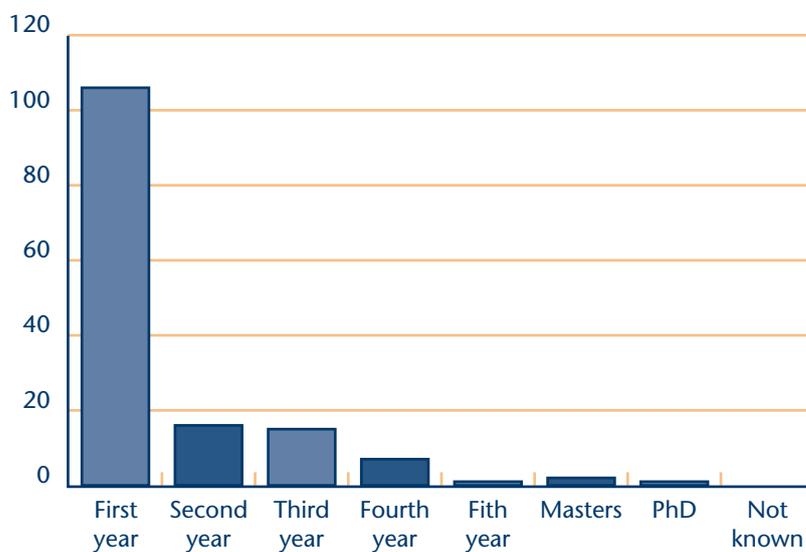
3.3.3 Age range

The youngest student interviewed was 17 and the oldest was 62.



3.3.4 Year of study

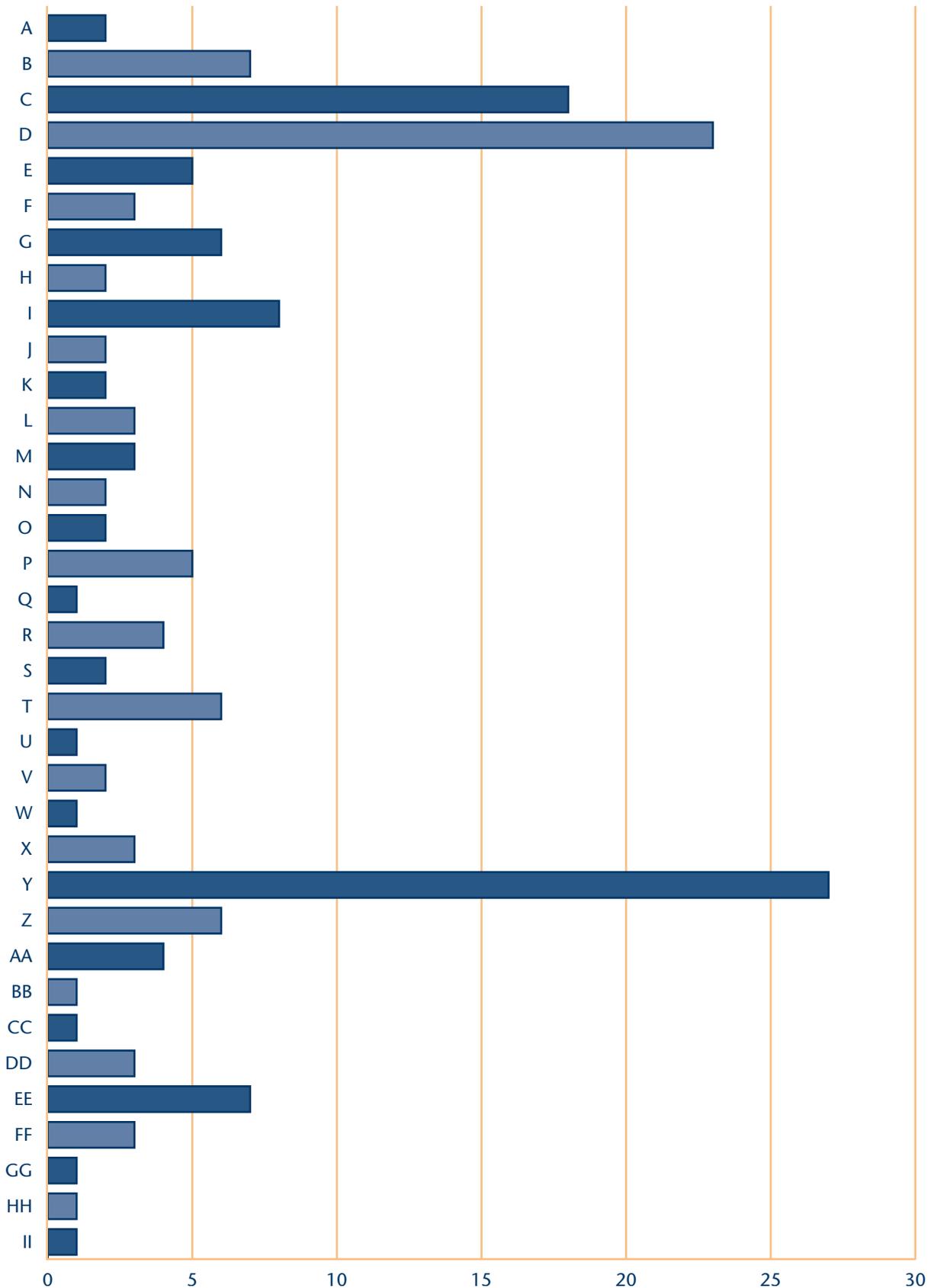
The breakdown of years of study across the cohort was as follows:



Of these students, one was a direct entrant into the second year and one had been offered direct entry into the second year but had opted to go into the first year.

3.3.5 Subject of study

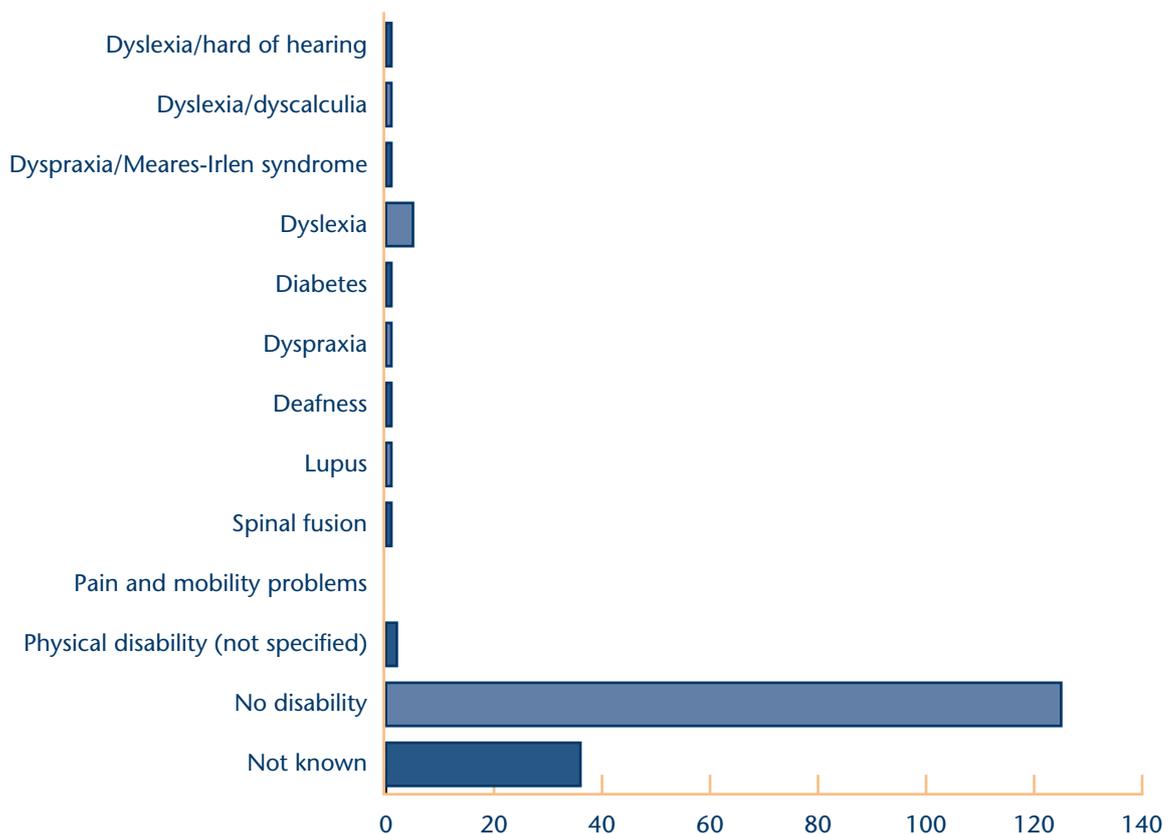
The breakdown of subject of study across the cohort was as follows:



- A Accounting/Finance
- B Adventure, tourism & outdoor pursuits
- C Architecture
- D Art and design/Fine art
- E Biological science/Biology
- F Biomedical sciences
- G Business
- H Chemistry/Biochemistry
- I Computing
- J Countryside management
- K Creative industries
- L Dentistry
- M Drama
- N Ecology
- O Education
- P Engineering
- Q Genetics
- R Health and social science
- S Languages
- T Law
- U Library studies
- V Marketing
- W Media
- X Medicine
- Y MA/BA in Arts and social sciences
- Z Music
- AA Nursing
- BB Nutrition
- CC Physics and astronomy
- DD Physiotherapy
- EE Psychology
- FF Social work
- GG Stage management
- HH Veterinary science
- II Not known

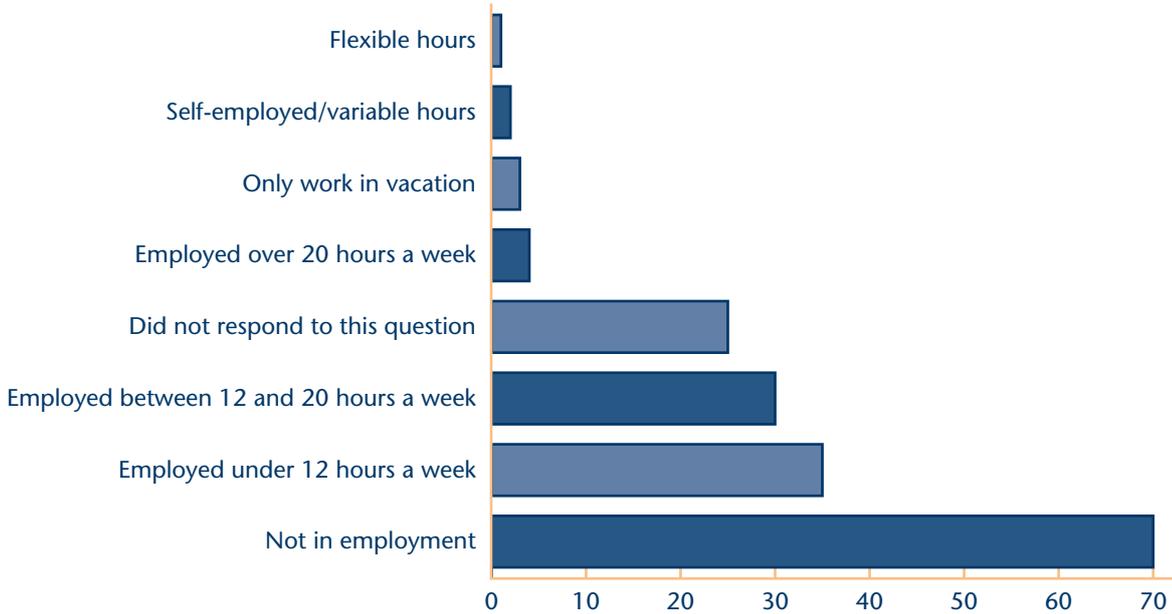
3.3.6 Disability

The breakdown of disability across those students who stated a disability was as follows:



