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Citation for published version (APA):

Kandiko Howson, C. B., & Mawer, M. (2013). *Student Expectations and Perceptions of Higher Education*. King's Learning Institute.

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QAA

STUDENT EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

A STUDY OF UK HIGHER EDUCATION

Commissioned by the
Quality Assurance Agency

PROJECT REPORT

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Foreword

QAA has long been committed to understanding and meeting the needs of students, to help make sure they get the best possible experience from higher education. This report provides valuable evidence to help us in our work, and to guide universities and colleges. Now more than ever it is critical that providers and QAA act on what students say.

The report sheds new light on what students perceive as value for money, and what is important to them. It also provides evidence about the information students need and what they get, how their courses are managed and structured, and the role of technology in shaping their experiences. It raises the issue of what feedback students expect – something that comes up regularly in QAA's reviews and that universities and colleges still need to consider very carefully.

We are extremely grateful to Camille Kandiko and her team for the work they have undertaken in this report. I know it will spark useful and constructive debate, and provide evidence for any changes QAA and the wider higher education sector may make in response to its messages.

Anthony McClaran
Chief Executive
Quality Assurance Agency

Acknowledgments

The project team wishes to thank the students who generously gave their time to participate in this research project. Gratitude goes out to the individuals, academics, professional staff, Student Union staff and representatives who helped coordinate interviews and focus groups with students, and without their efforts this project would not have been possible. Thanks also goes out to the King's Experience Project interns who reviewed drafts and provided feedback throughout the project.

Many thanks goes to the QAA for commissioning this research, particularly for their interest in including student perspectives in policy research. Particular support and advice was given by Chris Taylor and Sarah Halpin, from the Student Engagement team, throughout the project, and their effort is graciously appreciated. Finally the team expresses gratitude to King's Learning Institute staff for support managing the project.

To cite: Kandiko, C. B. & Mawer, M. (2013). *Student Expectations and Perceptions of Higher Education*. London: King's Learning Institute.

Student Expectations and Perceptions of Higher Education

Executive Summary

Introduction

This Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)-funded research project explored the views of students in higher education across the UK in 2012-13, to investigate their expectations and perceptions of the quality of their learning experience and the academic standards of their chosen programmes of study. This project provides illustrative examples of the issues affecting student perceptions and expectations regarding quality and standards in the first year of a funding model in England that is significantly different both to that in existence in previous years and to that operated in the other countries of the UK.

Aims

- A better understanding of student perceptions of quality and standards, leading to the possibility of more effective relationships within and across institutions
- Sector, academic and student groups that are better equipped to understand student engagement and thus facilitate enhancement
- Examine the impact of recent policy developments on students' perceptions of quality
- A more developed understanding of how perceptions vary across student groups, institutional types and regional settings

Research consisted of conducting interviews and focus groups with over 150 students (primarily Years 1 and 2) at 16 institutions, across a range of mission groups, institutional types and UK-wide geographical locations. Concept maps of students' higher education experience were collected along with transcripts of interviews and focus groups. Open coding was conducted using grounded theory on selected transcripts, allowing themes to emerge from the data itself. These were compared with emergent themes from the concept maps and the codes were then refined. This iterative process has produced eight major themes with supporting concept maps, reported in the order prominence across the data.

This report represents a holistic view of the student experience from students' perspectives, encompassing a wide view of student life. This goes beyond what is often traditionally part of the academic student experience to include internships, work experience, extra-curricular activities, accommodation, facilities, a sense of community and transition, which are all what students expect as part of higher education, and from students' perspectives play a significant role in their learning experience. This report summarises how students view higher education, the management and organisation of their course and the role of the institution in fostering an environment for learning, opportunities for social activities and development of students' employability. Recommendations are made for how students' views can be represented in policy decisions, how institutions and the

higher education sector can respond to student expectations and how students themselves can engage in enhancing higher education.

In the selection of participants the aim was to represent the diversity within UK higher education, including part-time, mature, international and European Union students. Within the scope of this project we would not expect to achieve a full representation of higher education settings but we were not intending to do that: we wanted to illustrate the range of situations and different ways students perceive quality and standards and how this reflects on their current experiences. A limitation of the study was that despite best efforts, interviews were not conducted in Wales, although Welsh students were represented in the interviews. Below are key findings and selected recommendations, further recommendations are in the main text.

Key Findings: How Students View Higher Education: Ideology, Practices and Purposes

1. Students' Framing of Ideology: Consumerist ethos: Student perceptions of value.

A major finding from study was that dominant across all student year groups, institutional types and subjects, students have a consumerist ethos towards higher education, wanting 'value-for-money'. This was seen tangibly through sufficient contact hours and resources available and abstractly through institutions' investment in students, learning spaces and the educational community. This emerged across all year groups and locations (across the UK), rather than being particular for first-year students on the new fee regime in England. Students have at best a vague understanding of how their tuition fees are spent, and many do not think they are "getting their money's worth" (see Figure 1 and Map 1).

- Recommendation:** Institutions and the sector need to explain the relationship between fees and the quality and value of their degree. There is also a need for financial education and information for students on how universities are funded and where their money goes, as there is still a lack of understanding around the case for funding universities in a new way.

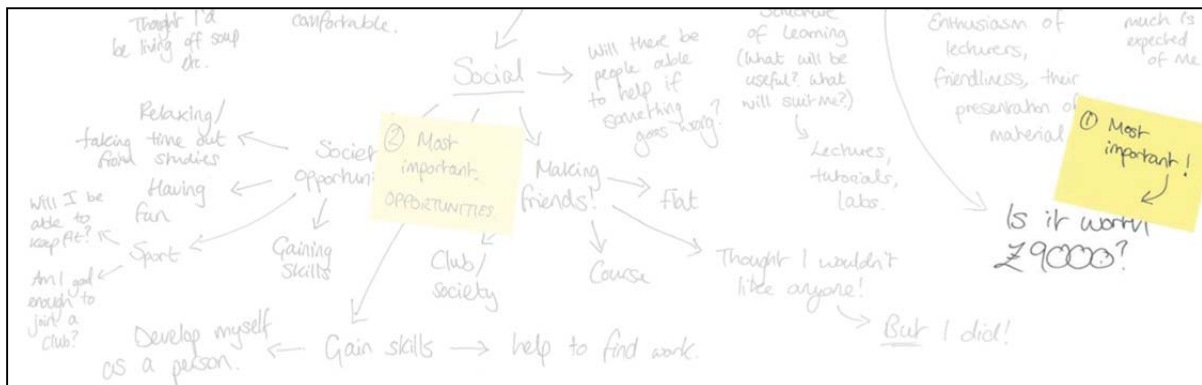
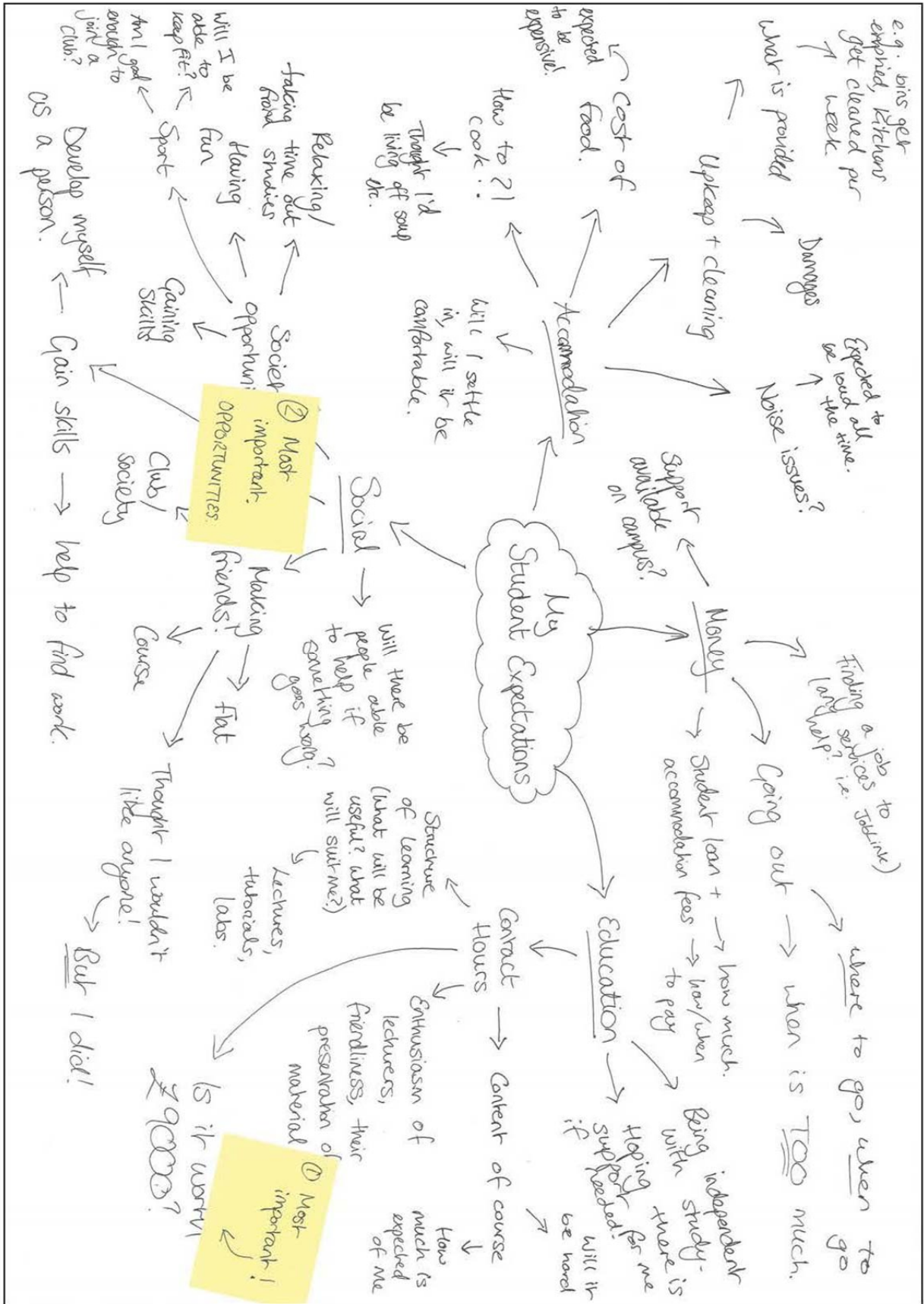


Figure 1. Snapshot of Concept Map 1. First year, Female, Chemistry, Teaching-intensive institution.



Map 1. First year, Female, Chemistry, Teaching-intensive institution.

Students perceived a lack of clear information about what most concerned them: essentially how can students find out if they are going to be (and what proportion of the time) taught by well-qualified, trained teaching staff in small settings? Students felt these factors had the greatest impact on their academic experience and are metrics that they would be able to base their market decisions on.

- **Recommendation:** To support student choice, there should be greater information and transparency over of information on how money is spent on teaching and learning activities, what qualifications do academics have in their subjects and for teaching, how are academics hired and trained and how teaching is structured and allocated. Information could include nuanced statistics on size of tutorials and seminars, department-level teaching staff-student ratios and staff teaching qualifications to allow students to choose courses offering what is most important to them.

2. Students' Framing of Practice: Student expectations of the learning environment: Clear benchmarks.

Students' expected their learning environment to meet clear benchmarks across four areas: instrumental (computers and physical spaces); organisational (timetabling and course structure); interpersonal (staff support and engagement); and academic (lecturers' knowledge and attitude towards students). Facilities and resources were central; if the institution is unable to effectively provide the environment in which the student can learn, it appears to be seen as failing in its mandate. Students increasingly reflect negatively on failures to meet their expectations.

- **Recommendation:** There needs to be clear and simple statements communicated for the most important aspects of a student's degree, focused at the course-level. Institutions should be cautious of using these as marketing opportunities and setting unrealistic expectations or 'selling' an undeliverable experience.

Students value face-to-face interactions for learning and support. Students viewed technology as a means to access resources and support studying, and no students mentioned pedagogical uses of digital technologies.

- **Recommendation:** Institutions should be cautious of using technology as a replacement for face-to-face interactions, or as a substitute for developing an active and collaborative learning environment and community.

3. Students' Framing of Purpose: Student expectations for employability: "Future-focus".

Across all subjects of study, the primary purpose for students entering higher education was to improve their career prospects and as a pathway for career enhancement. Students expected institutions to offer advice and guidance to support them in developing their employability for

future careers within and beyond their formal course. Students spoke of needing to go beyond their degree to gain the skills and experience they would need for employment, highlighting the importance of extra-curricular activities, internships and work placement opportunities. Students were rarely satisfied with centralised careers services.

- **Recommendation:** Institutions need to offer more course-level information and better organisation of their offering of internships, placements, work experience and skills support, all tailored to specific subjects, with support available from those with experience in those industries and fields. There is a need for more information on employability, with a focus on 'process' and development opportunities, rather than 'product' statistics.

Key findings: The Importance of Course-level Quality and Standards

4. Evaluation, feedback and feed-forward.

Students were concerned about evaluation and feedback at the course-level. Students wanted clear, on-going and open processes for evaluation, and feedback opportunities that could improve their own experience, not only providing commentary on what could help future students. Frustrations emerged around the opacity of comments being acted upon or communicated appropriately. Students noted differences in changes that helped them, which were often instrumental, such as those related to buildings and facilities, versus feedback that only helped future students—often core aspects of the design and delivery of the course. Students were generally more concerned about quality and format of feedback than the timing of it.