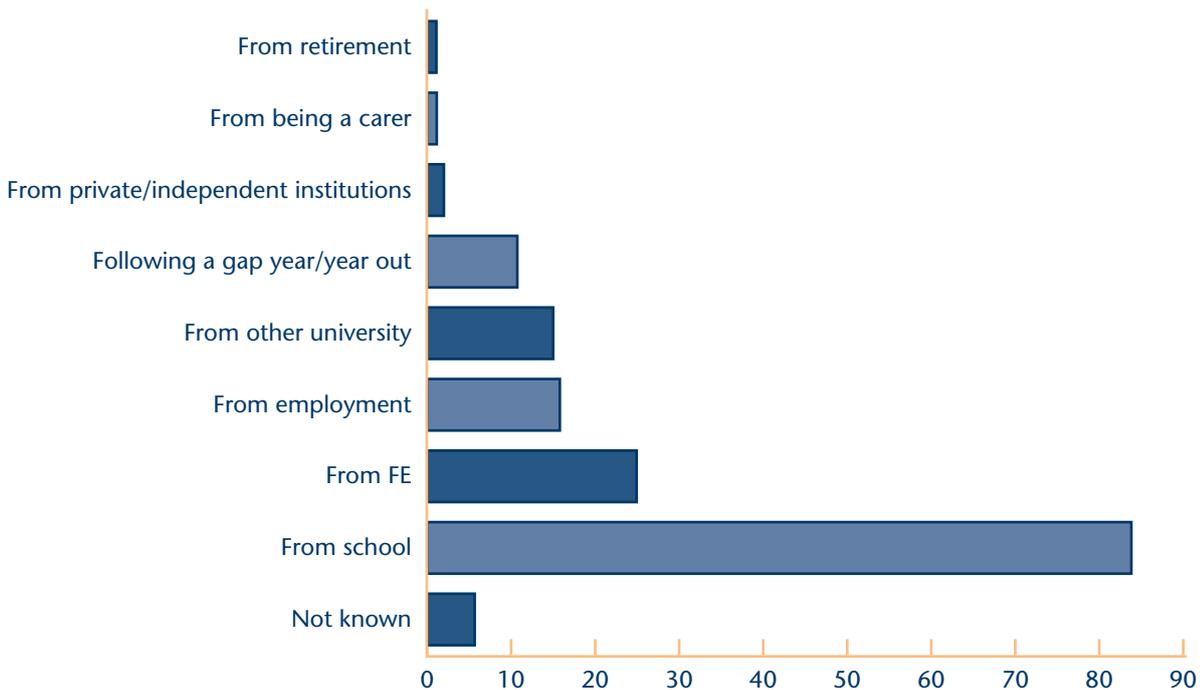
3.3.7 Paid employment

The number of hours worked by students across the cohort was as follows:



3.3.8 Entry routes

The following table gives the entry routes of participants into HE. There is some element of double counting where, for example, a student worked part-time and attended further education (FE) part-time or where they had spent part of the year at another HEI and part of the year working. Some of the participants had initially started their studies at another institution and had transferred to their current institution without completing their initial course of study.



4 Outcomes of discussions with students: expectations and experience

The prompts which provided the focus for the discussion were very open-ended:

- What influenced you to come to university?
- What keeps you going?
- What are the differences between your expectations and the experience?
- Give three suggestions for improving the first-year experience?

While the questions are open-ended it should be clear that they go to the heart of any analysis of the relationships between institutional policy and pedagogical strategy. For example:

- the amount of time and effort to devote to pre-entry activities
- the extent to which first-year curricula are designed to meet varied motivations for learning
- the means of keeping students engaged over time
- the roles of different staff groups in enhancing the first-year learning experience.

The bullet points in the sub-sections below give an illustrative selection of quotes taken from individual student questionnaires or small group questionnaires or from the notes of whole group discussions. We have not included all the quotes available to us but have tried to give a balanced flavour of the discussions which took place across the sector. We have deliberately refrained from commenting on the student views, leaving these to speak for themselves.

It is interesting to note that, on the whole, the academic and pedagogic concerns expressed by the students tended to be consistent regardless of where they were studying or the type of institution they attended. Occasionally responses from students studying at a particular type of institution confounded expectations as when students at a post-1992 institution, for example, reported that staff were spending time on research rather than on learning and teaching and the student experience.

Some issues which were specific to individual institutions were raised in discussions. These were generally to do with facilities (residences, catering, IT, library provision) and will be communicated to the individual institutions. Information is given about the year of study and general area of study of individual students and about the type of institution attended by the individual or group. We have not named the particular institution in order to respect the anonymity of the individual participant.

For the purposes of this study, institutions visited are grouped as follows:

- 'Ancients' - Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow
- 'Chartered' - Dundee, Stirling and Strathclyde
- 'Post-1992' - Abertay, Glasgow Caledonian, Queen Margaret, The Robert Gordon and UHI
- 'Specialist' - Edinburgh College of Art, Glasgow School of Art, Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, and Scottish Agricultural College.

4.1 What influenced you to come to university?

This is a key area of interest in relation to institutional marketing, selection, recruitment and advising activities, and it is also significant for wider socio-cultural analysis of access policy and practice.

The student participants discussed a number of key factors which played a part in their decision to come to university. Different factors affected different students, some suggesting that there was one primary influence, while for others there were clearly several influences at work. The breakdown of the main influences was as follows:

4.1.1 Normal expectation

It would appear that for students today attendance at university is increasingly seen as the norm:

- 'Seemed like the next natural step' (Year 2, Social Sciences; Ancient)
- 'Not going was not really an option in my surroundings' (Year 3, Social Sciences; Chartered)
- 'I never imagined not applying to university' (Year 2, Humanities/Social Sciences; Ancient)
- 'Everyone goes to university nowadays' (large group; Chartered)
- 'It's the obvious choice for everyone nowadays' (large group; Post-1992).

Or it is seen as the logical next step after a successful school or college career:

- 'Having done well at school it felt like a natural progression to go into further education' (Year 4, Humanities; Chartered)
- 'It was just a natural progression at the end of sixth year' (Year 1, Social Sciences; Post-1992).

Some individuals never considered other options. Indeed there were some who deliberately:

- 'Didn't think about it a great deal beforehand' (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Specialist).

One participant even stated:

- 'I didn't look too much into it in case I freaked out and didn't do it' (Year 1, Science; Post-1992).

Others had come to university for want of anything better to do:

- 'I didn't know what else to do' (Year 1, Science; Post-1992).

Others because there was no better option:

- 'Lack of appealing alternative' (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Specialist).

Some had come to put off the start of employment:

- 'I feel I am too young to be in a job' (Year 2, Social Sciences; Ancient)
- 'Didn't want to get a proper job' (Year 1, Humanities; Chartered).

Attendance at university was seen as a general societal expectation, reinforced by the expectations of family, school and by the example of peers:

- 'My siblings went to university so I also felt it was expected of me' (Year 1, Social Sciences; Post-1992)
- 'General expectation from school that students would go on to university' (Year 1, Business; Ancient)
- 'School arranged events to encourage us to go to university' (large group; Chartered)
- 'The fact that most people I knew were going' (Year 1, Humanities; Ancient).

Family expectation appeared to be a strong influence where other family members had attended university, but there was some evidence that families with no history of university education were now expecting their children to attend:

- 'Family - no-one in my family had been to university' (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Chartered).

There was also some evidence that, while the parents or the more extended family of mature students might not expect them to go to university, such students chose to come to university partly to provide a role model for their own children.

In their study on the first-year experience in HE in the UK, Mantz Yorke and Bernard Longden similarly noted that 'some students still entered higher education because it was expected of them, or because they were pressured by others to do so'. The following quotations from the 'free-response' comments in their study could just as easily have come from participants in our pyramid discussions:

I only went to university because I didn't know what to do after college (Business & Administrative Studies, Post-1992 institution).

Pressure from school teachers and others around me at the time of my A-levels pushed me into doing a degree that would fully justify my A-level grades (Subject allied to Medicine, Pre-1992 university).

Looking back, I feel that I went to university partly because the rest of my friends were & because I didn't want to get a full-time job (Law, Pre-1992 university). (Yorke and Longden, 2008, page 30.)

4.1.2 Vocation/career/employment/financial reward

Several of those taking part in the pyramid discussions were on vocational courses or wanted a career or the kind of employment which requires a degree. For other, mainly mature, students university education was seen as a means:

- 'To get out of a rut' (Year 1, Social Sciences; Post-1992)
- 'Not to be stuck in a "dead end" job' (Year 1, Science; Post-1992).

The figures used to demonstrate the financial advantages of a university education by the UK Government - and extensively reported in the media at the time of the introduction of top-up fees in England - would appear to have had some influence north of the border as well:

- 'We were always told that you earn more money in a job if you have a degree' (Year 4, Humanities; Chartered)
- 'I'll have a better chance in life financially if I get my degree' (Year 1, Arts; Chartered)
- 'The fact that I'll be more marketable when I get out' (Year 1, Business; Post-1992)
- 'Expectation that a university education positively influences future prospects' (Year 4, Humanities; Chartered)
- 'I was given the impression that with a university degree I was ensuring a promising future career' (Year 1, Humanities; Chartered)
- 'Thought that with a degree I would earn more' (Year 1, Business; Chartered).

However, some students specified that employment or career prospects were not a big motivation.

4.1.3 Love of learning/interest in the subject/development as an individual

The love of learning for its own sake, and the possibility of working with like-minded individuals, was the impetus for many who had enjoyed their experience at school and wanted the intellectual stimulation of study at a higher level. Other aspects of university life which appealed to this group were:

- 'Wanting to be in an exciting and stimulating environment' (Year 1, Social Sciences/Humanities; Ancient)
- 'Be able to meet with experts in the fields I am interested in' (Year 1, Humanities; Ancient)
- 'Enjoyment of the learning process and variations within it' (small group; Specialist).

Others saw university as an opportunity for personal development:

- 'To learn, grow and feed interest in life' (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Ancient)
- 'Desire to develop what was an interest into an academic qualification as well as develop myself as an individual' (Year 2, Arts; Chartered)
- 'Wanting to be taken seriously' (Year 2, Arts; Chartered).

4.1.4 Other influences

For some, a university education was seen as one of life's milestones:

- 'Want to move away and be more independent' (Year 3, Arts; Specialist)
- 'Emancipation/independence (or at least first step)' (Year 2, Social Sciences; Ancient).

Others said they had come to university for the life experience or:

- 'The personal challenge' (Year 2, Professional/Vocational; Ancient).

For others their perception of the student lifestyle was one of the deciding factors:

- 'There are many social opportunities available that would broaden my horizons' (Post-1992).

4.2 Why the particular institution?

In responding to the more generic question of why attend university, some students elaborated on the reasons behind the choice of a particular institution. The chief reasons identified by this subset of participants were, in no particular order:

- reputation
- location
- availability of a particular course
- the structure of the degree
- the age of the institution
- family or school links
- the quality of the open day
- the cost/cheaper than other cities.

It is interesting to note that two of the participants said they had been influenced by the league tables in making their choice:

- 'Ranking in Scottish scoreboard' (Year 1, Humanities; Chartered)
- 'University league table ranking showing prospects of future employment' (Year 2, Business; Ancient).

Other reasons may have owed more to the individual student's perception of the institution than to reality, as with the student who saw his institution as 'leftie, less establishmenty' (large group; Chartered) than the nearest alternative.