- **Recommendation:** Institutional feedback time targets may not be tackling the most salient issues in feedback quality. The pressure for quick feedback returns with limited staff time can exacerbate the problems students have identified with feedback detail and personalisation. Institutional policies should prioritise quality, format and timing of feedback in relation to other assessments, managed at the course level, over standardised feedback turnaround times.
- **Recommendation:** Students almost exclusively spoke of their educational learning experience in terms of their course. This raises the need for strong course-level management of curriculum, quality and standards, with a clear structure of academic management mirroring undergraduate student-facing aspects, including local feedback and evaluation, module and course review.

5. Staff: Attributes, practices and attitudes.

Students praised enthusiastic, experienced and engaged staff, but wanted mechanisms in place to develop staff and to manage 'bad' teachers. Students wanted staff to be qualified and

trained, and students expressed a desire for procedures to manage “bad teaching”, described as lecturers not knowing the course material, reading off slides and failing to offer any support to students. Despite having a consumerist approach to higher education, students complained about academics who ostensibly took the attitude of “just doing their job”. Students wanted lecturers who were passionate and knowledgeable about their subject, with sufficient content knowledge and teaching capability.

- **Recommendation:** Staff need to be supported by their institutions to provide the interaction and support that is important to students. This includes manageable teaching loads, a balance between teaching and research responsibilities and meaningful reward, recognition and progression opportunities related to teaching and support activities.

Students were aware of inconsistency in teaching competence and ability, they acknowledge personality differences and personal style, but have minimum expectations, such as not reading off slides or teaching straight out of a textbook. Students wanted teaching staff who were enthusiastic, experts in their field and met benchmarks of good teaching.

- **Recommendation:** There should be support for staff development and training (both initial and continuing support), public information about teaching qualifications, along the lines of the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) and institutional reward for teaching and recognition of teaching excellence.

6. Equity of opportunity: Personalisation versus standardisation.

Students wanted a personalised higher education experience, with small teaching sessions, opportunities to meet other staff and students. Students wanted acknowledgment of their individual circumstances and these to be accommodated, with flexibility and some degree of authorship over their degree experience. Students wanted options for a ‘tailored’ education, but with a sense of fairness and clear rules being maintained. The diversity across the sector indicates there is no one “student experience” rather each individual student has his or her own experience.

- **Recommendation:** There needs to be recognition that students enter higher education on different trajectories, they need different kinds and levels of support, and the institution needs to be responsive to students’ needs. A considered balance needs to be sought between having clear and consistent procedures and being flexible and accommodating for students.
- **Recommendation:** The role and function of personal and academic tutors may need to be revised at some institutions. Students should have clear avenues for support that they are comfortable using for personal and academic concerns.

Key findings: The Role of Students in the Institution

7. Students as stakeholders? Community, engagement and belonging.

Being part of a community and having a sense of belonging were the most important environmental aspects for students. This related each individual's engagement with the institution, and the institution with them, for the enhancement of the student's overall learning experience. Students wanted opportunities to interact with other students through Students' Union societies and clubs, institutional activities and other social opportunities; students from a variety of institutions spoke of wanting activities less centred on drinking, particularly with respect to Students' Union events.

Students wanted more interaction with staff, both within the classroom experience and beyond. To students, engagement meant all students having opportunities to engage with course and institutional-based activities, rather than in a "representational" context. Students' views suggest more of "a partnership of aims" rather than "a partnership of means" with staff at a local level, indicating more of a sense of collegiality with staff, rather than large-scale, high-level partnership work.

Students wanted opportunities to meet and interact with other students, engage with their course and participate in extra-curricular activities, both social and academic-related.

- **Recommendation:** There needs to be sophisticated promotion and coordination of student services, within institutions; this means building relationships between Students' Unions, institutional student services and support and departmental activities. Management and leadership can be provided at the institutional level through Director or Pro-Vice Chancellor of Student Engagement positions. Across the sector this requires greater support, promotion and development opportunities for those in student-facing roles.

A significant proportion of students had very limited contact with the Students' Union, particularly groups such as mature and part-time students, students on time-intensive pre-professional courses, and students who were not interested in a sporting or drinking culture.

- **Recommendation:** Students' Unions may want to promote the availability of non-drinking-associated activities, societies and clubs.
- **Recommendation:** To offer opportunities for the full range of students there may be need for dedicated institutional staff to work in partnership with Students' Unions and course-level management, mediating engagement with those students typically insulated from the Students' Union.

Despite many institutions adopting them, there was not a single mention of student charters in the interviews. Although charters may be seen as an efficient way to inform students about higher education, they seem to have negligible impact on students' expectations.

- **Recommendation:** Institutions and sector agencies should consider the purpose, role and effectiveness of student charters.

8. Transition into higher education.

Students' incoming expectations of higher education came from family and friends; secondary schooling and further education; and the general media and political discourse. Key features of transition for students were "feeling in the loop" with what was expected of them, balancing the various demands of higher education and developing independent learning approaches. Students' expectations rarely matched their subsequent experiences of higher education, indicating a potential need for guidance for students embarking on a degree course. It is noted that across institutions, subjects and demographic characteristics, students have varied reasons for entering higher education, information they used to choose an institution and their planned trajectories after higher education.

There was a recurrent theme about transgression of expectations, mostly these relate to expectations of higher education being shaped by the 'campus' discourse of the university, content and structure of courses, difficulty of work, availability of opportunities and degree of independent learning. It was common that students felt lost, unsure of what was expected of them and not sure of where to go for assistance in their transition to higher education.

- **Recommendation:** Institutions should consider direct interventions in students' transitional experiences, not only the general provision of services. Direct intervention strategies, such as peer mentoring of incoming students, were well regarded by students.

Further Student Concerns: Additional Recommendations

There were several additional issues raised by large number of students, as well as some significant omissions by students. These are noted here to better inform sector and institutional responses to students' concerns, particularly around issues of student life and technology.

- **Recommendation:** Regarding finances, students spoke as often about immediate financial concerns, such as money for food, rent and transport, as about tuition fees and student loans; there should be increased access to flexible part-time work, paid internships and educational maintenance loans and grants.

- **Recommendation:** There needs to be a collective, institution-wide response to support for student services and student affairs, offering a balance of course-based provision and access to centralised services coordinated at the course-level. This includes greater institutional responsibility, oversight and partnership with wider aspects of the student experience, including accommodation, transport, cheap and healthy food options, family-study balance and social activities.

Students tend to focus on functional aspects of IT infrastructure, including ease and reliability of accessing resources and quality of wireless internet, rather than innovative uses of technology in teaching. Students also continue to value face-to-face interactions for support and feedback.

- **Recommendation:** Institutions should consider students' preferences for functional infrastructure and face-to-face interactions when allocating resources related to teaching and technology.

Summary

Students have positive perceptions of higher education, but also clear expectations in mind of what institutions should provide to support and enable their learning and enhance their career prospects. Students wanted to be challenged in their learning, but also supported by the institution. Students almost exclusively spoke of their educational learning experience in terms of their course. This raises the need for strong course-level management of the curriculum, quality and standards, with a clear structure of academic management mirroring undergraduate student-facing aspects, including local feedback and evaluation, module and course review. There needs to be institutional-level support and management of quality enhancement and quality assurance of student engagement, individually and collectively, which can be coordinated through dedicated offices or senior appointments. Together this would allow for evaluation and feedback processes to be managed at the course level and coordinated at the institutional level, keeping in mind to seek, ask and report on feedback to and from students.

The trajectories of students into higher education and out of higher education are highly influential in shaping their perspectives. The question of what is 'quality' or 'good' about a particular institution should thus be framed within the contingent question of what a student is looking for in an institution, which may or may not be academic reputation. Whatever the institutional type, institutions need to develop a community and help students transition into it. Staff need to be supported by their institutions to provide the interaction and guidance that is important to students.

Across the sector there needs to be a focus on how students can enhance their employability within, related to and beyond their course. Students are investing significant amounts of time and money in their education, and expect institutions to do the same. At the same time, students need to be held responsible for their role in the institution, and further opportunities for students to engage should be encouraged. There is much work to be done across the higher education sector to support students, staff and institutions in this endeavour, working *with* not *for* students.

The Project: Exploring Student Expectations and Perceptions

Background

This report draws on primary data from a national study of student expectations and perceptions of higher education, leading to recommendations for quality assurance, enhancement and institutional practices to focus on what matters to students, and also to raise the profile of the student voice in policy. A fundamental issue is the relationship of student engagement discourse and what matters to students.

This project provides illustrative examples of the issues affecting student perceptions and expectations regarding quality and standards in the first year of a funding model in England that is significantly different both to that in existence in previous years and to that operated in the other nations of the UK. For the 2011-2012 academic year most tuition fees for students in England, Northern Ireland and Wales were around £3375 (with no fees for Scottish students). For 2012-2013, tuition fees for English students studying in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland could be up to £9000 (with Scotland maintaining a no fee policy for Scottish students, and no major fee hike for Welsh and Northern Irish students studying in their home countries). The major fee hike in England came with great publicity and raised many questions about the impact on students' decisions to attend higher education, what subject to study and what they would expect from higher education and their student experience.

In many ways, 'the student experience' is fused with the commodification of education—the turning of higher education into another business with a financial bottom line—arguably occluding more diverse perspectives on both 'students' and 'experience' (Sabri 2011). This project aims to understand from students' perspectives their experiences as students, highlighting the individual nature of each student's own experience and raising awareness of what matters to students in higher education. Further, this work provides examples of issues affecting quality and standards of higher education from students, in context of their experience and from the voice of individual students. Although much is written about what students want and expect from higher education, 'reality as experienced by the student' has an important additional value in understanding students' learning (Entwistle 1991) and in efforts to improve the quality of higher education. This highlights the difficulty in researching students' expectations and perceptions, largely due to the intensely participatory nature of higher education, which is both shaped and influenced by students themselves (James 2002).

Data collected from students on their expectations and perceptions of quality, standards and the student learning experience is a key part of bringing the student voice into quality assurance structures and institutional decision-making. This is relevant as the position of students in relation to higher education is dramatically changing across the countries of the UK. This empirically-based study provides a framework for how the student voice can feed into quality assurance decisions, and highlights what matters to students today. This work complements and goes beyond literature-based reports (Gibbs 2010; Trowler 2010) and quantitative studies (Bekhradnia 2013) and captures a

more holistic view of the student experience than student feedback surveys of teaching and learning (Griffin et al 2003).

Data from this report highlights the importance of individual student involvement in their learning experience. Drawing from a North American perspective, this is captured through the concept of student engagement which represents two key components (Kuh 2003). The first is the amount of time and effort students put into academic pursuits and other activities that decades of research show are associated with high levels of learning and development (Chickering & Gamson 1987; Ewell & Jones 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005). The second is how institutions allocate their resources and organise their curriculum, other learning opportunities and support services (Kuh 2003). These areas measure how institutions provide the environment for students that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success, broadly defined as persistence, learning and degree attainment (Kuh 2001). Essential to student engagement are students' expectations, and subsequent perceptions, of the student experience (Lowe & Cook 2003). Quality assurance determinations need to take into account how students engage, and how institutions can encourage and support educationally purposeful activities (Coates 2005).

The individual student approach of North American-style student engagement is contrasted with much of the collective and representational student engagement work in the UK, which has been defined by the QAA as the participation of students in quality enhancement and quality assurance processes, resulting in the improvement of their educational experience (QAA Quality Code, Chapter B5). Rather than focus specifically on how students viewed their role in quality assurance and enhancement processes, this project centred on students' perspectives of their student experience and the issues that affected the quality and standards of their experience. This provides a student-perspective on higher education, which covers a broad range of issues not always considered in context with one another by sector agencies, research reports or even institutions, with often rigid divides between academic and professional services.

Methodology

This project took a mixed methods approach, combining a critical analysis of the literature, primary data collection through qualitative concept map-mediated interviews (Kandiko & Kinchin 2013), which was triangulated with secondary data from institutional and sector policy analysis to explore student perceptions of higher education quality and standards. This broad comparative case study approach has a rigorous grounding in research methods, providing a wide set of data to develop illustrative case studies of students' engagement across the UK. The project approach was grounded in capturing and providing a vehicle for student voices, and was supported throughout by undergraduate student input and reflection.

Interviews were conducted with over 150 students in sixteen settings, representing four general institutional types (research-intensive, teaching-intensive, regional-focused and special interest) across the countries and regions of the UK. We analysed institutional documents and conducted interviews and focus groups with students from a wide range of departments and disciplines, reflecting academic subjects, pre-professional courses and joint honours degrees. In our selection of participants we aimed to represent the diversity within UK higher education, including part-time, mature, international and European Union students (see Table 1). Within the scope of this project we would not expect to achieve a full representation of higher education settings but we were not intending to do that: we wanted to illustrate the range of situations and different ways students perceive quality and standards and how this reflects on their current experiences.

Concept map-mediated interviews and focus groups (Kandiko & Kinchin 2013) were used to elicit students' expectations and perceptions of quality, standards and the student learning experience. In the interviews and focus groups, students were first asked to make concept maps of their student experience. Concept mapping (Novak 2010) is a method of graphic organisation. It is now widely reported in the literature for use in the sharing of individual knowledge and understanding.