4.3 What keeps you going?

Increased student numbers and the widening access policy have focused institutional attention on questions of student retention, performance and progression. In addition student motivation and persistence are clearly major factors in describing how engaged, or disengaged, students are with their courses. The students we spoke with reported that a number of factors are at play when it comes to staying the course. Several participants saw themselves as highly motivated individuals driven by ambition and:

- 'The desire not to let anyone (including myself) down' (Year 1, Humanities; Post-1992)
- 'Being able to make myself and my parents proud by what I can achieve' (Year 1, Engineering; Chartered)
- 'Determination to succeed' (Year 1, English, Chartered and Year 2, Science; Ancient)
- 'Taking more responsibility for my way in life' (Year 1, Arts; Post-1992)
- 'Must complete what I've started, do not allow myself to drop out' (Year 1, Social Sciences; Post-1992)
- 'Desire to prove to yourself that you can do it' (Post-1992).

Others considered that dropping out would be a waste of time and money:

- 'Dropping out now would be a huge waste of my life - and my money' (Year 1, Arts; Specialist)
- 'It is very expensive - the cost keeps me going because I know that I am investing' (large group; Post-1992)
- 'Expensive - you want a qualification at the end of it - something to show for the money' (large group; Ancient).

Some saw the intellectual enjoyment of their course as one of the main factors keeping them going:

- 'The knowledge that I'm doing something I truly love and am passionate about' (Year 1, Arts; Specialist)
- 'Passion for particular subject' (large group; Ancient).

A number commented on the motivating effect of achieving good grades and coping with tough academic challenges:

- 'The challenge of the learning experience' (Year 1, Arts; Specialist)
- 'Hard work paying off/reflected in results' (Year 3, Sciences; Ancient)
- 'Positive feedback on my work' (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Specialist)
- 'Continuous assessment with feedback which enables you to gauge how well you are doing' (large group; Chartered)

- 'Getting good grades' (large group; Ancient)
- 'Knowing how much I'm improving' (Year 1, Arts; Specialist)
- 'Doing well on the course and getting good grades in assessments' (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Chartered)
- 'When you receive a good grade it's a bit addictive and [you] always strive to work hard to achieve similar grades again' (Year 4, Humanities; Chartered).

This reinforces the argument that 'more recognition should be given to the role of feedback on learners' motivational beliefs and self-esteem' put forward by David Nicol and Debra Macfarlane-Dick in their paper on 'Rethinking formative assessment in Higher Education: a theoretical model and seven principles of good feedback practice', which appears in *Enhancing Practice: Reflections on Assessment: Volume II* (QAA, 2005).

For others the impetus was more negative:

- 'Things can only get better' (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Specialist)
- 'The hope that I will actually start working properly academically "some time soon"' (Year 1, Business; Ancient)
- 'Getting into second year where I can drop the subjects I dislike' (Year 1, Humanities/Social Sciences; Chartered)
- 'The thought it'll be over soon' (Year 1, Humanities; Chartered).

A number of those who took part in the discussions were very positive about the beneficial role of the social aspects of working with other students:

- 'Students are very supportive of each other and tend to support each other to keep going' (large group; Post-1992).

Some were positive about the helpfulness of university staff in keeping them going, particularly where the latter provided encouragement and positive feedback:

- 'The help from staff in aiding me to achieve what I want' (Year 1, Arts; Post-1992)
- 'The university staff who push you to your full potential' (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Chartered)
- 'Staff quite helpful in helping you achieve things' (large group; Post-1992).

Others saw the social lifestyle with clubs and societies and opportunities to make friends as one of the main attractions:

- 'The wide variety of extra-curricular activities and societies...they alone provide invaluable life experience even without the course itself' (Year 2, Social Sciences/Humanities; Ancient).

A number were motivated by the memory of previous poor employment and/or the fear of the kind of job they might have to take if unsuccessful. This was particularly strong among mature students.

4.4 What are the differences between your expectations and the experience?

This perspective on the first-year transition can identify gaps and mismatches which may be open to improvement by a blend of institutional action, and reflection by the students themselves on just how realistic their expectations may have been. In addition questions arise concerning the nature and influence of public discourse and pre-university advice describing the value and nature of degree studies.

A number of students reported that their experience had exceeded or matched their expectations either in total or in important aspects. On the positive side, many of those we spoke to found the whole experience less intimidating than they had expected. The lecturers were more supportive and their fellow students friendlier - something a number of participants went out of their way to tell us, notwithstanding the important issues raised in discussion and reported below:

- 'The experience I have had in my first year has been excellent' (Year 1, Science; Post-1992)
- 'I had an amazing time in my first year and it's difficult to think what could have made it better' (Year 5, Engineering; Chartered)
- 'First year was a brilliant experience and it is important that that doesn't get forgotten' (large group; Chartered and large group; Ancient).

They were keen to emphasise that, while some aspects of an individual's experience may have been negative, this did not necessarily detract from the overall positive nature of the first year.

A number of participants, particularly, but not exclusively (as the quotations below indicate) those on vocational courses, found that the first year was harder work than expected in terms of workload and pace:

- 'Expected the workload to be smaller - didn't anticipate as much so early on' (Year 1, Business; Post-1992)
- 'I did not expect it to be as fast paced as it is' (Year 1, Business; Post-1992)
- 'Pace of work is faster than I expected' (Year 1, Humanities/Social Science; Chartered)
- 'I expected first year to be closer to what sixth year in high school was ie essay styles etc but found it was a step up, even from Advanced Higher - which is meant to be a similar level to first year' (Year 1, Humanities; Chartered)
- 'Not as easy as I expected it to be' (large group; Chartered).

A smaller number, notably those studying fine art and architecture, found their courses to be more prescriptive and with a fuller timetable than expected:

- 'I expected it to be more autonomous. It has been much more prescriptive than expected' (Year 2, Arts; Chartered)
- 'My timetable is like a full time job, 9-5 most days of the week' (Year 1, Arts; Chartered)

- 'Less academic freedom than we expected. Courses organized in a very prescriptive way' (small group; Specialist).

In contrast others said that the first year was too easy in terms of content and they felt as if they were moving backwards. These students tended to be on the more broader-based faculty entry courses, though this was not necessarily the case:

- 'I found I was sometimes bored as the work covered wasn't as in depth as A-level' (Year 2, Sciences; Ancient)
- 'First year is not even A-level standard. It's almost year 11 standard' (large group; Post-1992)
- 'Repetition of sixth year studies in first year' (large group; Ancient)
- 'First year work has been done before. It is repetitive and not empowering. Later years are more engaging' (small group; Ancient)
- 'Less academic work required to get by than I expected' (Year 1, Business; Ancient)
- 'Teaching in early years FAR less intense than imagined' (Year 2, Social Sciences; Ancient)
- 'The workload is much smaller than expected and there is often little depth in subjects covered' (Year 1, Arts; Post-1992).

Similarly, some students in the Yorke and Longden study 'found their first-year studies to be lacking in challenge', as illustrated by the following student comments taken from their study:

I spent the previous 2 years doing a BTEC in the same subject and the work we did then was in a lot greater detail than at university! (Sports Science, Post-1992 institution)

Throughout the 8 months I attended this course, I believe I learnt nothing that I didn't already know, which is not what I was expecting (Sports Science, Post-1992 institution - not the same institution as the previous student). (Yorke and Longden, 2008, page 28.)

Some of the students who felt that their university courses were more demanding than the courses they had taken to gain entry to university, argued that they were nonetheless:

- 'Less stimulating/less exciting with no interesting academic discussion' (large group; Ancient).

Others found them uninspiring, having expected more emphasis on personal growth, independent thought and developing an intellectual interest rather than on taking in information and reproducing it:

- 'I expected much more exchange of ideas, whereas assessment has been comparable to that of "rote" learning in some subjects' (Year 3, Humanities; Ancient)
- 'Thought what I experience now - debate type, views shared, work has to be done - would have been introduced in first year' (Year 3, Business; Chartered).

Others, from across the full range of subject areas and institutional type, argued that the education they were receiving was:

- 'Not as intellectually rigorous as I had hoped' (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Post-1992)
- 'I expected much more from university. The course is not as intense as I'd hoped it to be' (Year 1, Arts; Post-1992)
- 'The education I receive during the first year is too general. It seems that we are taking part [in] what I would qualify as a "mass education": we are considered somehow more as clients than students' (Year 1, Humanities; Ancient)
- 'Early lectures were more general than I had expected - thought there would be more specialisation' (Year 3, Sciences; Ancient).

Indeed, one student was contemplating dropping out for this reason (Post-1992 group). One student even expressed the view that first-year courses are designed to put students off:

- 'Some first year courses are tedious in comparison to later years and seem built to drive students away' (Year 1, Humanities/Social Sciences; Ancient).

As part of their work on curriculum design for the first year, undertaken as part of the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme, Catherine Bovill, Kate Morss and Cathy Bulley held three student focus groups with students at Queen Margaret University. Like the students reported above, the students who attended these focus groups also highlighted the need for more challenging work in the first year. They reported that they 'did not feel stretched by the first-year curriculum they had experienced, and described going backwards from the demands of school'.

In line with the findings in the literature reviewed in the course of work on *Introducing scholarship skills* undertaken for the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme by the team led by Fran Alston (Alston, Gourlay, Sutherland and Thomson, 2008), some participants in our study were left perplexed by what they perceived as a drop in the standard of their work at university, which was experienced as a demotivating factor:

- 'Top of class at school, find out that [you] are pretty average and motivation goes through the floor. Your idea of where you are on the scale is completely destroyed' (small group; Ancient).

A number found that they had too much 'free' time, that too much independent learning was expected without adequate guidance, and some missed having someone 'on their back' to ensure that they did the work:

- 'I'd like to have more guidance and less self-study time. I expected to have a more full schedule' (Year 2, Sciences; Ancient)
- 'Far less personal engagement from faculty; more independent "empty" time than expected; less "exciting" than expected' (Year 1, Humanities; Ancient)
- 'Didn't expect so much free time, could do a degree in three years rather than four' (large group; Chartered).

In some institutions, students felt that staff saw them as an interruption to the real business of academic life and that they had little interest in teaching or the students:

- 'Feels like lectures interrupt the academics' (large group; Post-1992)
- 'Staff only interested in research - don't try and teach' (small group; Ancient)
- 'It's frustrating when you ask an academic a question and feel like you're an inconvenience' (large group; Post-1992).

However, this was counterbalanced by the views of others such as the student who was:

- 'Impressed by the prestigious academic scholars that teach and the amount of research that is going on behind the scenes' (Year 2, Social Sciences; Ancient).

Other areas where expectations and experience did not match up were:

- feedback
- the lack of commitment from other students in groups/tutorials
- the greater amount of group work and the related need to rely on others for grades
- constantly changing timetables
- inadequate facilities, including the lack of social space.

Some participants, particularly those working across departments or faculties, commented on the inconsistency of their university experience, with different faculties/schools doing things in different ways. This included inconsistencies in the methods of assessment, and in the requirements for referencing and presenting work.

Some were disappointed with the social side of university, finding it difficult to meet people and make friends - this applied particularly to those not in halls or of a different age to the rest of the cohort. Others commented on the difficulty of adapting to a new culture and environment:

- 'The non-academic aspect of university life. That is, learning and accepting a new culture and environment. It is more difficult than expected' (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Ancient).

However, others had a different experience, finding university and the student body friendlier than expected. The size of classes and the lack of contact with staff and peers were also highlighted:

- 'I've felt throughout the course that because I'm in such a large class I've not got to know any staff' (Year 4, Professional/Vocational; Ancient).