Concept maps traditionally demonstrate two characteristics: a hierarchical structure and linked statements. Concept mapping has particular utility for research into understanding because it attempts to differentiate between information as knowledge and personal understanding (Kinchin et al., 2008). Because of the capacity of concept mapping to externalise understanding, concept maps provide "a window into students' minds" (Shavelson et al. 2005: 416). Concept map use within qualitative research can facilitate the eliciting of perceived importance of concepts and the visualising of the relationships between concepts (Wheeldon & Ahlberg 2012).

In the interviews, the student-generated concept map was used as a point of departure for a series of questions about how students' experiences mapped against their expectations and perceptions of higher education and issues affecting the quality of their education. This included probing students' perceptions of the major issues, and follow up questions about a number of questions related to quality and standards of teaching, learning and student engagement.

Demographics

Total participants: 153

Age

18 – 21	67	43.8%
22 – 30	33	21.6%
31+	26	17.0%
Not reported	27	17.6%

Gender

Male	57	37.3%
Female	94	61.4%
Not reported	2	1.3%

Study mode

Full time	132	86.3%
Part time	3	2.0%
Not reported	18	11.8%

Year of study

First	73	47.7%
Second	42	27.5%
Third-year+	38	24.8%

Institution type

Research-intensive	40	26.1%
Teaching-intensive	44	28.8%
Regionally-focused	27	17.6%
Specialist institutions	42	27.5%

Subject (Biglan 1973: 207)

Hard pure (e.g. physical sciences, mathematics)	11	7.2%
Hard applied (e.g. computer science, engineering)	17	11.1%
Soft pure (e.g. sociology, history)	47	30.7%
Soft applied (e.g. social work, law, education)	77	50.3%
Not reported	1	0.7%

Table 1. Demographics.

Analysis

Data were analysed using a multifaceted approach designed to incorporate the interview and focus group and concept map data. An initial phase of analysis consisted of informal coding of interview transcripts as data was collected to inform further interviews. Following the data collection phase, concept maps of students' higher education experience were collected along with transcripts of interviews and focus groups. Open coding was conducted using grounded theory on selected transcripts, allowing themes to emerge from the data itself. These were compared with emergent themes from the concept maps and the codes were then refined into more abstract focused codes. This iterative process produced eight major themes, with supporting concept maps, reported in the order prominence across the data. Concept maps were analysed visually initially. Major thematic areas were identified and categorised. Selected maps were chosen to illustrate key themes identified in the interview data.

Analysing focus group and interview data

Focus groups were analysed through an approach adapted from grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006; Corbin & Strauss 2008). Initially, two focus group sources from each institutional type were 'open-coded'. All codes were generated through conceptualising the data; none were created beforehand. This process produced approximately 500 text codes, such as 'Needing to buy your own books' and 'Feeling support is available if required'. After each group of two to three sources was coded, the codes produced were examined and cleaned for semantically identical codes (i.e. codes that meant the same thing, but were worded slightly differently). Groups of codes – categories—were built iteratively by grouping conceptually similar codes (e.g. 'Needing to buy your own books' and 'Paying for field trips') after each group of two to three interview transcripts. After open coding eight sources, the categories were reviewed again and additional coding appeared to add more content to existing categories, rather than creating new categories. This concluded the initial phase of the analysis, generating 24 categories from the data.

Next the categories were closely examined, combining common concepts or processes that were indicative of meta-level analytical issues. For example several categories related to the balance of support and guidance, such as 'Contact and input', 'Balancing guidance and autonomy', and 'Support and flexibility' all indicated a common concern. From this category analysis 19 'focused codes' were generated, such as 'Receiving sufficient guidance'. These codes were indicative of more abstract conceptual issues in the data which had been indicated by more concrete, specific issues the initial open coding highlighted.

In order to test the fit of the focused codes, a further eight sources were analysed, including two from each institution type, using the focused codes rather than generating new codes. As the sources were coded using the focused codes, the meanings of codes were further adjusted. In three cases the name of the focused code was changed slightly to better capture the nuance of what was being described (e.g. 'Studying to get a job' to 'Studying to advance your career'). Any data which was not well coded by the focused codes was labelled 'does not code': this totalled nine instances (i.e. nine sentences or groups of sentences) out of the sources coded. In several cases these data

were re-coded after expansion of the scope of a focused code. The remainder did not relate to a common or coherent concept that could form a new focused code and thus were set aside as 'minor' issues in the data.

All 19 focused codes were retained. These codes were then used to construct the themes presented in the report (building upon and modifying the themes created through the preliminary analysis). The associations between these focused codes were examined to consider whether particular codes linked strongly with others. For some codes links were evident – for instance the focused code 'studying to advance your career' shared common issues with the focused code 'going beyond the degree' – and are discussed together in the report. Finally, by comparing the findings to prevalent contemporary debates in higher education policy and practice, several 'themes of omission' were identified; issues frequently discussed in academic literature, government or institutional policy, or the educational media which were absent from the findings. As an additional check on the data, the focused codes and themes were discussed with a group of four undergraduate students for clarity and comprehensiveness.

Analysing concept maps

Concept maps were first used in the study as a starting point for discussion in the interviews, and as reference points throughout the interviews. The maps were initially analysed visually and holistically (Nesbit & Adesope 2006; Novak 2010), taking emergent structures into account (Kinchin et al 2000). The maps were then analysed for reflection of the 19 focused codes from the data. Additional themes from the maps that were not reflected in the codes were noted. This included many of the wider aspects of the student experience, including accommodation, social activities and safety.

Next the maps were analysed for structures representing broad categories, for example 'studying', 'students' union', 'sports' and 'family'. The maps were divided into those with broad discernible categories and those without. For the maps with broad categories (120 maps), the categories listed were tallied to develop a list of the twenty most commonly referenced (all with at least five indications). The analysis of the maps was compared with that of the interview and focus group data to look for any gaps. Finally, maps were selected that represented students' views regarding specific codes, themes and visualisations of the student experience. These were chosen for clarity, structure and representativeness.

Developing recommendations

The conclusions and recommendations were drawn from the analytical process described above and that of analysing the concept maps. The recommendations are based on analytically relevant approaches to achieving the most positive outcomes in relation to particular report themes. For example, in discussing issues of 'transition' we advocate approaches which cohere with the data on the most positive and least troublesome transitional experiences. This is important given the current trend in higher education to view students as consumers, and implies that knowing what consumers expect is crucial in delivering high-service quality (Tsiligiris 2011). However, given that the data is by definition from one stakeholder's viewpoint (the student), both the data and recommendations should be viewed as a vision for higher education quality from this particular viewpoint.

The Findings: Student Expectations and Perceptions

There was an immense amount of data collected from the interviews. Overall, students were positive about their higher education experiences. What is often lost in reports on higher education is the profound sense of how important and life-changing higher education can be for many students. Students put a lot into their higher education experience, in terms of time, effort, energy and finance, and as a result have justifiable expectations of the environment that institutions provide and the support offered for learning. There were some noted gaps between what students expected of higher education and what they subsequently perceived their experience to be, mostly these related to expectations of higher education being shaped by the 'campus' discourse of the university, content and structure of courses, difficulty of work, availability of opportunities and degree of independent learning. This varied across institutional type and degree programmes.

The data from the study is summarised under eight main themes. These represent the areas of greatest concern to a majority of students interviewed. The first three themes cover how students view higher education, in terms of ideology, practices and purposes. Recommendations from this section are largely directed at sector agencies and government, but also at institutions and their professional and student services.

The next set of three themes highlights the importance of course-level quality and standards for students. Although many policies about the student experience are set at the institutional-level, students experience higher education at the course-level, and subsequently this is where they largely direct their concerns. Most of the recommendations in this section are directed at the course-level, although course-level leadership does need higher-level management and support. Several issues in this section also highlight the need for sector agency support and quality assurance of areas that strongly affect students' higher education experience.

The last set of two themes covers the role of students in the institution. This includes recommendations for institutions regarding students as stakeholders, their engagement with the institution and the fostering of a sense of belonging and community. The final theme covers transition, with recommendations directed at higher education institutions and other sector bodies to inform and support students in the often challenging transition into higher education.

The data represents the views of students' expectations and perceptions of higher education. These should be taken into account as one of many stakeholder perspectives on higher education. In this light, recommendations were made to address issues raised by students about the quality and standards of their higher education experiences. Hopefully these can support developing a partnership approach to working *with*, not *for*, students to enhance higher education.

Students' framing of ideology of higher education

1. Consumerist ethos: Student perceptions of value

There was no noticeable trend in changes to students' expectations and perceptions of higher education between first-year and second-year students. What did emerge was a 'consumerist ethos' across all student years and across countries in the UK with different fee regimes, regarding the value of their educational experience and the value they expect in return for their investment. The overwhelming majority of value discussions centred on pecuniary value and were framed by the issue of tuition fees.

Quality is a complex concept and needs to be considered in context and in relation to the perceptions of the purpose of higher education (Harvey & Williams 2010). Students generally had little awareness of national and high-level institutional quality assurance and quality enhancement mechanisms, such as accreditation or university committee and oversight structures. Similarly, students generally had minimal knowledge about how higher education was funded, and how changes in fees were related to changes in government funding for higher education. Students' higher education experiences were largely local, with most discussions and quality-related issues occurring at the course-level, which is how students' views of higher education were predominantly framed.

Two broad perceptions of value were reflected in the data. First is a *hedonic conception of value* where value is based on comparisons of a set of abstracted metrics (Podolny & Mill-Popper 2004, 94). This is seen when key aspects of higher education are decomposed into key attributes and compared, exemplified through league tables and Key Information Sets, and represents a traditional consumerist approach to education. The second perception is a *transcendent conception of value* where value depends on what oneself and others have invested (Podolny & Mill-Popper 2004, 94). This more holistic approach highlights the cognitive and emotional investment that students make in their education and the institution in them. These two conceptions are reflected in the four main themes discussed below.

Getting sufficient value for the investment of time and money students were making was a significant concern, with extensive discussion of economic value and the recent changes in higher education funding. This sense was heightened by awareness of changes to tuition fees and the media and political discourse around higher education funding. Tangible measures of value, such as contact time and new buildings, were often used as proxies to inform judgements about 'value for money', although for some the outcome measure of graduate employment or enduring usefulness of the degree was more important. Whilst financial value was an important concept in the data, it was not a determining one; there were no examples of cost being deployed as a reason for choice of institution and the concept of a fees 'market' was almost entirely absent.

'[the] sense of community is quite loose and it's getting, like, dispersed. It's not that present which is kind of a shame. You would want to have a close-knit relationship with tutors and your professors and this, like, feel that the people are just doing their job and it's not really closeness with the people who are teaching so this is quite missing and I guess this is a symbol of capitalising the education'

[First year, Male, Fine art and history of art, Specialist institution]

Although the framing of higher education in economic terms was pervasive, 'value for money' sometimes seemed to offer a lens through which students could reflect on high and low quality practices and experiences. Concerns about low contact time appear less easily dismissed by the familiar refrain that higher education is about 'independent learning' when such issues are framed as the institution delivering poor value for students' high financial investment.

Value for money

For many students, getting 'value for money' was an important factor in shaping their student experience:

'I think now that we're paying so much, sometimes I find myself thinking am I getting what I'm paying for, and then I think to myself... we're in three days a week and then two days a week after Christmas and then, it's only a two term year and you just think, I'm paying so much money for it and you put so much time and effort and everything into it, and then I think just the financial pressure really hits you and you think, well, I'm paying £9,000 just for this year, is it worth it?'

[First year, Female, Social Work, Teaching-intensive institution]

Students frequently reflected on the relative value of their educational experience in comparison to their financial input through tuition fees. The query 'is it worth it?' resonated with quite a few students and there was a pervasive tone of uncertainty about the value of higher education in light of the significant financial investment required (see Map 1). Few students unambiguously asserted the value of higher education in economic (or other) terms, most questioned whether they were really receiving their due given the tuition costs, and some were strident in their rebuke of the institution for ostensibly not providing value for money. Two general observations can be made of these trends. Firstly, although few students were entirely convinced their institution offered 'good value', none of them offered an alternative. As such, it seems there is uncertainty regarding the financial value of higher education, but not necessarily a desire for, or ready access to, an alternative route. Secondly, within the trend of financial framing of higher education, there was a tendency amongst students to identify contact class time as the main, or only, cost for which tuition fees were paid.

Several humanities students noted that it seemed a waste of money to spend so much on fees and spend so little time in the classroom. One student remarked that contact hours were 'a tangible measure' of value; straightforward to quantify and consequently make judgements on value. Some students worked out the cost of their contact time mathematically, presumably by dividing the total fees by the total contact time, often expressing dissatisfaction with figures such as '£200 per lecture

hour' that seemed to be yielded by such calculations. Although students considered other elements of their experience, such as having access to a university library, to be something for which they were paying, it was a less visible and tangible element of value.

'People have... presumably, a lot higher expectations now. They're generally going to equate that to the money they're spending to study at a particular university, and so when they do study there and they get engrossed in student life and all these experiences, they are always in the back of mind saying, you know, paying £9,000 per year for this, is this worth so and so'

[Second year, Male, International Politics, Research-intensive institution]

Part of the catalyst for feelings of uncertainty about the financial value of higher education appeared to be the changing fees structure within England. We did not find evidence of a sharp division of perspective between students in their first year (paying £9000 tuition fees) and other years (on lesser fees), but rather a general ambiguity over what increasing tuition fees mean for the higher education experience students received. Numerous students, when reflecting on the shifting fees regime, questioned what substantive changes had been realised through significant increase in financial input from students.

'I think you do buy the time you spent at university and since it has gone up and I've talked to a few of the more mature students, and they're paying three grand for the same as what we're paying nine grand, and I think, well, that's kind of a big jump. What is so valuable to make it that big? It's not because it's got a new building on the side, it's nothing like that, because it's every university'

[First year, Female, Social Work, Teaching-intensive institution]

This sense of "symbolic value", in both a tangible sense, such as contact hours discussed further below, but also more ephemeral, such as the institutional investment in student life, buildings and spaces, generally represented a more consumerist attitude. However, some students also reflected upon a more transcendent conception of value of the effort they put into their degree, particularly the sense of whether their effort would lead to a 'good job' (not necessarily judged by being a high-paying job).

The disparities in fees regimes for students highlighted their perception of homogeneity of provision for all students, with both first year students and other students noting that little seemed different for those paying more in fees. Some students observed that no new buildings or student spaces—tangible investment projects—had been created to justify the increase in fees to be paid. Few, if any, students felt that the rise in tuition fees had translated into demonstrable change, leading several to question whether such fees were warranted. Overall, students have at best a vague understanding of how their tuition fees are spent, and many do not think they are "getting their money's worth".

- **Recommendation 1**

Institutions and the sector need to explain the relationship between fees and the quality and value of their degree. There is also a need for financial education and information for

students on how universities are funded and where their money goes, as there is still a lack of understanding around the case for funding universities in a new way.

Embodiment of value: Contact time

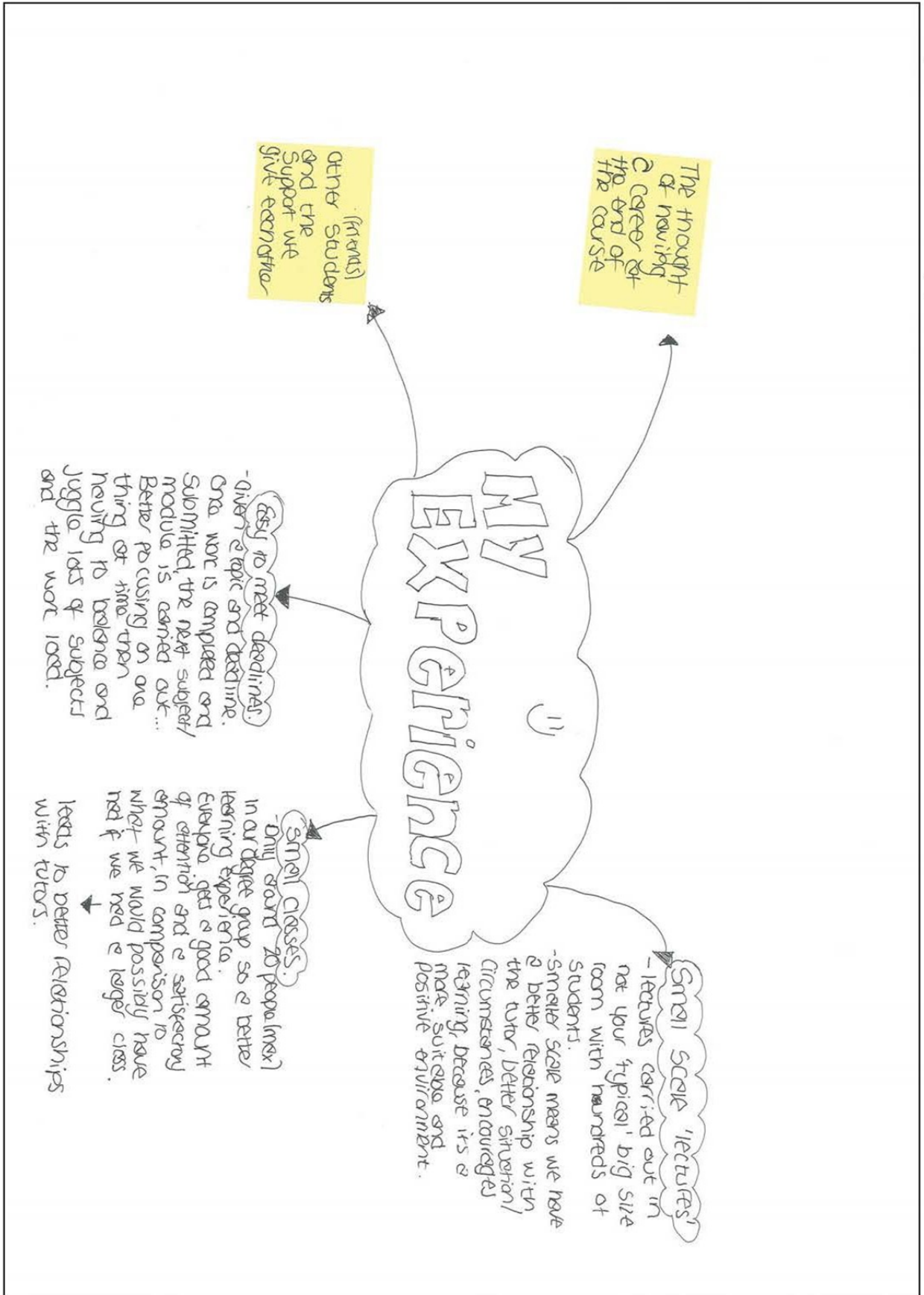
The primary way students referenced issues of quality and value in their degree was through contact time. Students questioned if they were getting sufficient contact for the amount they were paying (regardless of that was). Whilst, as repeatedly reported (Bekhradnia 2013; National Union of Students 2012) students want ‘more contact time’, through interviews with students we found they wanted more ‘close support’, through contact time in small seminars and tutorials, and definitely not more lecture hours. Contact time was considered in hours per week, the yearly length of academic courses and in the quality of the hours received, particularly time in lectures versus seminars and tutorials. One student remarked about the efficiency of tutorials in terms of learning gains compared to large lectures.

Our research confirmed previous studies which indicated that students expect to be taught through a combination of formal and interactive lectures but prefer a mix of interactive lectures and group-based activities (Sander et al. 2000); students’ least favoured format was the formal lecture (see Figure 2 and Map 2). Exhibiting transcendent conceptions of value in terms of contact time, students were keen to have more of the contact time that suited them most effectively, either through increasing the total contact hours or re-balancing existing contact time. Similarly, the desire for particular types of classes highlights that raw amounts of contact time were not the only concern expressed by students, but rather a correlate of the quality of academic guidance available to students. Even small group contact time, widely preferred by students, could be unproductive, especially when seminars were deemed to be excessively student-led and lacking academic input.



Figure 2. Snapshot of Concept Map 2. First year, Female, Health and social sciences, Specialist institution.

Across disciplinary groups, once contact hours per week reached a critical point (around 15-20), students no longer had a concern with the balance of contact hours, independent study time and other course components. Students with less than ten contact hours a week generally expressed discontent with their course’s value for money.



Map 2. First year, Female, Health and social sciences, Specialist institution.

'I'm on the international students' fee system and so I'm... more aware about contact hours and the value that I'm getting from each of my courses and that's why I'm so glad that I took up a language this year...We get more contact hours and more personal attention because the classes are smaller, I feel, personally, more invested in that course, because the workload is more intense and I also feel that I'm getting better value for what I'm paying.'

[Second year, Female, English literature, Research-intensive institution]

Overall, contact time was viewed as the most important site of academic guidance within students' educational experience. Reflection on the sufficiency of guidance offered within contact time was an important marker of students' disposition toward the quality of their educational experience. Although it is the absolute total that is most cited as a measure of value, it is balanced with a variety of other 'value' concerns, such as 'spoon feeding' and transmission-oriented teaching, the offering of extra and co-curricular activities, including work experience, representation involvement and social events.

Despite media and political discourse focused on hedonic conceptions of value, for example average post-degree earnings, students often place more weight on transcendent conceptions in relation to their higher education experience. Students want more 'high-quality' contact time, in small seminars and tutorials run by qualified teaching staff, not simply more lectures.

- **Recommendation 2**

Institutions should support departments in ensuring staff are qualified and trained and that students are offered sufficient small-scale seminars and tutorials.

Tangible value: Resources

The resources the institution offered and what additional costs students faced were summarised as 'what do you get for what you pay'. Additional costs were frequently a source of frustration for students who felt they were already paying significant tuition fees that should include textbooks, field trips, printing, and so forth. Whilst a few institutions across the sector supplied these materials to new students, this was not universal practice and frustration, and sometimes student action, resulted. In light of the fees changes some students also indicated they would appreciate some form of symbolic value or gesture from the institution to go some way towards justifying the increases.

Whilst students acknowledged that gestures such as course-specific clothing or provision of text books would not account for the almost-trebling of tuition costs, they indicated that they would feel that the institution was at least attentive to offering them greater value than if they were paying the significantly lower tuition costs of previous years. Second year students and others made similar statements and were equally ill-disposed to the tuition fee rises. One student noted that rather than representing a divide between current students, the framing of higher education practice within a discourse of financial value was a progressive transformation of student disposition:

'I think even though I'm not paying the higher fees, I think there's like a heightened awareness of what you might be getting in terms of like what you've given and whether it's like worth it but, yes, I think generally I am just like, oh, well, quite satisfied with it because I

feel like I have got a lot out of it. But you kind of like feel for others and like so it's kind of... it does cross your mind and you're thinking like, hmm, I wonder if like if that... it would be worth it if I paid like the higher fees, or it's worth it for them.'

[Third year, Female, Law, Research-intensive institution]

Tuition fees in this sense represent less a reality of students' financial input into higher education, but rather a policy discourse that shapes their evaluation of the student experience. As such, second and third year students appeared just as disposed to posing questions of value in terms of the higher rate of tuition fees as the first year students who were actually paying the higher rate. Another student noted that thinking about higher education in terms of financial return was something relatively new to her, an awareness raised by the media and political discourse of higher education funding that affected her now and those she now saw going to university as new students far more so than when she had first entered higher education. The majority of students were either unaware of the changes made to teaching block grants or were aware but felt that their institution should nonetheless be offering more to undergraduate students.

Return on investment

Quite a few students noted the reputational value of a degree, their subject and that of the institution. For some students the value of a degree could be better assessed by the outcome variable of employment. Given that desired graduate employment was the primary aim of higher education for most students, it was perhaps surprising that the availability of graduate jobs was not raised more often. Viewed in this fashion, the value of higher education could also be eroded by actions beyond institutional or student control:

'I want it to be that this degree is still worth what it is now because in three years' time if it's not the same and we've done three years of this degree, then it would be really painful...Government policies are changing, so we're sort of in the middle of it all, aren't we?'

[First year, Female, Social Work, Teaching-intensive institution]

As this Social Work student observes, changes in government policy and subsequent change in institutions could significantly influence both the reputational value and practical value of a degree. Students studying in vocational subjects particularly faced the prospect of value being eroded by the obsolescence of content through changes in the professions. Yet future changes need not always be deleterious to the value of a degree. For instance, one student observed that the on-going fortunes of institutions in national and international rankings influenced the reputational value of the degree he was studying and thus progress to higher rankings may improve the value of his degree for gaining entry into desired employment.

Despite the prevalent framing of value in terms of financial investment and return, money was not always at the heart of students' decisions on higher education. No student indicated they had chosen an institution based solely on its cost and, whilst cost provided some influence on certain students' decisions, there was no indication of the educational 'market', in which institutions would compete on cost, implied by recent governmental policy. Rather the cost of studying provided a

framing for evaluating the higher education experience at a specific institution, rather than a genuine differentiation between institutions. When cost did play a part in students' decision making about which institution to attend, it was in concert with other issues perceived to be more important, such as the institution being geographically convenient, or the waiving of tuition fees on certain NHS-sponsored health courses. Differentiation on the basis of fees charged for courses may require time to 'bed in' on the basis that fees changes only occurred very recently, but it is difficult to see how a market situation will emerge when there is parity across the tuition costs of so many courses.

A consumerist ethos emerged throughout students' expectations and perceptions, with positive and negative consequences. Positively, students reflected on what they were investing financially in higher education and felt the need to invest time studying and on developing their portfolio of skills. On the negative side, students saw themselves as dissatisfied customers in relation to many aspects of their experience, especially when minimum expectations were not met.

'I think it's now a sort of consumer sort of thing, like I'm paying for this so I must get this in return. At the beginning, I felt myself thinking like that, but then it takes... the whole idea of learning, it takes that away so you have to try not to think about it like that.'

[Second year, Female, Social Work, Teaching-intensive institution]

Students perceived a lack of clear information about what most concerned them: essentially how can students find out if they are going to be (and what proportion of the time) taught by well-qualified, trained teaching staff in small settings? Students felt these factors had the greatest impact on their academic experience and are metrics that they would be able to base their market decisions on. From the concept maps, students raised two main questions about value: Was the degree worth the money? Was the degree worth the effort? Some concluded yes, others left such questions unanswered.