It was stated that this often led to feelings of loneliness:

- 'Lonely, not a lot of group interaction, for example mainly large lectures (Year 1, Science; Post-1992).

A number of participants commented on the lack of a sense of belonging, which also contributed to a sense of estrangement:

- 'The idea of being at the university and having an identity, of being part of it doesn't exist in the way I thought it would' (Year 2, Arts; Specialist)
- 'There is no sense of belonging when one first arrives' (Year 1, Medicine; Ancient).

There was a view expressed by participants in several institutions that there were too many events, particularly in freshers' week, centred on the consumption of alcohol and that there should be less pressure on students to drink. Students also highlighted the need for more events to be accessible to 17-year-olds and those with religious or other objections to alcohol.

A number of international students commented on the lack of maturity of the home students, particularly in relation to their approach to their studies, their fellow students and their lecturers. This was echoed by some of the mature home students:

- 'The one thing that surprises me is the lack of manners in lectures and the amount of students who regularly fail to attend' (Year 1, Humanities; Chartered - mature student)
- 'Thought students would be more mature/more serious about their work' (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Ancient)
- 'Students lack maturity because it is an extension of school for them. Treated as a joke' (large group; Chartered)
- 'The distinct lack of discipline' (Year 1, Engineering, Chartered)
- 'I thought everybody would be as keen as each other having tried so hard to get here' (Year 1, Arts; Chartered)
- 'Shouldn't be a trial period. Should be proud to be at university. Should have respect for the system, not just to fill in the time or use for social aspect' (focus group; Ancient).

A similar view was expressed by one of the overseas students in the Yorke and Longden study:

Before attending university, I had expected a demanding course. I had also hoped to study with able and motivated students. Both hopes were disappointed (Business & Administrative Studies, Pre-1992 university).
(Yorke and Longden, 2008, page 28.)

Finally, for several of those taking part in the study cost was a significant issue. While they had been aware that university would be expensive, the costs were much higher than expected. Those who had to buy expensive materials and equipment for their course were particularly hard hit. This group felt that these costs should be taken into account by the Funding Council, which should fund the courses in such a way that the institutions could supply the necessary materials to the students.

4.5 Student suggestions to improve the first-year experience

As part of the pyramid discussions, participants were invited to suggest ways of improving the first-year experience overall. Discussions covered a wide range of topics which cannot be directly mapped onto the seven practice-based projects. However, we have grouped the student suggestions under the following headings so that they can be related more easily to the projects with which they overlap:

- induction/communication
- transition/scholarship skills
- personalisation of the first year
- formative and diagnostic assessment and feedback
- peer support in the first year
- academic issues
- academic advisers/personal tutors
- improved use of technology
- social aspects
- finance.

The suggestions made by participants can also be related to the features which those taking part in phase 1 of the Yorke and Longden study wished to see change:

- workload and time management (relates to study skills)
- organisation and management (relates to induction and communication)
- accommodation related
- preparedness and attendance (relates to induction and transition)
- personal matters
- finance related
- curriculum aspects (relates to personalisation of the first year)
- teaching related (relates to academic issues)
- change course
- feedback and assessment (relates to formative and diagnostic assessment and feedback).

(Yorke and Longden, 2007, page 40.)

One area which would appear not to be a key issue for the individuals who took part in the pyramid discussions is Personal Development Planning (PDP). This was only mentioned in passing at two institutions and was not picked up in the general discussions.

As mentioned in the introduction, the tone and shape of the discussions followed a pattern of initial emphasis on the critical or negative, leading to a more considered and balanced evaluation. During the general group discussions, several of the participants

were keen to point out that the responsibility for the success of first year, or indeed of the whole university experience, was down to the individual concerned. This was also highlighted by individual students in their responses:

- 'There is only so much lecturers can do in the first year. It's down to the individual' (large group; Chartered)
- 'Lecturers shouldn't be the ones to do the motivating. The students should want to do well' (large group; Specialist).

One went so far as to state that:

- 'Generally I think the university, as an establishment, does as much to benefit first year students as it can. All they can do is advise and encourage, it's ultimately up to the individual to perform' (Year 2, Science; Ancient).

4.5.1 Induction/communication

In discussion about induction, pre-entry support was highlighted as a key area, in line with the findings of Ruth Whittaker's First Year Experience Enhancement Theme report on *Transition to and during the first year*. In this she highlights pre-entry support as 'vital in terms of enabling informed choice and preparation for HE study through university-led support via websites, school and college liaison, campus visits, peer mentoring schemes and collaborative approaches with schools, colleges and the community'. (Whittaker, 2008, page 5.)

For the participants in the study communication is the key, both pre-entry and once the students have arrived at the institution:

- 'Making sure that communication is key! With such a new environment it can be hard to figure out what's what, where to go, where to find info and most first years are afraid to ask' (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Post-1992)
- 'Help finding your way around campus during the first one-two weeks. Older students, ie third/fourth years, could do this' (Year 1, Humanities; Chartered)
- 'More information about all areas of the course before arriving' (Year 1, Arts; Chartered).

Like Ruth Whittaker, students argued for a need for improved communication between schools/colleges and universities, and greater collaboration in providing pre-entry support. Some even argued that there should be a role for the students themselves in helping prospective students with their choice of university and course:

- 'Role for current students to go into colleges to tell intending students about their university experience' (large group; Post-1992)
- 'Would be an advantage if staff from HE could go directly into schools and colleges to talk about it, or if existing student mentoring schemes could be extended to fulfill this purpose' (large group; Post-1992).

Giving students more information about the course, the syllabus and what was expected of them was seen as helpful in enabling applicants to make informed choices and improving retention. Specific suggestions, which chime with Ruth Whittaker's

identification of the need to clarify 'expectations in terms of the academic and social dimensions of the university experience' (Whittaker, 2008, page 53), were as follows:

- 'Students need more information about the course/syllabus which would help drop out rates. Students need to know they are on the right course' (large group; Post-1992)
- 'More information about the structure of university life, which would make first years feel more at ease' (Year 1, Social Sciences; Ancient)
- 'Clearer descriptions of exactly how the course works, what you do day to day. How much is expected of you. Student life in general' (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Specialist)
- 'Less vague outline of expectations of work' (Year 1, Social Sciences; Post-1992)
- 'Give students more information...on what is a) expected of them, b) what the first year process/time involves' (Year 1, Arts; Specialist)
- 'An overview of the year to come at the beginning of the first year/second year etc, only to allow an idea of what to expect' (Year 1, Arts; Specialist)
- 'An overview per course/subject about the relevance of the course/subject to the course/wider world. This might ignite and maintain enthusiasm' (Year 3, Professional/Vocational; Chartered).

The views expressed above also support Claire Carney's statement that 'first year students need to be connected to the university learning community through proactive and consistent communication of what is expected of them as students in higher education' in the executive summary of the section on induction in *Enhancing practice: Responding to Student Needs* (QAA, 2005).

A number of participants in the pyramid discussions argued that initial induction should cover the practical everyday things with other things being done later, when they are needed:

- 'More focused induction sessions. We need useful info like where toilets are and cheap parking. Induction seems to consist of what the university wanted to tell us about benchmarks and PDPs rather than useful, practical help' (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Chartered)
- 'The initial induction week was seen as a waste of time for many, it was hard to differentiate the essential information from the optional and a lot of time is spent going to things where you hear similar general greetings from slightly different people' (large group; Post-1992).

This too ties in with some of the key features of transition as identified in Ruth Whittaker's *Transition to and during the first year* report - 'Information and guidance linked to induction and transition support need to be made available to students on a timely basis, avoiding information overload'. (Whittaker, 2008, page 54.)

Again echoing the report on transition, participants in our study saw induction as an ongoing process and not a one-off event, which should also be provided for direct entrants to subsequent years of study:

- 'Active and repeated intro, advice, services available to students' (Year 1, Science; Post-1992)
- 'Induction is a big part of first year, not very good. One week only, needs to be over a longer period' (large group; Chartered).

The views expressed by participants in the pyramid discussions brought together in sections 4.5.1 and 4.5.2 can be mapped onto the following characteristics of an ideal induction programme which can be found listed, with others, in the key outcomes section of *Enhancing practice: Responding to Student Needs*, edited by Professor George Gordon (QAA, 2005):

- provide time-relevant, targeted information
- make academic expectations explicit
- be an integrated whole
- be part of an ongoing extended programme
- recognise different entry points and routes into HE
- recognise existing skills and experience.

4.5.2 Transition/scholarship skills

Students suggested that there should be more help with the changes from school to university and that this was as much a responsibility of the schools as it was of the universities:

- 'Schools should make transition to university easier in terms of preparing for work load and deadlines' (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Chartered).

One suggestion was for prospective students to go through a preparatory course such as a summer school (Year 1, Science; Post-1992). Another was for the year to start with a 'how to be a student' module available to all new entrants at any level of study (student exec member, Arts; Specialist).

Another key feature of transition identified in Ruth Whittaker's *Transition to and during the first year* report - 'transition support needs to be part of the institution's mainstream teaching activity' (Whittaker, 2008, page 53) - was also raised by individual students in their discussions with us. Participants argued that new students need time to adapt both to the new style of learning and to the university way of life, and that help should be provided not as an add-on but rather should be embedded in the programme:

- 'The first year of the HE programme is the right time to learn way[s] of working, but learn through relevant practice tasks rather than through formal advising - embedding skills through all activity not through crude extras' (large group; Specialist)
- 'More time to adapt to a different style of learning' (Year 1, Science; Post-1992).

Discussions with individual students also reflect the argument that 'staff should make space in the curriculum to teach students how to learn and give them time to learn how to learn', expressed in the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme report *Personalisation of the first year* (Knox and Wyper, 2008, page 4).

Participants highlighted new students' need for help with note-taking and, in relation to this, students suggested that it would help if lecturers were to 'slow the pace a bit initially' (large group, Chartered). They also argued that new students need to be told what is required for an academic essay or scientific report and to be given guidance on the expected layout, referencing and so on, as this differs from what was expected of them at school and can vary from discipline to discipline (large group, Chartered). This variation in expectation was identified as a particular problem for students taking classes from more than one department. Similar comments were made by students in the Yorke and Longden study:

Lecturers not to presume that we know their way of teaching and the uni way of learning. Go through topics more thoroughly and then gradually reduce the amount of aids to student - not all of a sudden (Combined Arts/Humanities, Pre-1992 university). (Yorke and Longden, 2008, page 26.)

I would have to change the fact I didn't realise exactly how much work to put in. I would have liked much tighter guidelines on how much reading and which readings to do and when. (Yorke and Longden, 2008, page 41.)

4.5.3 Personalisation of first year

In the observation in the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme report *Personalisation of the first year*, the authors state that:

Students value personalisation, whether this is by having choice within the curriculum, access to online resources for use in their own time and place, or personalised support to make good earlier failures in academic performance. (Knox and Wyper, 2008, page 3.)

In line with this observation, participants in the pyramid discussions suggested that there should be more hands-on opportunities for students with more personally-based challenges and greater choice and flexibility with regard to the delivery of the course (student exec member, Arts; Specialist). They argued that there should be more dialogue with staff about how the course is delivered (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Specialist), and requested:

- 'Students should be given more role in decision making' (large group; Post-1992)
- 'Over time it would be good if students were involved in actually shaping the future programme of study, though first-year students would not be ready for this' (Post-1992)
- 'Individual learning programme for different students - not one size fits all' (large group; Ancient)
- 'Better clustering of the timetable to allow for more solid, private study' (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Post-1992).

Some students, having read the prospectus and other materials before arrival, had expected that they would be empowered to choose optional/elective subjects from across the full range of options available. However, on arrival they had discovered that once all the compulsory elements had been put into their timetable there was not as much choice as they had hoped for (large group; Specialist, Chartered).

4.5.4 Formative and diagnostic assessment and feedback

Students identified three main areas for action in respect of assessment and feedback. These related to the provision of better information on the criteria and marking schemes for assessment:

- 'More info on what is expected in relation to coursework' (Year 1, Marketing; Post-1992).

And also to the scheduling of assessments:

- 'More assignments as to gage how you are learning the material' (Year 1, Social Sciences; Post-1992)
- 'It would be better to have two pieces of work worth 20 per cent each or four pieces of work worth 10 per cent each over the course of the year rather than one essay worth 40 per cent. Student would become more involved' (large group; Ancient).

And to the amount and timing of feedback:

- 'Return of coursework throughout the session' (small group; Post-1992)
- 'Marking delays mean feedback becomes irrelevant in the end' (large group; Ancient).

The first of these can be related to questions 5 and 6 of the National Student Survey (NSS) and the third can be related to questions 7, 8 and 9. The results of the NSS show that assessment and feedback in particular are the areas of provision with which final-year students are least satisfied. From our discussions it would appear that individual students are concerned with the provision of useful feedback from first year.

Feedback was seen by participants in our discussions to be particularly important at the beginning of the course as, at that stage, students have no real conception of what is needed to achieve a pass or a good grade as they have no frame of reference:

- 'More feedback for both essays and exams. It is particularly hard in first year to adapt to a new way of learning at uni. Feedback would help immensely in showing you what you do right and what you do wrong' (Year 1, Social Sciences; Ancient)
- 'At the beginning you have no idea what constitutes a pass as you have no frame of reference. Need feedback on earlier work before progressing to next assessment' (large group; Chartered).

The First Year Experience Enhancement Theme report on *Transforming assessment and feedback: enhancing integration and empowerment in the first year* (Nicol, 2009), suggests ways to improve this aspect of the student experience.

4.5.5 Peer support in the first year

Participants argued strongly in favour of greater integration with fellow students within the class group, within the year with students taking other classes, and within the discipline but across other/all years of study both to enhance a sense of belonging and to enhance the academic experience.

Some participants argued that the students themselves could play a more active role in improving inter-year and inter-student relations.

The First Year Experience Enhancement Theme report on *Peer support* (Black and MacKenzie, 2008, page 3) explores examples of both 'horizontal peer support, where students within the same year group support each other, and vertical peer support, where more senior students support the first year student or students'. The report offers a number of case studies relating to both explicit and implicit peer support practices.

4.5.6 Academic issues

The disengaging effect of being taught in mixed ability groups was highlighted and some participants even argued in favour of streaming students more rigorously, so that students are able to study at the appropriate level rather than being 'dragged down' (large group, Chartered).

Again, the view was expressed that too little was expected of students in the first year:

- 'I wish that there was a little more pressure from lecturers so that I had more motivation to work' (Year 1, Arts; Post-1992)
- 'Nobody on your back if you don't hand assignments in' (large group; Chartered)
- 'More one to one time - need to check up once in a while to see how students are progressing which would make them feel more secure in first year' (large group; Ancient)
- 'Maybe make first year work a little harder' (Year 2, Science; Ancient)
- 'A lot more work to do - students are not lazy' (Small Group; Specialist)
- 'If lectures were compulsory' (for example must have 70 per cent attendance) then that would motivate students to go to lectures' (Year 1, Science; Post-1992).

Some participants identified a need for more teaching in the first year:

- 'More teaching time' (Year 2, Social Sciences; Ancient)
- 'More/longer seminars' (Year 3, Social Sciences; Chartered)
- 'A longer academic year' (Year 2, Arts; Chartered).

They also identified a need for a greater degree of standardisation of experience across the institution:

- 'Standardisation across the departments so that all students have similar structured week' (Year 2, Arts; Chartered).

Small group teaching was identified as a useful tool to help the year bond as a group and establish friendships:

- 'More interactive learning, ie more labs, more tutorials, and to have the lectures more focused instead of broad topics' (Year 1, Science; Ancient).

It was argued that this might encourage people not to drop out. Tutorials and small group teaching were also identified as opportunities to ask questions and hear how other students were tackling the issues (large group, Chartered). This was seen to help both to establish the required frame of reference for assessments and to build peer support. The emphasis on small group teaching and on one-to-one interaction with academic staff and tutors ties in with the perception some students have that large classes are disengaging and disempowering. There were, however, some concerns about how group work is assessed and some participants were nervous about having to rely on others for some portion of the mark they received for group work.

Some students identified a need to improve the teaching skills of lecturers, demonstrators and postgraduate tutors. One argued that paying them better might encourage greater effort in this area.

The issue of the feedback students provide on their courses and how this was acted upon was raised several times. In this context one group pointed out that:

- 'The students who have switched off are not there at the end of the course so don't input into feedback gathered by means of an end of course questionnaire' (Ancient).

Others asked:

- 'Are questionnaires just a sop to the students? Is anything ever done about the matters raised?' (large group; Ancient).

One group suggested that the pyramid discussion methodology could be usefully implemented at course level (Ancient).

Only in one institution did students consistently praise the way that institution sought feedback and acted upon it.

4.5.7 Academic advisers/personal tutors

A number of participants argued that more and better use should be made of the system of academic advisers/personal tutors, calling for greater contact, more guidance and a need to match advisers to students:

- 'Personal advisors should be matched to students for interests' (academic and personal) (Year 3, Science; Ancient)
- 'Being able to visit advisor when needed. Couldn't always reach them' (Year 1, Social Sciences; Ancient)
- 'Better relations with tutors' (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Specialist)
- 'The support can be quite fragmented, no one knows everything you are doing so you tend to need to work out who is the right person to see and seek them out' (small group; Specialist).

This ties in with a desire expressed by several individuals for more one-to-one interaction with staff. It also aligns with the findings of Elaine M Smith in the section on personal tutor systems and their alternatives in *Enhancing practice: Responding to Student Needs* (QAA, 2005, page 46), which show that:

Where an academic advisor or personal tutor is made available to a student, the main requirements...to satisfy student support needs are the:

- availability of the adviser
- level of knowledge of the adviser
- level of interest of the adviser.

4.5.8 Improved use of technology

A number of participants argued in favour of better use of technology and electronic aids, such as interactive learning, online access to lecture notes, Moodle, electronic submission of essays, or the use of video streaming, webcasts or podcasts to enable students to catch up on missed lectures or for revision purposes:

- 'Better online resources - notes, web links etc' (Year 2, Social Sciences/Humanities; Ancient)
- 'Better use of WebCT for reading, lecture notes etc' (Year 2, Professional/Vocational; Ancient)
- 'Academic staff (especially elderly) should use new facilities which help to present information such as projectors, audio-video equipment' (Year 1, Humanities; Ancient)
- 'Use PRS [personal response systems] more widely where teaching a large number of students' (large group; Ancient)
- 'Recording of lectures so one can watch a missed lecture' (Year 1, Business; Chartered).

The latter was also seen as helpful for non-native English speakers.

In discussing this issue participants recognised the need to ensure adequate staff development, as well as training for students:

- 'No consistency as to what [is] prepared to put on site because the staff can't deal with the technology - they need to be trained' (large group; Ancient).

In making this observation, the students are in tune with the view in *Flexible Delivery: An overview of the work of the Enhancement Theme 2004-06* that:

The development of online resources and e-assessment, the support of e-portfolios and the moderating of online discussions, for example, represent a significant shift away from traditional teaching techniques. This is an easier transition for some staff than for others. However, all staff need initial training and support in the new approaches to learning and teaching introduced through flexible delivery. (Mayes, 2006, page 7.)

A note of caution was, however, sounded by some:

- 'The computerisation of coursework is good to a certain extent but I feel too heavily utilised' (Year 1, Professional/Vocational; Post-1992)
- 'Idea is very good but in practice can be more confusing than helpful if it doesn't work the way it is supposed to' (large group; Ancient).

Some variation in the use of technology was seen as a plus by some as 'it would be boring if all did the same' (large group; Ancient).

4.5.9 Social aspects

Students argued that the first year should be used to enable students to engage more with each other and to foster a sense of belonging to the department or course. They wanted more situations or places other than the classroom where they could meet people:

- 'There should be more situations where you can meet people other than just in classes - more places to do this' (Year 1, Social Sciences/Science; Ancient).

To this end, several participants suggested that students should be given more encouragement to join clubs and societies. Others identified a need for increased study space.

A number of students identified a need for more social events not centred on the consumption of alcohol and less pressure/encouragement to drink.

4.5.10 Finance

Individuals identified a need for additional funding and/or lower tuition fees:

- 'Reintroduction of grants that don't need to be paid back' (small group; Specialist).

Participants felt this should be coupled with a need for increased support and guidance for budgeting and dealing with finance for first-year students:

- 'More help and advice with financial issues or make these more accessible' (Year 1, Science; Chartered).

Some students, particularly those on fine art and architecture courses, wanted institutions to 'be honest about hidden costs' of materials and books, which can add considerably to the cost of some courses:

- 'Extra costs not well advertised beforehand' (small group; Specialist).

They thought that the Government should take these into account in setting the funding for institutions:

- 'Cost of materials should be considered for each course' (Year 3, Arts; Specialist).

4.5.11 General advice to those intending to come to university

The main advice participants would give to intending students can be summed up as follows:

- 'Give very careful consideration to where you choose to go to university (the place and the course are both important) and seek the views of students' (Ancient)
- 'Go because you want to go and not because of perceived pressure' (Post-1992)
- 'Don't go if you don't know what you want to do' (Ancient)

- 'Consider taking a year out between school and university' (Post-1992)
- '[You shouldn't go to university] just to fill the time, or use for social aspect' (Ancient).

A number of participants argued that students are more likely to drop out if they are not ready, whether because they are too young, have chosen the wrong subject, have come in through clearing and made the wrong choice just to get a place (large group, Chartered), and/or have given in to pressure from school or parents. Similar views are also to be found in the Yorke and Longden study:

I chose to attend a course through clearing after not getting my expected A level results. Therefore, the course I started was a very different choice of subject than I had planned, and I probably would have been better to take some time before deciding on a different area of study (subject allied to medicine, Post-1992 institution). (Yorke and Longden, 2008, page 31.)

Some expressed the view that schools encourage students to apply to university because it looks good in the school league tables and not because it is the right thing for the individual.

Finally, a number of individuals advised that it is more difficult to establish friendships at university when you arrive with a friend from school or live at home (large group; Chartered).

5 Outcomes of discussions with students: engagement and empowerment

The points below are taken from the notes of the focus group discussions on engagement and empowerment. The institution attended by the students is given in brackets.

As stated in paragraph 2.2, no explanation of the terms 'engagement' and 'empowerment' was offered to participants in the focus groups by the project team. Participants were invited to define these terms for themselves. By and large, individuals found it easier to talk in terms of what is 'disengaging' or 'disempowering' about their university experience. Discussion of the two areas tended to overlap with some suggesting that a lack of engagement is in itself disempowering:

- 'Turning up and just taking notes is disempowering - need to be involved' (Specialist)
- 'Lack of interaction with the course content is disempowering' (Ancient).

Conversely, some participants suggested that engagement is empowering:

- 'Broadening learning (learning how to use journals, etc, reading around the subject, not getting stuck on working to the exam) is empowering' (Chartered)
- 'By engaging with the material you are empowered to move on' (Ancient).