- **Recommendation 3**

To support student choice, there should be greater information and transparency over of information on how money is spent on teaching and learning activities, what qualifications do academics have in their subjects and for teaching, how are academics hired and trained and how teaching is structured and allocated. Information could include nuanced statistics on size of tutorials and seminars, department-level teaching staff-student ratios and staff teaching qualifications to allow students to choose courses offering what is most important to them.

Students' framing of the practices of higher education

2. Student expectations of the learning environment: Clear benchmarks

Adopting Herzberg's (1993) theory of the motivation and work, students' expectations and perceptions of quality and standards can be explained by his two-factor theory of 'hygiene' and 'motivation' factors. Herzberg (1993) posits that the absence of *hygiene factors*, such as quality of learning spaces, can lead to dissatisfaction, but their presence does not elicit strong emotion. Conversely, *motivation factors* can inspire engagement and push students to go beyond their expectations, whilst a lack of motivation factors may not lead to dissatisfaction, (although would mean that students are likely to be only minimally engaged). Motivation factors can difficult to isolate, but are often indicated by what students describe in processes of good teaching and a challenging course environment.

The term 'minimum benchmark' is used here in the way students mentioned 'standards', as an acceptable level of a practice or process of their student experience. Students' reflections on minimum benchmarks were most commonly negative, which reflects the way in which benchmarks were often posited as a minimum or expected level of performance against which success was evaluated. This particularly applied to organisational issues, in which the benchmark invoked established the institution's responsibility for providing a consistently well organised, clearly communicated educational experience. The presence of any form of benchmark indicates a comparative frame of reference against which judgements about performance can be made. Students can be taken to be experts on their own experience of teaching, organisation, and so forth, but this should not preclude interrogation of the assumptions upon which students' expectations – which are clearly influential in shaping their judgements about institutional performance – are based.

Most students had clear benchmarks in mind for the learning environment. If these benchmarks were met, students often had little to say about their learning environment. If they were not met, students were often quite vocal about their discontent. Students' frames of reference for making such judgements were drawn from a variety of sources, including their expectations about higher education and comparison to other experiences, within a module, course, or between institutions. As such, minimum benchmarks were linked to issues of inconsistency, expectations students brought to higher education and the availability of guidance and support. There was discussion of the institution as both challenging and supporting students, but much more of an emphasis was on the institution's support role.

Students see the institution as the provider of effective infrastructure for learning to take place. Facilities and resources are central; if the institution is unable to effectively provide the environment in which the student can learn, it appears to be seen as failing in its mandate. This failure might be an overt administrative problem, such as providing conflicting timetables, or a lack of resource, such as too few computers or too little library space. Whilst some students have noted that they understand administration of higher education to be challenging, all appear united in the assertion

that one key role for the institution is the provision of infrastructure for learning and, consequently, failures to do so are seen as failures in educational quality. Conceptions of minimum benchmarks fell into four main categories: instrumental, organisational interpersonal and academic categories.

Instrumental Expectations: Resources for Learning

Students' discussion of facilities related primarily to the learning environment, including aesthetic and functional qualities. Students expect a reasonable number of (available) computers, regular wireless internet access and sufficient (available) library books. Many of the facilities issues students discussed related to accessing resources.

'I was doing biology of cancer and there was about 250 on that course, and for one topic the [lecturer] was insisting that everyone should read this amazing book, and I went to the library and there was two copies and one was lost, and it was like this big kind of hardback beast and like no one's going to be able to buy it, so it was not very helpful.'

[Third year, Female, Biochemistry, Research-intensive institution]

It was notable however, in addressing issues of expectations in relation to their learning experience, several students mentioned the importance of maintaining facilities. The aesthetic quality of the learning environment was viewed as indicative of the effort by institutions in providing an effective learning environment. Dilapidation and disrepair in buildings was looked upon poorly and, in some cases, viewed comparatively between institutions when students had experience of other institutions. The condition of facilities also linked to teaching quality and low-grade facilities could exert significant deleterious influence on students' experiences of teaching:

'I remember the room, that it was really cramped in that lecture room, and it was quite warm and humid, and it was, like, for an hour...I just failed to, even get to grips with [the lecture material], because it was an awful environment. That's probably the worst lecture room, probably, at the uni, I reckon.'

[First year, Male, Sports Psychology, Teaching-intensive institution]

Unsurprisingly, lecture theatres which proved to detract from the teaching and learning experience did not meet students' minimum expectations. Although no specific facilities expectations were offered, generally there appeared to be an assumption that the environment should be *at least* 'neutral' insofar as it did not make student life (and learning) more difficult. Spatial elements of facilities, such as communal campus spaces or libraries with extensive opening hours, were more readily identified as high quality than technical infrastructure elements of facilities, such as internet and computer access. In this context technology represents a hygiene factor, because students assumed a level of provision of computing facilities and inability to access a computer, for instance, was perceived more readily as a failure of the institution than ability to access a computer was perceived as a success.

Technology was an area students were constantly disappointed by. They wanted technological infrastructure and access to resources to be provided and maintained, and what was promised, such as recorded lectures, to be delivered upon. A few students remarked that some institutions pushed

for technology to replace face-to-face teaching and support, such as through wikis and discussion boards, but they would prefer for basic services, such as wireless internet access, to be prioritised.

- **Recommendation 4**

There should be better coordination between academic staff and library staff about the availability and accessibility of resources. Academics should consider availability and costs of materials when recommending course materials to students.

- **Recommendation 5**

Institutions should be cautious of using technology as a replacement for face-to-face interactions, or as a substitute for developing an active and collaborative learning environment and community.

Organisational Expectations: Managing the Environment for Learning

As with the technical infrastructure of facilities, effective and clear organisation was widely perceived to be a minimum benchmark of the student experience and lack of clarity or organisational disruption was viewed as the institution failing to meet this expectation. Students appeared particularly aware of the structure and organisation of contact time. Timetable clashes, lack of information about classes and classes cancelled or rescheduled (particularly without proper notice) were viewed negatively by students. A significant amount of dissatisfaction that students expressed about their institution related to the effectiveness of organisation, exacerbated by widespread frustration that organisational problems often seemed, from the 'student-eye view' at least, straightforward to avoid or correct. Timetabling issues particularly appeared to rouse ire due to the lack of clarity over how timetabling was arranged and lack of recourse for students with timetabling clashes.

I understand that the University has a lot to do and there are many, many courses, many lecturers and many people, and many people doing different jobs. But the one thing that the university should be organised with is, time...time keeping and time management, and bookings, really, because that's what you go to university for in essence... to study.

[First year, Male, Sports Psychology, Teaching-intensive institution]

Joint honours degrees and combined programmes, representing over a sixth of students interviewed, presented a common incidence of breakdown, with almost all joint degree students in the data expressing concerns over the infrastructure of the programme. These concerns linked to: systemic infrastructure (timetables, assessment deadlines), integration (academic crossover and synergy between subjects) and awareness (recognition of joint students' views and needs in course planning). Concerns over learning infrastructure are not *particular to* joint honours students, but they do appear *particularly acute* for joint honours students. One clear finding reported universally for joint honours students was the prevalence of organisational and communicational difficulty between departments involved in joint degrees which left students frustrated and often feeling neglected by the institution. The sentiments expressed below are typical:

I study law and politics as joint honours. I'm actually quite disappointed with the lack of communication between the two schools, and there's very good communication with the law school, because that's where I spend the majority of my time, but with the politics I feel that I'm not supported very well, so that was the bad. And they don't communicate at all together, so I'm not really aware of anything that's going on the politics side of things, because they, the university regard me as more of a law student than a politics student.

[Second year, Female, Law, Regionally-focused institution]

They just really seem to treat it [joint programmes] like two different degrees... the lectures and seminars this year, they just, like, they timetabled it so that our seminar for one half of the degree clashed with the lecture for another so we just physically couldn't do it and it was a big struggle to try and get them to change it even though...we just went to the office and we were like "you clashed the two" and they said that it was full at the moment so we'd have to wait to see if some people wanted to switch...

[Second year, Female, Media and Sociology, Specialist institution]

Disappointment with joint honours degrees appeared to reflect an expectation that students would feel part of both departments involved in the degree, but in reality most felt either marginal members of one department and students of another or, in worst cases, neglected in both. The multiple links between organisational problems within joint degrees and other salient minimum expectations emphasises how important department-level experiences are for students (Gibbs 2012), particularly when considering academic issues.

- **Recommendation 6**

Joint honours courses need stronger management and coordination by and across course leaders. Where students are allowed to do joint degrees, course leaders need to facilitate and oversee the organisational and structural elements of the combined course.

Interpersonal Expectations: Responsiveness

Students had expectations of the responsiveness and level of support from the institution, drawing on academic staff, professional staff and fellow students. Issues of institutional responsiveness related to expectations about the speed at which the institution would react to potential (or actual) problems or student requests for information. Although no absolute time limit was set, there was widespread feeling that institutions should respond quickly and take action to resolve concerns. Particularly in the case of urgent queries, such as the case of missing books or timetables, institutions were expected to provide near-instantaneous solutions; particularly as, following the discussion on organisational issues, such problems were often viewed as institutions failing to meet minimum expectations. Although organisational shortcomings were widely regarded as institutional failings there may be recognition that problems will inevitably occur in a complex (and heavily populated) institution and thus institutional responsiveness is of paramount importance.

Academic Expectations: Course Content and Delivery

Lastly, students had expectations of curricular content and delivery. An area in which minimum benchmarks appeared consistent across students was the need for departments with academics

with sufficient content knowledge to effectively teach subjects. Situations in which students perceived tutors to be assigned to teach modules for which they were insufficiently knowledgeable attracted severe criticism from students. Understanding the subject being taught was clearly perceived to be a minimum benchmark of competence for an academic and, whilst students had differing stances toward self-directed learning, there was general dissatisfaction when tutors were unable to provide subject-content support and students felt that they were learning the topic alongside the staff members (ostensibly) teaching them.

A less often discussed expectation was the content of the course itself and the degree to which this content measured up to students' perception of the appropriate level, or type, of content within the academic programme. As might be expected, students' perspectives were divided on the content of their courses, which may reflect differing expectations of particular students or differences between the degree programmes studied. There was no evidence to indicate a perceived difference in content expectations between institutional types.

What was evident from comments about curricula content, however, was that the relevance of taught content to the students' perception and definition of the subject and contemporaneity of content were salient factors to students when evaluating the quality of a course. This indicates that, perhaps unsurprisingly, one expectation students have in relation to their student experience is the quality of material on the degree programme they are studying, in addition to, and beyond, the means of delivery. The content of courses was scrutinised both for its academic rigour and for its coherence with the industries to which it purported to relate. One notable concern observed the contrast between academic and industry perspectives on subject content:

'a lot of the academics in the management school have never held a management role, so their teaching is all, kind of, skewed through theory...I'm thinking actually, well, we've been [on industry placement] and what you're saying is wrong. I, kind of, feel the same way with employability. All this stuff's doing CV workshops and other stuff, I've, kind of, looked at it and laughed every time an e-mail's popped into my inbox this year, because I've seen it and thought, well, that's wrong. That's completely opposite of what people in these situations who are recruiting and hiring have told me.'

[Fourth year, Male, Management, Teaching-intensive institution]

The sense that some academic content might be 'out-of-touch' with industry, both in terms of subject content and guidance on employability, is a concern of particular note when taken in tandem with the recognition that the majority of students indicated their purpose of study was to advance their career. Students may need more support and guidance about how curriculum decisions are made and for what purpose. Curriculum content expectations thus may be constituted of both academic benchmarks - which relate to, for instance, the inclusion of particular strands of literature deemed especially relevant to a literature degree - and coherence with subjects as practiced in industry settings.

Students increasingly reflect negatively on failures to meet their expectations. From the concept maps, students included notions of academic expectations, such as the quality of lectures, course

structures, both positively and negatively, as well as the number and length of seminars. They also included what facilities were provided, with examples such as expensive cafeteria food and the availability of resources such as books and computers.

- **Recommendation 7**

There needs to be clear and simple statements communicated for the most important aspects of a student's degree, focused at the course-level. Institutions should be cautious of using these as marketing opportunities and setting unrealistic expectations or 'selling' an undeliverable experience.

Students' framing of the purposes of higher education

3. Student expectations for employability: "Future-focus"

Students' dominant view of the purpose of higher education was as a pathway to 'advance your career', but this subsumed ideas of higher education as vocational training, a personally transformative experience and getting a job. Employability can be considered as a process and product of learning in higher education (Aamodt & Havnes 2008). There was a sense that content was valued because it led to employability. Students spoke of wanting to get a 'good job', with a much stronger focus on an interesting and purposeful career than on the financial benefits. Personally transformative aspects of higher education may be difficult for students to identify during their higher education experience; it may be a sense that develops after higher education.

Students expected institutions to link study and employment, and expected activities beyond traditional formal degree requirements. The theme of employability was strong across students from all subjects and institutional types, but was more focused on a specific track for students on pre-professional courses, such as law or medicine. Support and guidance also came up in connection with careers services, with students commenting that the advisors usually had no experience of the industries they were providing guidance about themselves. This highlights the challenges for quality with the blending of the workplace and the academy (Gibbs 2009).