5.1 Engagement/disengagement

Some participants argued that engagement came with active participation, taking responsibility for your own learning (Ancient) and a commitment to your studies:

- 'Need to get away from passive learning. Need to take information away from lecture, go and learn and research further etc' (Chartered)
- 'Taking responsibility for yourself' (Chartered)
- 'Taking control of your own life' (Ancient)
- 'Engagement depends on work that you have put something into' (Ancient)
- 'Doing extra reading due to interest in subject, not just for assignments etc. Learning because you want to, not just because you have to' (Chartered)
- 'Active learning, not passive learning' (Ancient)

In a similar vein a number of students posited that engagement came with:

- 'Feeling like a valued member of the community' (Post-1992)
- 'Feeling that you have something to contribute' (Post-1992)

- 'Need more stimulation to feel that your opinions are welcome and that someone actually cares' (Ancient).

And conversely some felt that disengagement came with anonymity:

- 'Anonymity is disengaging' (Chartered).

Some argued that it is easier to engage with a subject if you 'know how to learn it', arguing in favour of induction in the discipline and in the required study skills. This could be taken to support Terry Mayes' view that 'engagement concerns a student's attitude and commitment to study, and empowerment focuses on their competency to do so effectively', expressed in his scoping paper for the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme. However, the views expressed by participants in this study would seem to suggest that these issues are more complex.

The attitude, skills and delivery of the lecturers were identified as factors in student engagement:

- 'Lecturers having no enthusiasm equals students having no enthusiasm' (Post-1992)
- 'Some lecturers don't seem to care about the subject or whether the students care' (Ancient)
- 'Poor lecturers (just reading from the slides)' (Ancient)
- 'Lecturers not turning up or not making an effort is disengaging' (Post-1992)
- 'Switch off because it's not interesting' (large group; Specialist).

However, engagement was seen by some as a two-way street which required the commitment of the student as well as the lecturers:

- 'The more you engage with staff, the more they will engage with and encourage you' (Post-1992)
- 'Don't blame lecturers for not helping students that are not engaged' (Post-1992)
- 'A lot of university provision is such that you directly benefit and get more out if you put more in but can lose touch with it if you are disengaged' (Post-1992).

A related argument was to do with the subject/content of what was being taught. Some saw a need to make the 'boring subjects more interesting' (Post-1992) if students were to engage fully with them; others argued that having to take five disparate, unlinked subjects in the first year and being 'forced' to take subjects they did not want to study was disengaging (Chartered):

- 'You only do enough for a bare pass in the subjects you don't want to do' (Chartered).

Some saw coming to university itself as disengaging, arguing that the final years at school were very focused with a clear end in sight - in direct contrast to the first year at university (Chartered). Several participants expressed the view that 'the first year doesn't count', arguing that as a result many people do not take it seriously and just do enough work to achieve a bare pass (Chartered). Low expectations of students were seen as leading to a lack of engagement:

- 'Only have to pass so only do enough work to pass' (Ancient)
- 'Not encouraged to do preparation for tutorials because preparation is not checked. The tutor just gives out the answers' (Ancient).

In their First Year Experience Enhancement Theme report on *Curriculum design for the first year*, Catherine Bovill, Kate Morss and Cathy Bulley turn this on its head, referring to the 'teacher-expectancy effect' which 'suggests that if we have higher expectations of our students, they may well meet those expectations' (Bovill, Morss and Bulley, 2008, page 12).

A general lack of communication at all levels (lecturers, departments, faculties/schools, institutions), and not knowing the 'when, where, what or who' was identified as a cause of disengagement. Similarly not knowing people at university was seen as disengaging.

The mixed abilities and knowledge of students on a course or in a group was identified as another factor which led to disengagement (Chartered). More generally, students argued that the presence of students who do not know why they are at university is disengaging.

Some students identified participation in the student representative system as a demonstration of engagement with the university and their studies. However, there were issues raised concerning the apathy of much of the student body and the lack of clarity as to who the representatives were and how to contact them (Chartered and Ancient).

5.2 Empowerment/disempowerment

Attendance at university was seen as an empowering experience in itself as:

- 'Afterwards in a better position to deal with life' (Ancient).

One group argued that:

- 'Empowerment is bound to be a gradual process of evolution as you do not have the tools or knowledge at the beginning to feel empowered and in fact want some of the early directional decisions to be made for you, but you would hope that what you are getting in first year is building you up towards the goal of being empowered' (Post-1992).

The importance of the personalisation of study to a feeling of empowerment, that is the need to be involved in decision making and to feel in control of your studies, was highlighted by several individuals:

- 'Not allowing choice is disempowering' (Ancient)
- 'Ability to influence and change things - the way things are taught, what is taught, deadlines etc' (Ancient)
- 'Being involved in decision making' (Post-1992).

Two factors were identified as being particularly disempowering:

- 'Not getting feedback from an assessment before the next one is due means that you do not know how you are performing and cannot improve' (Chartered, Ancient, Post-1992 and Specialist)
- 'Deadlines all coming together can be disempowering as it can be overwhelming and removes the sense of being in control' (Chartered, Ancient, Post-1992 and Specialist).

A number of participants argued that class size is an issue as anonymity is both disempowering and can lead to disengagement:

- 'As numbers increase, empowerment and engagement decrease' (Chartered).

The realisation that, as a student, you have the power to influence and change the way things are done as a student representative, by active participation in staff-student committees, or through the students' association, can be very empowering. However, some felt that the student representative system needed to be reviewed and students needed to engage more actively with this aspect of university life:

- 'If people don't give feedback it is hard to know if they are apathetic or just fairly satisfied with how things are' (Chartered and Post-1992).

Some students expressed the view that the very fact that QAA and the sector had chosen to engage with them through this project was both engaging and empowering.

6 Analysis of opportunities provided for, and use of, feedback on the first-year experience by institutions

We surveyed each institution by means of a questionnaire seeking information on how feedback on first-year issues is gathered at university, faculty (or equivalent) and departmental level and by the students' association. Information was also sought on the use made of the information collected, and the way in which the outcomes of student feedback are communicated to the student body. Finally we asked for information on any strategic initiatives taken to address first-year issues in the previous five years.

Of the 20 HEIs in Scotland, 14 completed our questionnaire:

- University of Aberdeen
- University of Edinburgh (provided information, but did not use template)
- Glasgow Caledonian University
- Glasgow School of Art
- Heriot-Watt University
- Napier University
- University of Paisley/Bell College⁵
- Queen Margaret University College (provided information, but did not use template)
- The Robert Gordon University
- Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama
- Scottish Agricultural College
- University of St Andrews
- University of Stirling
- University of Strathclyde

⁵ Bell College produced a separate response as the request went out before the merger with the University of Paisley.

6.1 Analysis of university-wide initiatives to gather feedback from students

Six of the 13 institutions which responded to the survey run annual university-wide surveys of all students which are managed centrally, in one case by a special project team, in one case by the Student Experience Committee, and in two cases by the Quality Enhancement Service/Unit. One piloted a centrally-managed university-wide postal questionnaire in 2002-03. One has a standard university-wide module-level questionnaire and one required departments to add a number of university-wide questions to their own module-level questionnaires. All of these indicated that the university-wide survey was capable of being interrogated at the level of first-year students.

Five institutions do not currently operate university-wide surveys of all students. Two of these do, however, operate surveys aimed specifically at first-year students. Two of those which operate university-wide surveys also operate surveys aimed specifically at first-year students. One institution indicated that individual central services (that is IT, catering) also run their own surveys, which can be interrogated at the level of first-year students.

Of those institutions which do operate centrally-managed, university-wide student surveys, four use electronic questionnaires, one administers the questionnaire in class, one has advisers of study distribute the questionnaire and one of the smaller specialised institutions conducts one-to-one interviews. One institution which administers the annual questionnaire online has decided, since 2006-07, to supplement this with student focus groups. The institution which uses a university-wide module-level questionnaire uses an electronic questionnaire administered in class.

The details and the information sought by means of these questionnaires vary on an institutional basis. Some questionnaires cover recruitment and induction only, whereas the more detailed analysis at other institutions examines pre-university administration, belonging, study skills, workload, staff, support services, academic issues, examination performance and preparation.

Where institutions indicated how the results were processed, two forward them to the relevant central university committee for discussion and approval of appropriate action, one forwards them to the relevant managers for action and one produces results for each programme offered by the institution.

Three institutions operate university-wide staff/student committees. All operate staff/student committees at the level of the programme or department. Approximately one-third of the institutions which responded to the questionnaire use focus groups, with half of these using them in conjunction with a dedicated first-year questionnaire. Five institutions hold ad hoc focus groups, in some cases in collaboration with the students' association, and one holds focus groups for a sample of programmes across the institution each year.

All institutions have student representatives on some or all of the major university committees. One institution had a Senate-Student Committee which met three times a year but, since the survey was undertaken, this has been replaced by student participation (five members) on a new Student Experience Committee; another holds an annual joint meeting of its Quality Enhancement Committee and the Students' Association Council. One holds an open meeting for all students with the Vice-Principal,

Learning and Teaching, one holds monthly catch up meetings of members of the senior management team with the Vice-President (Education and Employability) of the students' association and one has regular meetings between the Principal and the President of the students' association.

In addition to a university-wide survey, one institution uses a detailed university-wide course evaluation pro-forma, which is undertaken in weeks six and 12 of each module and is completed anonymously by students. It is described as 'the cornerstone of the university's mechanisms for seeking feedback from students'. Course coordinators discuss the outcome with the course team and report to the Head of School. The latter then reports to the Staff-Student Liaison Committee, the College Director of Teaching and Learning and the relevant Academic Standards Committee. Particular policy issues are referred to the University Committee on Teaching and Learning.

6.2 Use made at university level of the feedback from students

With only one exception, all of the institutions which responded to the survey stated that student feedback obtained from the above sources (that is, by various internal initiatives - course reps, staff student committees, course evaluation and so on) informs, either directly or indirectly, the university strategy for learning and teaching and is used to improve service provision. The majority also stated that student feedback informs university policies and guidelines. Only two institutions indicated that student feedback is used in the calculation of resource allocation. One university indicated that 'student satisfaction contributes two of the major key performance indicators for institutional health and are part of the set used to assess senior management performance'.

6.3 How the outcomes are communicated to the students

As one of the respondents indicated, feedback to the student body of the outcomes of surveys or other means of garnering the views of students is 'patchy'. This ties in with the responses we received from students, the majority of whom raised communication and responding to student feedback as issues, irrespective of which institution they were attending.

Most institutions seem to rely on individual members of staff (that is module/programme leaders), student representatives, meetings of staff-student committees and the publication of the minutes, either electronically or in hard copy on the relevant noticeboards, to disseminate the results of surveys and meetings. Only in a few cases was the institution more pro-active in disseminating the results of surveys.

The University of Aberdeen stated that some issues raised in surveys are incorporated into course handbooks, which indicate when specific changes have been made as a direct result of student feedback. The Glasgow School of Art, Napier University and Queen Margaret University email a summary of the results of the annual student survey to all students, Napier in the form of a newsletter. Glasgow School of Art includes the institutional response to the recommendations and an update on the recommendations for the previous year in its email. The then University of Paisley indicated that they were erecting boards with posters headed 'You said..., we did...' as a means of communicating to students how the institution was responding to issues raised by them.

The Robert Gordon University informs students of the outcomes of the suite of student evaluation questionnaires via an online system which is linked to the student portal and the student involvement website. This details, on a course-by-course basis, how students responded to the questionnaires. Students are informed about the actions taken as a result of student feedback, from whatever source, primarily through the use of the student involvement website, email communication and posters.