Career advancement

The advancement into a specific job or a career route more generally provided the frame of reference for students evaluating the utility of modules, the approaches to learning and extracurricular activity, and their trajectory through and beyond higher education (see Figure 3 and Map 3). When asked, a significant proportion of students responded directly that the purpose of studying a degree was to move into a desirable job. Developing knowledge and skills from a course was posited as a prerequisite for entry into a career route, particularly pre-professional and vocationally-oriented courses (e.g. teaching, social work). For some students their reason for returning to higher education was to advance a career already in progress, and the degree programme was a form of continuing professional development to 'unlock' a new career route or progress more effectively. The ways in which studying linked to students' career routes thus differed, but the link between study and employment was strong for all students.

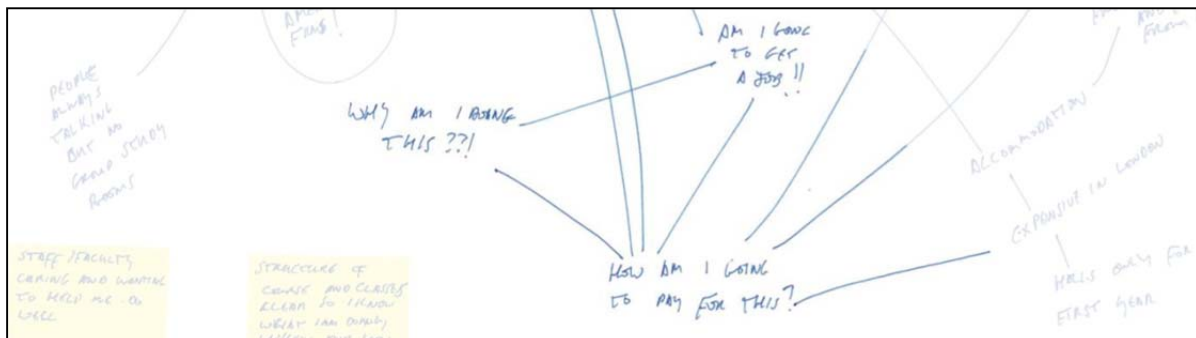
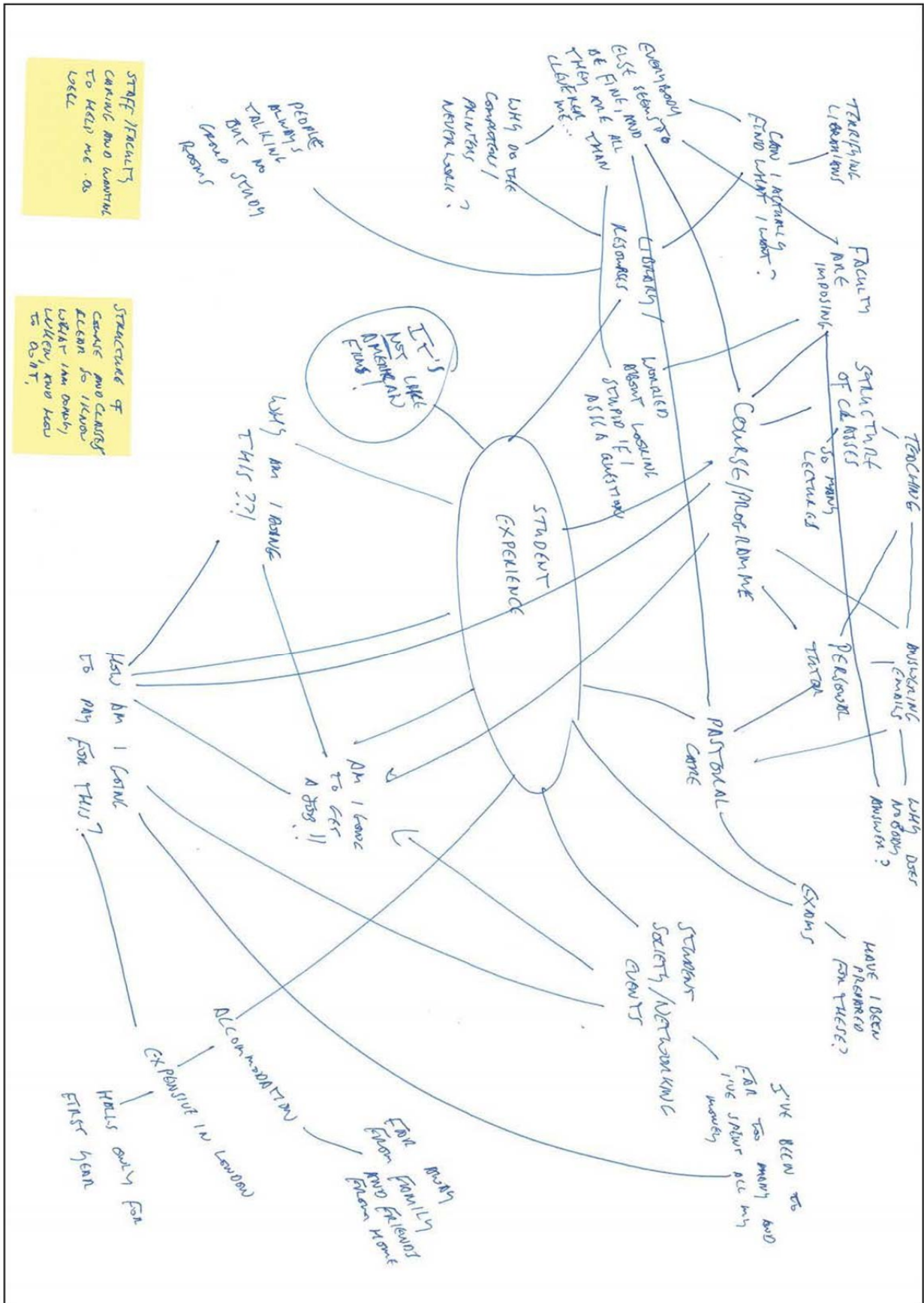


Figure 3. Snapshot of Concept Map 3, First year, Male, Law, Specialist institution.



Map 3, First year, Male, Law, Specialist institution.

The content of degree programmes was evaluated through an employability lens. Modules that offered opportunities for exploring possible career routes, for instance, were praised:

‘My course, which is Media and Cultural Studies, it’s really enjoyable...there’s less contact hours in it, but then it’s really good for people who don’t know what direction to go into from media so they let you experiment more with like TV and film and feature writing and stuff like that.’

[First year, Female, Media and Cultural Studies, Specialist institution]

Whilst students widely linked study and employment, they were not always clear what career route they wished to pursue, or had changed paths since beginning their degree. The design of the curriculum was thus a site of tension because of the differing career trajectories of students and, especially in courses with close vocational links, there could be significant differences in opinion on the value of particular modules for advancing the employment agenda. The prevalence of the link between employment and study may represent a changing understanding of the degree, as one student asked during a discussion of employability: ‘Whether that was the original idea of a degree or not, I don’t know’ (Second year, Male, Mathematics, Teaching-intensive institution). The relative quality of degree courses might thus be a reflection of stakeholders’ framing of the purpose of higher education as much as the practices undertaken within the course itself.

- **Recommendation 8**

Students want more support for their employability, focusing on processes, guidance support available and development opportunities, including internships, placements and work experience. There is a need for more information on employability, with a focus on ‘process’ and development opportunities, rather than ‘product’ statistics.

Going beyond the degree

A related issue to studying to advance your career was students’ need to go beyond the academic content of the degree to achieve their goals (i.e. desirable employment). Extracurricular activity was widely discussed by students as an important facet of the student experience in this context. The most prevalent stance underpinning this perception was the need for more than a good degree classification to secure desired graduate employment, emphasising that extracurricular activities were sites in which crucial employability skills and portfolio building took place. Most students shared a perception that merely attaining a good degree was not sufficient to secure entry into careers:

‘People aren’t just looking for your grades any more, they’re looking for the experience and anything else, because a lot of people now are getting 2:1s and firsts in their degrees, so people are looking for other things to show they stand out rather than just your degree.’

[Second year, Female, Law, Regionally-focused institution]

This student’s interpretation of employers’ criteria for recruitment reflects the prevalent perspective that good grades alone are not enough anymore. As such, extracurricular activities were important for employability development: diversifying and strengthening students’ CVs with experience and

skills not easily garnered through degree studies. Due to their importance, some students were keen for more space to be made in the formal curriculum to accommodate them. Finding time to engage in sufficient extracurricular activities to build a strong CV was difficult for some students (particularly mature students and those living at home) and often seemed to compete for time with academic work.

Internships and placements were broadly held in high regard for employability development, both within the formal curriculum, such as on sandwich courses, and as extracurricular opportunities. Shorter duration extracurricular events aimed at developing networks were also considered valuable, although commuting students struggled to fit in campus-based opportunities, and engaging with events at institutions with diffuse structures (e.g. multiple campuses across a city) could be troublesome for all students.

Pressure to build employability through extracurricular activity was a widespread feeling amongst students, although whether this was phrased in a negative manner related to job competitiveness, or merely seen as part of the career entry process, differed amongst students. Conversely, for those students studying part-time or studying whilst maintaining full-time jobs (or both), extracurricular activities were of less concern. As noted in the previous section, students were rarely satisfied with centralised careers services helping them build their employability.

Although 'going beyond the degree' was an important facet of employability for students, extracurricular activities were also valued for a variety of other reasons. Social activities such as sports, clubs and societies, drinking and so forth were regularly mentioned by students in their discussion of their student experience. In some cases these activities were valued as part of a balanced lifestyle, in others as opportunities for personal and professional development. Participating in a variety of university activities was commonplace within the data, although far more so for those who studied full-time and had limited commitments than for those with family or employment commitments outside of the course.

Students were rarely satisfied with centralised careers services. Because students see the degree as more than the subject content, students want courses to engage with employability issues, including integrating internships, placements, careers advice and skills support, all tailored to specific subjects, with support available from those with experience in those industries and fields. The subject content is only part of what students feel they need to achieve their aims for higher education.

- **Recommendation 9**

Institutions need to offer more course-level information and better organisation of their offering of internships, placements, work experience and skills support, all tailored to specific subjects, with support available from those with experience in those industries and fields.

- **Recommendation 10**

Because most students want to go into specific graduate fields, generic graduate employment statistics or wage statistics are largely irrelevant.

The Importance of Course-level Quality and Standards

4. Evaluation, feedback and feed-forward

Feedback to and from the institution was a significant concern, although this was primarily at the course level from the students' perspective. Students rarely spoke of high level feedback, such as with senior management or through representation structures beyond those at the course level. For almost all students, they wanted their individual issues to be resolved at a local level. Students valued feeling that staff on their course were attentive to their perspectives, willing to listen to concerns about courses and take on feedback for continual improvement. Students did not distinguish between academic staff, professional services staff or others in terms of feedback.

Feedback and feed-forward to students

Experiences of feedback were highly variable, both between students and, in some cases, within a single student's experiences within a department. Feedback on academic work was frequently delivered as text comments either attached to work or provided as a separate document, but the length, detail, and constructiveness of this feedback was felt to vary significantly depending on the particular staff members who marked the work. Inconsistency in feedback was frustrating for students and led to some calling for standardised approaches or at least minimum requirements, generally of a higher level than students reported commonly receiving. Few students indicated they currently received as much feedback as they wanted, with even those who received comparatively generous time and engagement with academic staff indicating they would appreciate more. For those who felt they received very little feedback, this topic was one that generated the most aggravated quality frustrations.

Feedback consisting of just a grade or a few lines of generic comments was universally reviled by students, with most indicating that this form of feedback was useless. Receiving feedback of this kind was a regular experience for many students, but even though the practice was commonplace it was nonetheless rejected by students as unhelpful and indicative of lazy, inattentive teaching. All students valued feedback as a tool to improvement and, for some, as a justification for the grades they had received and, as such, the frequent low quality of feedback was a significant disappointment in many educational experiences.

Students were generally more concerned about quality and format of feedback than the timing of it. Students further noted that they wanted feedback to improve—feed-forward—regardless of their mark.

- **Recommendation 11**

Institutional feedback time targets may not be tackling the most salient issues in feedback quality. The pressure for quick feedback returns with limited staff time can exacerbate the problems students have identified with feedback detail and personalisation. Institutional policies should prioritise quality, format and timing of feedback in relation to other assessments, managed at the course level, over standardised feedback turnaround times.

Opportunities for students to feedback

Feedback to the institution was commonly referred to as 'evaluation', with students providing their views and not being aware of how such information was used, decisions were made or changes enacted. Mechanisms for offering feedback to staff on the quality of course content, performance of staff, or organisation of courses were concerns for students, especially when systems appeared to be dysfunctional. Most commonly feedback systems such as end-of-module evaluations offered an opportunity to shape the future module offering and provide guidance for lecturing staff to improve the course experience.

An element of institutional responsiveness is the degree to which institutional intervention – either unprompted or as a response to student feedback – directly influences the experience of the current cohort or only changes the experience for future cohorts. Whilst feedback is a complex issue, one notable concern is that offering detailed, constructive feedback to an institution through official feedback structures (e.g. module evaluation forms) often meant that no direct action was taken to improve the experience of the current students, but rather changes were (presumably) implemented the following year. Some concern was raised about this trend as it essentially meant that students felt they had no recourse to improve their experience, likely because the problems had already occurred and could not be revisited.