6.4 Specific university-wide/strategic initiatives aimed at improving the first year experience

Several institutions indicated that they were undertaking initiatives to improve generic skills and IT training for first-year students and to introduce Personal Development Planning. Similarly a number of institutions are looking at the student advising/personal tutoring systems, assessment, the shape of the academic year, improved induction, and 'buddy'/mentoring schemes to see whether these might improve the student experience. What follows gives a flavour of some of the strategic initiatives undertaken across the sector in the last five years.

In 2005-06, the University of Strathclyde instituted a university-wide review of the first year to follow up earlier work on retention. A questionnaire on departmental views and practice in relation to the first year was issued to each Head of Department and a team from the Centre for Academic Practice and Learning Enhancement and the Academic Office then met with each Head of Department and/or nominee to discuss the issues raised. A report was produced for the University Senate, which approved an action plan for the first year for implementation across the institution by 2009. As part of this ongoing work, the Learning Enhancement Network at the University of Strathclyde has held two full-day workshops on the first year and has also held a number of shorter sessions on specific aspects of the student experience. In 2007-08, the university set up an Education Excellence Fund to provide an investment resource to assist faculties and departments, and centres within them, to engage fully with the university's excellence agenda. Many of the proposals funded to date focus on the first year and transition experiences that enable success.

Also in 2005-06, The Robert Gordon University constituted a First Year Experience Working Group, with the aim of building on the work undertaken by the Student Induction Working Group. The First Year Experience Working Group sought to develop an institution-wide understanding of the nature and purposes of the First Year at The Robert Gordon University. The Working Group is now seeking to engender greater institutional discussion on the first year and, in support of this, organised a conference which brought together academic and support staff and students to share practice relating to the first year. Subsequently, seven teams of staff have been provided with first-year awards, with a value of up to £500 each, to support small-scale enhancement activity, and a network of First Year Practitioners is being created.

In 2006-07, the University of St Andrews conducted a survey of staff views on how better to 'engage students' and the University of Edinburgh Students' Association organised a forum on the first-year experience. The forum looked at freshers' week, WebCT (a virtual learning environment used in several institutions which has since been taken over by Blackboard), workload and engagement in the curriculum.

Napier University's staff development programme includes workshops on induction, the student experience, developing scholarship skills, and students as effective learners to assist staff in enhancing the first-year experience of its students. The university has also established a Teaching Fellowship scheme to demonstrate the value it places on teaching.

The then University of Paisley set up a Welcome/Welcome Back Working Group to look at induction issues for the first year and beyond, and also has a number of initiatives to support direct entrants to second and subsequent years of study.

Queen Margaret University has introduced QMConnect to match new students (mentees) with trained students (mentors), who are there to help them settle in to the university, student life and study routines. The project is designed to help new entrants to orientate themselves around the university, to learn what services and facilities are available for students, to receive tips on study skills from experienced students to help them cope with the transition from school or college, and to juggle study, work and family responsibilities. All new students can apply to be matched with a mentor and the scheme operates across the university with undergraduate students from all schools and departments taking part.

The University of Aberdeen provides an online support guide/HE toolkit and is seeking to improve pre-entry advice on study and life on campus to provide applicants with a better quality of information to help them make more informed curricula choices.

In addition to the above there is considerable activity at the level of the department and faculty/school within institutions, either as pilots for activity intended to be rolled out across the institution or as stand-alone projects.

Case studies taken from Scottish and UK institutions relating to different aspects of the first-year experience can be found in the reports of the seven practice-based projects funded as part of the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme referred to elsewhere in this report.

6.5 The role of students' associations in seeking student feedback

A number of students' associations are also active in this area. As well as activities such as freshers' week, induction and the recruitment and training of student representatives, a number of associations are active in promoting focus groups and feedback sessions.

The Students' Association at Napier University led a major review of the student experience as part of the university's strategic reviews into the shape of the academic year and consistency in assessment, and to feed into the plans for the new campus build at Sighthill.

The University of Aberdeen Students' Association introduced Area of Study forums in 2004-05 to facilitate wider debate of issues by students by bringing together student representatives from similar areas of study to discuss learning-related issues.

The University of Stirling Students' Association launched a 'What's bugging you?' campaign to encourage students to raise any issues they might have online.

The University of Strathclyde Students' Association introduced a student congress which meets twice a year with senior officers and others to discuss issues and concerns of interest to the student body. In addition, the University of Strathclyde Students' Association has introduced special events for first-year students living at home to bring them into the university to meet other students. In 2005-06 it produced a leaflet, *First year concerns, your questions answered*, which was widely distributed.

All of the above include discussion of first-year issues.

7 How our study relates to larger scale national surveys

A number of valuable national student surveys have been undertaken around the world. The main purposes for national surveys have been to:

- influence teachers and teaching
- improve the quality of educational provision and student support.

Our project addresses these goals by clarifying understanding, identifying difficulties, and producing suggestions for enhancing the student experience. However our approach has differed in terms of method and, to some extent, our strong desire to let students speak for themselves, and to speak to each other, rather than respond individually to pre-determined lists of very specific questions. We would contend that as such, our approach is a powerful complement to the large-scale student questionnaires that have hitherto dominated the landscape. These have often resulted in some form of league table or comparative procedure. The main foci are:

- student perceptions of experience/satisfaction
- student engagement.

In assessing the apparently 'hard' and 'objective' appearance of the statistical data analysis resulting from questionnaires' reliability, validity and interpretation need to be taken into account. There can be a tendency to 'routinisation' of the survey process and follow-through can be partial and selective. On the other hand, it could be argued that our 'evaluative dialogue' approach lacks statistical validity as a sample and is not 'representative' of the whole student body. However, we did not set out to establish quantitative data, but rather to seek qualitative data on the student experience as seen from the student perspective. While questionnaire surveys often include 'open' sections for student comments in free text, the approach we have used was designed to enable student participants to define the agenda both from a personal standpoint and in discussion with their peers, and to provide a snapshot of student views at a particular point in the development of the enhancement framework in Scotland. If an institution were prepared to adopt the pyramid discussion approach to conduct a review in class time then larger numbers could be involved. This would have the benefit of generating institution/course-specific evaluative dialogue, as opposed to generalised questionnaire data.

Participants in our study have commented favourably on the pyramid discussion method. Many appreciated the opportunity it provided first to think about their experience and then to discuss it with a small number of their peers before being asked to voice their views in front of a larger group. This helped them to clarify their ideas and was felt to be less intimidating. Participants appreciated the fact that our methodology enabled them to define the agenda rather than asking for responses to pre-determined questions. This aspect of the pyramid discussion method was described as 'empowering'. Participants also stated that this method was more likely to elicit a considered response

than either questionnaires (where there was a tendency just to tick the middle box unless the respondent had very strong views about something) or face-to-face interviews (where it was felt to be impolite to be too negative).

It remains to be seen how useful our findings prove to be in assisting HEIs to enhance first-year experiences. In the meantime we can consider the actual pyramid discussion process as experienced by participants, and reflect on their comparisons with questionnaires, and other approaches to seeking the views of students, and the implications of this for their engagement and empowerment.

7.1 National student survey comparators: UK, Australia, USA

This brief account is provided to assist readers in quickly accessing information about other surveys, which may be helpful in considering our approach and findings. Three surveys are considered, from the UK, Australia and the USA.

7.1.1 United Kingdom: National Student Survey (NSS)

The NSS⁶ comprises eight dimensions/scales of satisfaction, plus a choice of additional dimensions which HEIs can incorporate to meet local issues. It has been conducted annually since 2005, with some Scottish HEIs participating since 2007. The theoretical base is the same as the Australian Course Experience Questionnaire, emphasising the importance of students' perceptions of their learning context and the impact this has on their learning outcomes.

While this survey is useful in many ways, it has its limitations as the student's response is limited by the focus of the statements. For example, the statements on assessment and feedback imply a focus on written feedback, and the open comments section of the NSS and interviews with students would certainly appear to show that this is how these statements are interpreted by students. This may disadvantage courses and institutions which encourage active classroom-based feedback or group or online feedback and may be problematic in the long run as institutions use the NSS to guide interventions aimed at improving future practice and/or improving the institution's relative position. This underlines the need to support such surveys with richer qualitative accounts of the student experience.

7.1.2 Australia: Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ)

The CEQ⁷ comprises 10 dimensions of satisfaction, an annual summary of satisfaction, plus more specific reports. It draws on theories of student approaches to learning/staff approaches to teaching.

At present the Australians are piloting a new survey, the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) which is designed to illuminate student engagement or participation in activity designed to bring about high quality learning experiences and outcomes. It is based on the pedagogical premise that learning is defined by a person's involvement in activities designed to help construct meaning rather than passively

⁶ Available at:

www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/research/NSS_2008_questionnaire_online_version.pdf

⁷ Available at: www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/eippubs/eip01_1/01_1.pdf

absorb information provided by lecturers, and other resources. The AUSSE builds on the US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

In addition to AUSSE, a new survey is being developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) to extend the range of information on the quality of the student experience.⁸ This is being developed to assist selection and recruitment by assessing thinking skills associated with successful university study.

Two other survey instruments, the Staff Student Engagement Survey (SSES) and the Work Readiness Assessment Package (WRAP) are also under development. The fact that this work is being undertaken shows that the territories designated as 'student experience' and 'educational quality' are being differentiated and subjected to scrutiny through different survey methods. This underlines the importance of complementing such developments with richer accounts of student experience, written in the students' own words.

7.1.3 USA: National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

The NSSE⁹ comprises 42 items in five groups for 'comparative benchmarking', based on *Applying the Seven Principles of Good Practice for Undergraduate Education* (Chickering and Gamson, 1991). It has been ongoing since 2001 and is linked to the Defining Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) research project.¹⁰

The NSSE is designed to investigate student engagement, and the data is used systematically to identify HEIs which perform above their benchmark for engagement, and then to investigate what influential factors and practices are involved.

7.1.4 Complementarity of the Scottish pyramid review approach

While our qualitative approach differs from the quantitative approaches described, the actual studies are not mutually exclusive as sources of insight. For example, our perception is that the NSSE 'big five' clustering terms seem to mirror the factors which students in our survey deemed to be most important:

- level of academic challenge
- student interactions with faculty members
- supportive campus environment
- active and collaborative learning
- enriching educational experiences.

The main point we wish to emphasise is that the pyramid discussion approach we used offers a useful complement to current national surveys as a means of eliciting student views. In addition, it may offer HEIs a more effective means of engaging students in empowering dialogue than questionnaires and staff-student committees.

⁸ Available at: <http://unitest.acer.edu.au>

⁹ Available at: http://nsse.iub.edu/pdf/NSSE2008_US_English_Paper.pdf

¹⁰ Available at: www.nsse.iub.edu/institute/index.cfm?view=deep/index

8 Conclusions

Our conclusions can be divided into three sections. The first deals with the practical suggestions for improving the first-year experience raised by the students themselves. Many of these link very well to the conclusions of some of the practice-focused projects arising from the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme, and also provide support for points raised in the work of earlier Enhancement Themes. The second looks at areas for potential further study, while the third explores the potential of our method of 'evaluative dialogue' to assist institutions in engaging with their own students. All three suggest the kinds of responses and measures which might encourage greater student engagement and empowerment.

In terms of the potential for implementation, some of the 'improvements' suggested by the students could be adopted by HEIs relatively quickly, should they regard these as appropriate in their context. However some of the points raised by participants such as, for example, the over persuasion of applicants by schools to come to university without careful preparation and attention to motives, argue for a sector-wide debate and a discussion between the HE sector and other relevant sectors.