But it's really, really hard to get feedback and opinions from the students, because they just like to say, okay, it's the end of the course, that was horrible. But they don't really give feedback. So... because it's not for their own good, it's for, like, next year's, and I guess that's a problem.

[Second year, Female, Biological Sciences, Research-intensive institution]

The degree to which this 'legacy' effect of feedback systems was viewed as a problem differed amongst students. Some were clearly frustrated that they would not benefit from changes (which they had advised upon), linking with a broader trend about some students' frustration with continual changes being made to institutions (e.g. the erection of new buildings) which tended to disrupt their experience for the benefit of future students. For other students, evaluation measures were an opportunity to contribute back to the institution in a community spirit.

There is a challenging issue about whether student feedback impacts on their experience (and how it is responded to and communicated) or whether it functions as continual improvement for the institution (and functions as a customer review from a student's perspective); this relates to individualistic versus community perspective to higher education.

- **Recommendation 12**

Institutions should ensure that feedback is collected and acted upon for both current and future students.

Students' feedback being listened to and valued

Despite tensions around the differential impact of feedback mechanisms, there was widespread support for the value of feeling that opinions offered are given weight. Most often students referred

to feedback as occurring with teaching staff on their course. When defining the key characteristics of a good relationship between staff and students, 'approachability' was frequently a highly valued trait, often foremost in students mind. The negative reflection on this, that less approachable tutors had a deleterious effect students' work, indicates that not only is being listened to important in the sense of curriculum and course design, but also at an individual level insofar as specific tutors listening to students if they are approached.

It's, like, you know instantly. I've found that immediately. I just know as soon as I've been in one lecture, whether that lecturer is approachable or non-approachable. There's no in-between. It's either just, all right, this guy or this woman is really approachable, or no, this person just isn't. You instinctively know it and my personal opinion is, I mean, the experiences I've had up to now, I would say at least 70% of the lecturers I've had, are just so aloof. Honestly, they're just, I don't know, it's almost as if they're, like, I'm here to do a job, but that's it. You know, kind of attitude and it's really off-putting, it really is.

[Second year, Female, Computer Programming and Network Security, Regionally-focused institution]

A concern raised with feedback mechanisms was the difficulty in securing student participation, which students acknowledged. Although students widely valued being listened to by staff, they were not always willing to direct energy toward the systems in place to canvass students' perspectives or identify potential concerns. Even when staff were responsive to student feedback on courses there is not necessarily a wellspring of opinion available upon which to act. Student-staff liaison committees, and similar systems, tended to suffer from this problem and, whilst several students noted their utility, there was not widespread recognition amongst students not directly involved in such committees that they existed and were acting on their behalf. This concern was noted in relation to Students' Union intervention or support, with students on courses, but not representatives themselves, not always aware of changes made on their behalf or in response to their feedback.

In other instances feedback systems and mechanisms were unreliable, particularly those that depended on student action. Course representative systems were commonplace and several students noted that these systems were present in their modules, but often in the context of failings. Representative systems sometimes offered the impression of a channel through which students could voice opinions or concerns and be heard by course staff, but the representatives themselves could often be ill-equipped and ill-motivated to relay this feedback. One student noted that that the widespread practice of asking for student volunteers at the start of a semester to be course representatives did not guarantee that those taking on the role would be competent to perform it. This point was underscored by the following conversation during a focus group of five students on the same Social Work course:

Female 1 We do have the student rep, don't we? Not that I've ever spoken to the student rep...

Female 2 There's two in our class, but like you say, it's not clear...

- Female 3 Wait, I'm a rep
- Female 2 We are sitting with one right now! We can cross one off
- Female 3 Sorry!
- Female 2 Who else have you got?
- Female 3 [Student named].
- Female 4 Isn't it [Named student]?
- Female 3 Yes.
- Female 4 That's in our tutorial group. You're in a different tutorial group?
- Female 3 She is a rep [points at another student]
- Female 5 Sorry! Am I?
- Female 4 How are we supposed to know if you don't know!
- Female 5 I think I am. I don't know. I'm supposed to be, but I don't know. I've never been to a meeting. I've never been sent anything
- Female 1 So did you not go to any of the meetings then?

[First and Second Years, Female students, Social Work, Teaching-intensive institution]

- **Recommendation 13**

Students almost exclusively spoke of their educational learning experience in terms of their course. This raises the need for strong course-level management of curriculum, quality and standards, with a clear structure of academic management mirroring undergraduate student-facing aspects, including local feedback and evaluation, module and course review.

Closing the loop

The lack of transparency over the impact of module evaluations was a concern raised several times by students:

- Female 1 'It's all very good writing all these evaluation forms, but we don't get any feedback saying, look here, we received this back and we know that this was a major concern, or we're going to do this, but we didn't get any of that. So it just seems like...

Female 2 Yes, a waste of time.

Female 1 Yes, just like a tick box...'

[First years, Female students, Teaching-intensive institution]

The opacity of practices involving evaluative comments written on module evaluation questionnaires led some students to question what action is taken regarding comments. Notably, students queried whether the comments are acted upon at all and, following this, in what ways they are acted upon. Providing this information to students did not appear to be common practice across the sector.

I think a lot of the time, you can see that the university tries to put right what the students are saying is wrong. There's a couple of times that they haven't listened yet, but there are a few times that you don't get an indication of whether or not it's been heard or not. You are told that they have listened, but have they actually heard what you're trying to say?

[Third year, Female, Computing, Regionally-focused institution]

The perceived effectiveness of student-institution communication in identifying and making changes to the educational experience varied greatly across the student participants. Feedback that was clearly acted upon by the students providing it tended to emphasise the responsiveness of institutions to functional and infrastructural issues, such as fixing lifts or adding clocks to rooms. This was in contrast to the difficulty in resolving strategic and interpersonal concerns, such as course structure, pedagogic approaches or seemingly-disinterested staff. The role of responding directly to the concerns raised by students for their own benefit was broadly held as important, if not always widely engaged with. It is also sometimes in tension (implicit or explicit) with the view of higher education as a product for which much money is being paid and should thus not require student input to correct shortcomings.

'Closing the loop' of feedback through reporting to students any action taken by institutions tended to promote both the feeling that institutions were continually responsive to students' concerns and that individual students were listened to when they offered feedback through official channels, such as module evaluations. Relaying changes to the outgoing cohort, who provided the module feedback, appeared to be very rare; providing information on changes to incoming cohorts was well regarded but not common.

More speculatively, whilst there was not extensive evidence in this data of a growing recalcitrance toward cyclical feedback mechanisms it is possible that as higher education becomes increasingly commoditised within the consumerist ethos students may tend to question the value of offering feedback to the institution. A tension may arise between the effect of feedback to improve institutions and increase the value of a degree through the improved position of the awarding institution in comparative frameworks (e.g. league tables) and the effect of feedback to improve the course for future students and consequently better equip these future competitors to out-compete

current students in the job market. It is evident from students' accounts that feedback practices are widespread, albeit inconsistent. But institutions and individuals may soon need to decide how, and whether, to promote evaluative engagement with courses when doing so may not always be in students' best interests if considered within the consumerist framing.

- **Recommendation 14**

There is a need for local management of feedback processes in relation to the structure of the course, and that feedback and evaluation needs to be an issue for individual academics, a collective issue across a course and an institutional responsibility to assure quality across courses. Closing the feedback loop needs to be improved, particularly how information is fed back to students, and done at the local level as much as possible.

5. Staff: Attributes, practices and attitudes

Common across the literature (Ramsden 1992; Voss et al 2007) students wanted lecturers to be knowledgeable, enthusiastic, approachable and friendly. Most students wanted quality teaching to prepare them for both course assessment and for their future profession. When speaking about staff, students almost exclusively referred to the teaching staff and administrative staff for their course. Students had strong views on teaching quality, with expectations in mind for acceptable minimum benchmarks for teaching staff. 'Bad' teaching included lectures being read directly from PowerPoint slides or notes, not knowing the material and being unwilling to engage with students. There was a common concern about the lack of sufficient guidance and support for students to develop as independent learners.

Related to the consumerist mindset, students wanted teaching staff to meet minimum benchmarks for teaching, and several students made comments about "wanting to fire bad teachers" given what they were paying. Students' perceived 'good' lecturers to be passionate and knowledgeable about the subject, approachable, willing to invest time in students and to offer close tutorial support. A Scottish student reflected on the new fees system in England:

I think you would have a say on what lecturers stay and what lecturers go, to be quite honest with you. Because if you're paying that amount of money, this is where the consumerism comes in, because it now becomes that you're paying for this service. So if that service is not satisfactory, you should have a right to complain.

[Second year, Female, Computing, Regionally-focused institution]

The role of staff in motivational, inspirational, and guidance roles had a significant influence on students reporting high quality experiences, perhaps beyond even their teaching. These roles may be assigned to designated personal tutors or academic advisors, but most students spoke of academic staff generally providing support. Many students' negative experiences on their courses appeared to be either precipitated or epitomised by poor experiences with staff, particularly inattentive staff or staff for whom teaching did not appear to be a priority and thus they invested minimal time and energy. Conversely, positive experiences – including motivation to study for longer and pursue topics of interest – were often linked to the teaching styles of staff members or guidance of mentor-figures, both formal and informal.

The primacy of staff relationships in education is perhaps unsurprising given that academic staff are the main point of contact between student and institution. Notwithstanding this, the degree to which students have discussed picking modules because of their teacher (rather than their topic), pursuing a PhD (or indeed a degree) because of motivational staff members, and, conversely, the deleterious influence of negative staff relations on quality, seems to indicate that the engagement between staff and is of arguably greater importance than the systems and substantive content of educational experiences.

Teaching Quality

Issues around teaching quality tended to focus on the practice and process of classroom teaching. This often came up in a negative sense, when students' expectations were transgressed, such as an unprepared teacher 'reading 300 slides' during a lecture. Teaching practice involving lengthy lectures consisting primarily of verbatim reading were widely maligned and regarded as falling well below the minimum benchmark of teaching expected by students (see Figure 4 and Map 4). Many students spoke of the relationship between teaching quality and their educational experience.

'We've got an exam coming up but I didn't feel that the lecturer that delivered her lecture, in particular one of them, met up to the expectations of the lecture...But her quality of teaching now has a knock-on effect on us now being able to live up to those expectations and to get the marks to pass our first year.'

[Second year, Female, Education, Teaching-intensive institution]

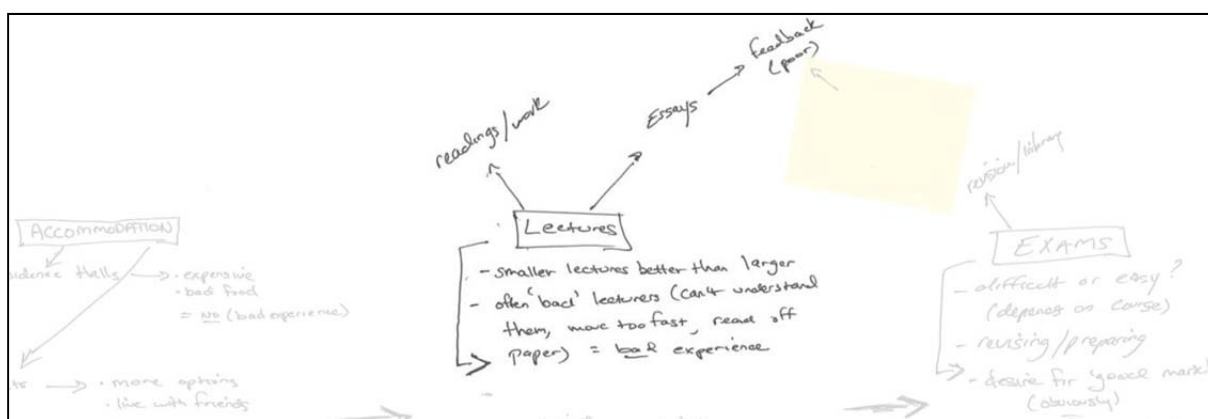
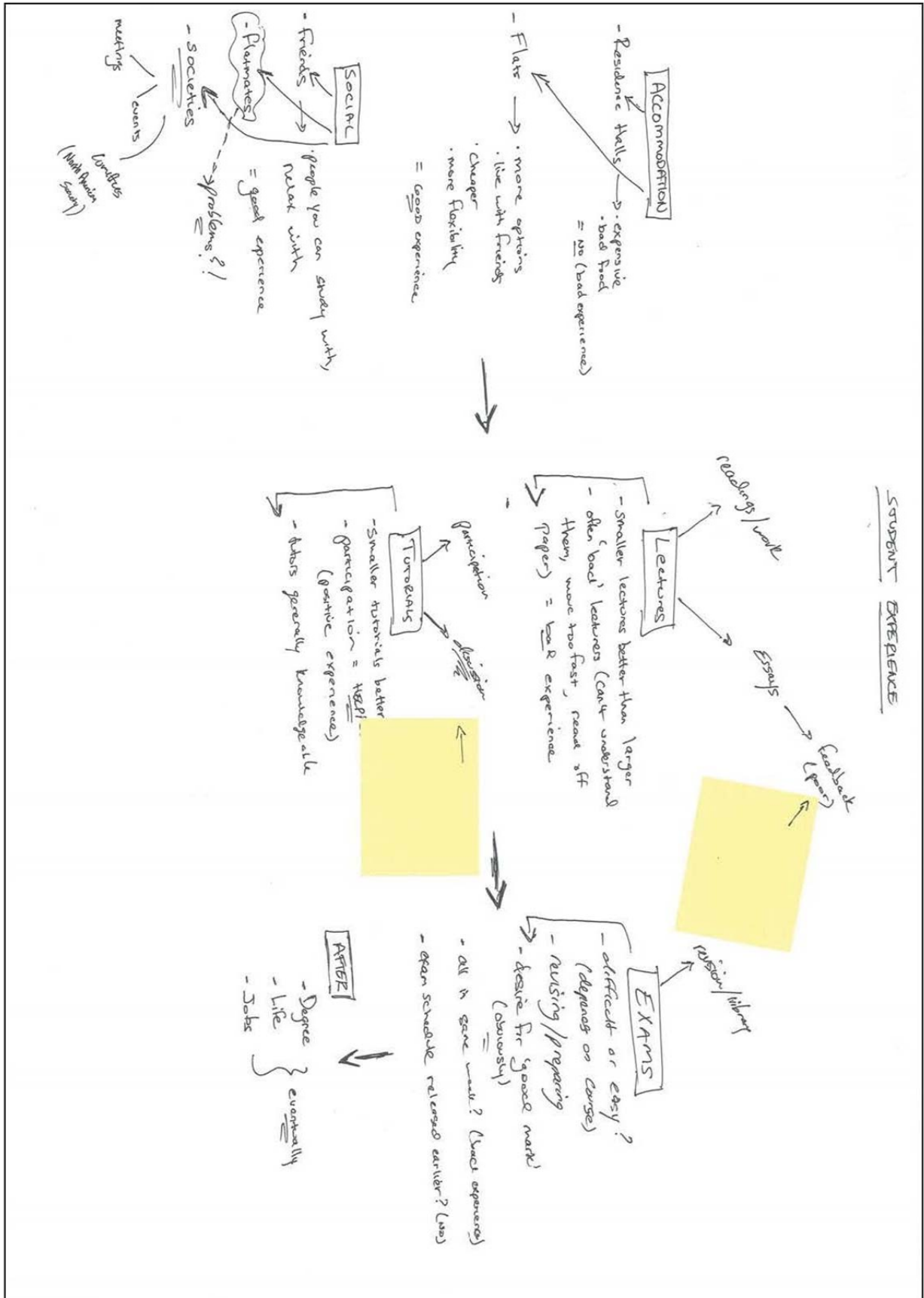