8.1 Student suggestions for improving the first-year experience

Firstly and most importantly, it seems to us that we should not be afraid to use the students as a resource in reshaping first year. Institutions could mitigate many of the effects of disempowerment/disengagement identified by the participants in this study by implementing some or all of the students' own suggestions for improving the first-year experience. Much of what they suggest would be relatively easy to implement and there are already examples across the sector of good practice in many of these areas, which could be adopted more widely.

The students who took part in this study took the task seriously and gave considered and generally balanced responses clearly aimed at addressing current issues and enhancing the experience for future students. In doing so they reached conclusions which are supported by the outcomes of the subject-specific projects undertaken as part of the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme or the outcomes of previous Enhancement Themes. The students' conclusions could be tested in discussion with student focus groups within individual institutions before implementation to ensure that they are relevant to the particular context.

Specifically the sector might like to consider the following:

8.1.1 Pre-entry

- Better communication of what it means to be a student at university today, focusing on our expectations of students in terms of independent learning, self-assessment and writing styles and the implications for them in terms of how they approach their studies and the discipline.

- Better communication of what they will be doing day-to-day on the programme, including: the shape of the academic week (for example, number of lectures, tutorials, labs and so on); what students can expect to happen in a lecture, tutorial or lab (for example, use of groups/personal response systems); what students are expected to do in the way of preparation, reading around the subject, coursework; the size of the cohort.
- Students argued that this could help to reduce drop out rates by enabling applicants to make informed choices.

That these suggestions from the students are considered and balanced responses to the issues as they see them finds support in the findings of some of the practice-based enhancement projects. The recommendations are echoed in Hazel Knox and Janette Wyper's First Year Experience Enhancement Theme report on the *Personalisation of the first year* which, in respect of pre-entry, states that 'the potential benefits of providing opportunities to learn more about university life ahead of entry were generally acknowledged' (Knox and Wyper, 2008, page 19). Colleagues might also want to look at the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme report *Transition to and during the first year*, specifically at the key features of effective transition support relating to the pre-entry stage (Whittaker, 2008, page 53) and the first two recommendations under section 16.2 on page 57.

8.1.2 Induction

- Move towards longitudinal, ongoing induction processes throughout the first year, where students are introduced to the information they need, when they need it.
- Better communication of what it means to study a particular discipline, including an overview of the relevance of what they will be doing to the wider world and of the particular module to the programme as a whole.

Again these suggestions are supported by the findings of other First Year Experience Enhancement Theme projects. See, for example, Ruth Whittaker's statement that 'transition support needs to be viewed as a longitudinal process which begins at pre-entry and continues until the end of the first year' (Whittaker, 2008, page 53).

8.1.3 Transition/study skills

- Move from more directed study at the start of the year towards more independent learning as the year progresses.
- Start slowly and pick up the pace of lectures as the semester progresses.
- Provide study skills as an integrated activity in disciplinary course teaching, rather than as a deficit model or 'bolt on'.
- Consider implementing a standard referencing convention, at the very least at the faculty/school level, in first year with refinements being introduced as students progress through the course.

The First Year Experience Enhancement Theme report *Introducing scholarship skills: academic writing* highlights several weaknesses to the bolt-on approach (Alston, Gourlay, Sutherland and Thomson, 2008). *Curriculum design for the first year* advocates, among other things, a 'bird's-eye view...where discipline-specific and transferable knowledge

and skills are developed within, and across modules or units' (Bovill, Morss and Bulley, 2008). *Personalisation of the first year* recommends that staff should 'make space in the curriculum to teach students how to learn and give them time to learn' (Knox and Wyper, 2008).

8.1.4 Personalisation of first year

- Provide greater choice and flexibility with regard both to the delivery of the programme and to assessment.
- Provide more opportunities for personally-based challenges.

The First Year Experience Enhancement Theme report *Transforming assessment and feedback for first year students: integration and empowerment* supports the view that institutions should provide greater choice and flexibility with regard to assessment (Nicol, 2009). In *Personalisation of the first year*, the authors recommend that 'staff should take steps to empower their students by creating a student-centred curriculum through which students can take control of, and responsibility for, their learning' (Knox and Wyper, 2008).

8.1.5 Formative and diagnostic assessment and feedback

- Provide more detailed feedback at the beginning of the programme when students need most guidance on how to achieve a pass or a good grade in a university context.
- Tell them why something is good or bad and what could be done to improve their performance.

The principles of good formative assessment and feedback advocated in *Transforming assessment and feedback for first year students: integration and empowerment* (Nicol 2009) include the delivery of high quality feedback information that helps students self-correct and helps to clarify what good performance is.

8.1.6 Peer support in the first year

- Provide opportunities for more interaction within the class group, with students taking other modules in the same year, and with students in the same discipline but from later years of study.
- Set up appropriate mentoring or buddy systems.

In particular, students identified small group teaching as a useful tool to help the year bond as a group and establish friendships and, it was argued that this might encourage people not to drop out. Tutorials and small group teaching were also identified as opportunities to ask questions and hear how other students were tackling the issues, helping to establish both the required frame of reference for assessments and to build peer support.

In the First Year Experience Enhancement Theme report on *Peer support in the first year*, the authors recommend making space in the curriculum for peer support, the establishment of mentoring and peer support schemes that are integrated into the curriculum; and promulgate the view that engagement with these schemes is universal (Black and MacKenzie, 2008).

8.1.7 Social aspects

- Foster a sense of belonging to the department or course.
- Provide opportunities for students to engage more with each other outside the classroom, by providing appropriate social and study spaces.

8.1.8 Finance

- Provide increased support and guidance for budgeting and dealing with finance.
- Be upfront about the costs of materials and books, which can add considerably to the cost of some courses.

Financial issues are becoming more important. Some students are now talking in terms of 'value for money', others feel they have been misled about the true 'hidden' costs of their course. Nearly all of the participants are finding university more expensive, and the student loan less elastic, than they expected.

8.2 Areas for potential future development and enhancement

- Given the perception that attendance at university is now seen as the normal expectation by many school leavers, and the government push for the expansion of the participation rate in HE, it might be timely to consider the implications of this for the purposes, structures and practices of Scottish HE. It might also be worth considering how we locate the first-year experience within a lifelong learning framework, particularly in view of the Scottish Funding Council's work on Articulation for All?¹¹
- Some students, generally those on non-vocational courses, argued that the current first year is not sufficiently challenging academically and that it is too general. Some disquiet was also voiced about the structure of degree programmes based on faculty entry in which students are not 'owned' by a department until entering honours and in which they are 'forced' to take subjects in which they have little or no interest. While recognising that this can facilitate a change of direction if desired at the end of the first year, many of the participants appeared to find the experience alienating, demotivating and disengaging.
- While these are the views of a small number of students relative to the student population as a whole it would be worth testing just how widespread a view it is for these groups across the sector. Were these to be common views, it might be timely to consider what the first year of a Scottish four-year degree programme is for, and whether we should be taking more students directly into the second year or, at least, streaming intake into the first year.
- The views expressed by this small cross-section of students as to the disempowering and disengaging effects of large classes and the advice they offer to intending students suggest a potential area for further research, particularly in view of the factors outlined above.

¹¹ Available at: www.sfc.ac.uk/news_events_circulars/Consultations/2007/ArticulationforAll.aspx

- A number of students argued that people are more likely to drop out if they are not ready, whether because they are too young, have chosen the wrong subject, have come in through clearing and made the wrong choice just to get a place, and/or have given in to pressure from school or parents. There was a view that students need to be enabled to make sensible choices based on an understanding of what a university education entails, and what a particular institution has to offer, and that universities have a role to play in better communicating this information to prospective students.
- The concerns expressed by some of the international and mature participants in our study about the detrimental effect on their educational experience of the lack of engagement and respect for education of some home students are perhaps worth exploring in more detail, given the importance of the international student market to Scottish HEIs. It might be worth commissioning a study on this issue to see how widespread a view this is at institutional level, to see whether this is an area the sector needs to address in future.
- There would be merit in seeking funding either to track the students we have spoken to for this study over the course of their degree studies or to repeat the current study at regular intervals in order to build a longitudinal picture of the experience of students in Scottish HE.

8.3 Evaluative dialogue: a new direction in student engagement and empowerment

The pyramid review method of engaging students in open discussion about their expectations and experiences of the first year has proved to be a useful and flexible approach. It gave the participants the balance of control in the discussion and encouraged confident expression. These features were felt to be an advance on their experience of questionnaires and staff/student committees.

In our view, the extension of the benefits of the pyramid review method beyond the lifetime of our project, and its wider use as a method of engaging students, would benefit both students and institutions. We therefore end with a practical proposal to achieve these benefits in the sector. The form suggested is based on the research described above, and given the working title 'evaluative dialogue' to signify the combination of meeting the institutional requirement for student feedback, and the desire to drive up engagement and empowerment through dialogue.

8.3.1 Towards evaluative dialogue in universities

Many students said that they found the pyramid discussion format preferable to questionnaires or a direct approach from tutors. Students appreciated the phased nature of the format, which allowed them to discuss their views in a small group before moving to a general discussion. It gave them the confidence to speak their minds because they had the reassurance of agreement from some at least of their peers. The fact that we were 'outsiders' albeit with official status, added to the positive nature of the discussion.

It seems that this positive response might offer an opportunity for practical advancement by augmenting current methods such as questionnaires, focus groups and staff student committees with the pyramid review approach and allowing the students to direct institutional discussion to the issues which are of concern to them. Although our study

involved only a small number of the total student population, it nevertheless produced rich data and engaged students in ways which other approaches do not. If these benefits are taken at face value, then it is arguable that institutions could adopt the method as a staple of local quality enhancement leading to sophisticated student/staff dialogue concerning learning and course designs. Such an approach would engage students in reflection on their learning processes within the context of a specific programme, and empower them as joint participants with lecturers in developing new course designs to enhance learning.

If the pyramid discussion method were to be adopted by a university on a comprehensive scale, cutting across courses, then it would be possible to generate a substantial databank of ideas and suggestions for improvement which, while course specific, could be generalised at the level of institutional quality management, in order to justify particular resource allocation decisions for example. Relationships based on mutual understanding and agreement about teaching and learning in practice would provide a solid basis for institutional quality enhancement and strategic management. In addition, empowering students to develop deep knowledge of learning, and to be actively engaged in their learning, would benefit them not only as undergraduates, but also as lifelong learners.

In addition to specific local gains at course level, this approach would help institutions balance the growing influence of large-scale surveys of student satisfaction/engagement. While such instruments can provide useful data, there is potential for state and sector interest groups to over-rely on such forms of measurement of satisfaction as a primary tool for analysing and managing institutional performance, with consequences for resource allocation. A robust local account of student experience, aligned by student commitment to the institution's approach to quality enhancement, would provide a powerful counter balance to broad national data gathering exercises.

We therefore wish to advocate the introduction of pyramid review at course level, and across institutions, as a key way to engage and empower students, by building learning alliances between staff and students.

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10 Appendix

Quality Enhancement Themes First Year Experience reports

Mayes, T (2009) *Overview of the Enhancement Theme 2006-08: The aims, achievements and challenges*

Sector-wide discussion projects:

Gordon, G (2008) *Sector-wide discussion: the nature and purposes of the first year*

Gordon, G (2008) *Sharing and reflecting on international experiences and initiatives*

Kochanowska, R and Johnston, W (2009) *Student expectations, experiences and reflections on the first year*

Practice-focused development projects:

Bovill, C, Morss, K and Bulley, C (2008) *Curriculum design for the first year*

Nicol, D (2009) *Transforming assessment and feedback: enhancing integration and empowerment in the first year*

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