Figure 4. Snapshot of Concept Map 4. Second year, Male, International relations, Research-intensive institution.

Students also expressed expectations about the level of engagement and enthusiasm an academic tutor should show toward their subject whilst teaching. Whilst factors such as 'passion' and 'excitement' are more difficult to observe than procedures of teaching, students were nonetheless expectant of a high degree of enthusiasm from their tutors and were critical when they perceived this enthusiasm to be lacking. The majority of highly positive academic experiences related to subjects being delivered by staff passionate about the topics involved and keen to share this passion with students.

Expectations about teaching differed amongst students, but there were a few instances in which students observed that their teaching had been of higher quality than they expected. Most experiences revolved around meeting high expectations, or being frustrated by inconsistency in the quality of teaching. In several cases reflections on teaching quality revealed initial expectations may have been somewhat optimistic.

Student Expectations and Perceptions of Higher Education



Map 4. Second year, Male, International relations, Research-intensive institution.

'I kind of thought they'd[lectures] be like TED talks, like that they would always be really inspirational, and that, like, each lecture would just be an amazing experience and you'd come out and be, like, whoah, and want to change your life. But then now it's like, you go in and you get a lot of knowledge, but it's not that inspirational.'

[First year, Female, English Literature, Research-intensive institution]

The likening of university lectures to TED presentations— a renowned international speaker series—is conversant with the broader issue that students' expectations about higher education are rarely accurate or cohere with their experiences at university. Although reflections on teaching quality should thus be taken as expressions of minimum expectations, such as not reading verbatim from Powerpoint slides, there needs to be interrogation of the basis of expectations to manage them. Students were aware of inconsistency in teaching competence and ability, they acknowledge personality differences and personal style, but have minimum expectations, such as not reading off slides or teaching straight out of a textbook. Students wanted teaching staff who were enthusiastic, experts in their field and met benchmarks of good teaching.

- **Recommendation 15**

There should be support for staff development and training (both initial and continuing support), public information about teaching qualifications, along the lines of the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) and institutional reward for teaching and recognition of teaching excellence.

Tutor knowledge

Quality of teaching involved practices, attitudes and content knowledge. Concerns about tutor knowledge tended to be realised more often in teaching situations with junior and 'adjunct' faculty, such as hourly-paid lecturing staff and doctoral students:

'I had a tutor who hadn't, actually, studied what she was teaching us...she was a Ph.D. student and her undergraduate wasn't done at this university, so it was a different core course, so she was teaching us from the same text book that we were using, which was not very reassuring...she didn't, necessarily, know what she was talking about and, or that we had the same amount of information available to us. If we had any questions, then she wouldn't have been...she always used to email someone else to find us the answers.'

[First year, Female, English language and literature, Research-intensive institution]

Staff without sufficient content knowledge appeared to some students to be unable to offer sufficient guidance and support. Students assume academics are experts in their subject and, perhaps more importantly, in the subjects in which they teach students. In some cases this expectation is transgressed, such as examples of classroom experiences with insufficiently knowledgeable tutors and in cases where students return from industry placements and find taught content at odds with their experiences on placement.

One trade-off of note is between levels of 'enthusiasm' and 'passion' in teaching quality and levels of tutor knowledge and depth of experience. Highly experienced lecturers were sometimes not

perceived to be as enthused and passionate about subjects as new lecturing staff (e.g. doctoral students). This was not universally the case and several experienced and engaging academic tutors were identified; however, the possibility of trading off a level of experience or content knowledge for a level of enthusiasm suggests that expectations indicate a balance of qualities in academic staff that are valued by students.

Students expected staff to have expertise in their subject, and across a variety of disciplines this included a relationship and working knowledge of relevant business and industry. Interestingly, despite the desire for course content to reflect current industry practices and academics areas of interest, perspectives on research-led teaching were divided amongst students. Although research-led teaching was argued by some to offer cutting-edge content, for others the examples drawn from current academic research were viewed as too esoteric. More generally the relationship between academic research and undergraduate teaching was viewed uneasily by students, with several students lamenting that a focus on research appeared to detract from undergraduate teaching. Very few students praised academic involvement in research or research involvement in the curriculum. More commonly, the identity of academics as researchers was seen as problematic insofar as it distracted focus and time from teaching and made several students feel that academic staff were uninterested in undergraduate teaching.

Students assess the quality of their experience under multiple dimensions, and there are trade-offs amongst these, such as the wisdom of an experienced lecture and the enthusiasm of a new lecturer, but most students see the highest quality as an experienced, enthusiastic lecturer.

- **Recommendation 16**

Staff should be supported, trained and developed to enhance teaching and learning; good teaching staff should be retained as a priority.

Support and guidance

The desire for regular contact time with direct access to academic staff was prevalent. Students with a preponderance of lectures, particularly those in large cohorts of 200-300 students, tended to prefer smaller group seminars and tutorials and felt they learned more within these environments. It was also notable that the 'bad' teaching practices identified by students - notably lack of interaction and lengthy, PowerPoint slide-driven teaching – were associated with lecturing, and it is perhaps unsurprising in this context that students predominately regarded smaller group sessions as their main source of academic guidance.

A related facet of receiving sufficient guidance was the perceived balance between guidance and independent study. Stances toward the importance of independent, self-directed learning within higher education were somewhat mixed, with a sizeable group of students asserting that independent learning was the core premise of higher education, but with others lamenting the feeling of being left alone to cope with complex academic work. A common concern was lack of understanding of how to best go about self-directed learning. Guidance on how to learn independently was thus much sought after, with absence of such guidance hindering students as they attempted to learn independently in the manner they felt was expected of them. Concern over

lack of guidance also focused on the subject content, as well as the practice, of independent learning.

The objection to 'spoon-feeding' was common amongst students and reflects the assertion that independent learning is a key facet of higher education. However, the concurrent need for sufficient guidance to facilitate independent learning was also asserted, and the balance between these two aspects of education was the subject of considerable attention for students. Even though these aspects were seen as a balance to be mediated, guidance was the subject of concern in an overwhelming majority of cases.

Students were concerned about the quality of teachers on their course, and many remarked that bad teachers had a negative influence on the quality of their course, but also that good teachers could have an enormous positive impact on their educational experience. Many students need more support to develop as independent learners in context of the subjects they are studying. Students' evaluation of teachers was influenced by the size of course being taught and whether the topic was in an area of the instructor's expertise and knowledge.

- **Recommendation 17**

Students' concerns about quality of teaching on their courses highlight the need for strong local management and oversight of teaching allocation, quality and enhancement.

- **Recommendation 18**

Staff need to be supported by their institutions to provide the interaction, support and guidance that is important to students. This includes manageable teaching loads, a balance between teaching and research responsibilities and meaningful reward, recognition and progression opportunities related to teaching and support activities.

6. Equity of opportunity: Personalisation versus standardisation

Students recognised there would always be differences in teaching styles and academics' attitudes, but there was a strong sense that all students should have 'equity of opportunity' and that standards were important to maintain quality. However, this is balanced by students wanting a tailored, personalised experience, meaning that students wanted their individual circumstances to be acknowledged and accommodated.

The need to balance commitments was also reflected in students' reasons for choosing a particular institution at which to study. Whilst some students had relative freedom due to lack of family or work commitments, others were restricted to particular geographic regions or course structures. As such, the facets of an institution valued by students in their choice of where to study were more diverse than merely the academic reputation of the institution and programme and the availability of places. This differential value system should be taken into account when considering what attributes demarcates an institution or course 'high quality'.

Equity of opportunity

'I would expect the university to have the relevant systems to allow every student to succeed if, you know, that student's willing to put the effort in or, you know, whatever it might be. But I think there should be no barriers. No student should walk into an institution and not be able to achieve the highest possible grade because of their background or because of the amount of money that they've got access to. So the university should, you know, it's a requirement for the university... it should be a requirement for the university that there's absolute parity and fairness, so once the student's been accepted, you know, and they walk in the door, there shouldn't be any barriers for that student to achieve or for the students themselves.'

[Third year, Male, Fine Art, Specialist institution]

There appeared to be an assumption across much of the data that students should have equity of opportunity within their student experience (see Figure 5 and Map 5). Although this stance was largely implicit, it was articulated effectively in the quotation above. It was assumed within the much of the other discussion of benchmarks mentioned that the institution should be meritocratic, offer equality of opportunity and treat students equally.

In addition to parity of experience in academic engagement, parity in access to resources was also raised. One English student at a Scottish institution raised the case of a bursary for which only a subset of students were eligible:

'It's a bit of an on-going frustration at the amount of things that are Scottish students only. Like, for instance, I was trying to find an internship over the summer, and there was this really great bursary they give out...and I was halfway down and it said "by the way, you have to have been born in Scotland" And there were a few awards as well, and things. And in fact,

because you can't exclude other EU countries, Scottish-only actually means anywhere in the EU apart from England or Wales.'

[Second year, Male, Biology, Research-intensive institution]

Situations in which certain resources are only available to particular groups of students had potential to cause frustration and to transgress the expectation of parity of experience. Broader problems regarding access to resources, such as inability to find a computer terminal on campus, were presented as shared concerns for all students, but access problems that were created by pre-specified exclusions – as in the case of the bursary above – were more readily characterised as unfairness.

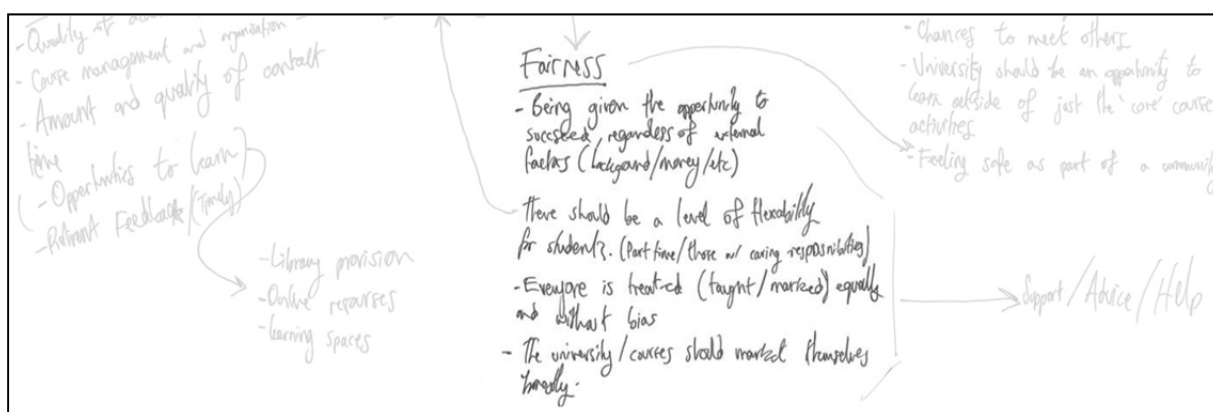


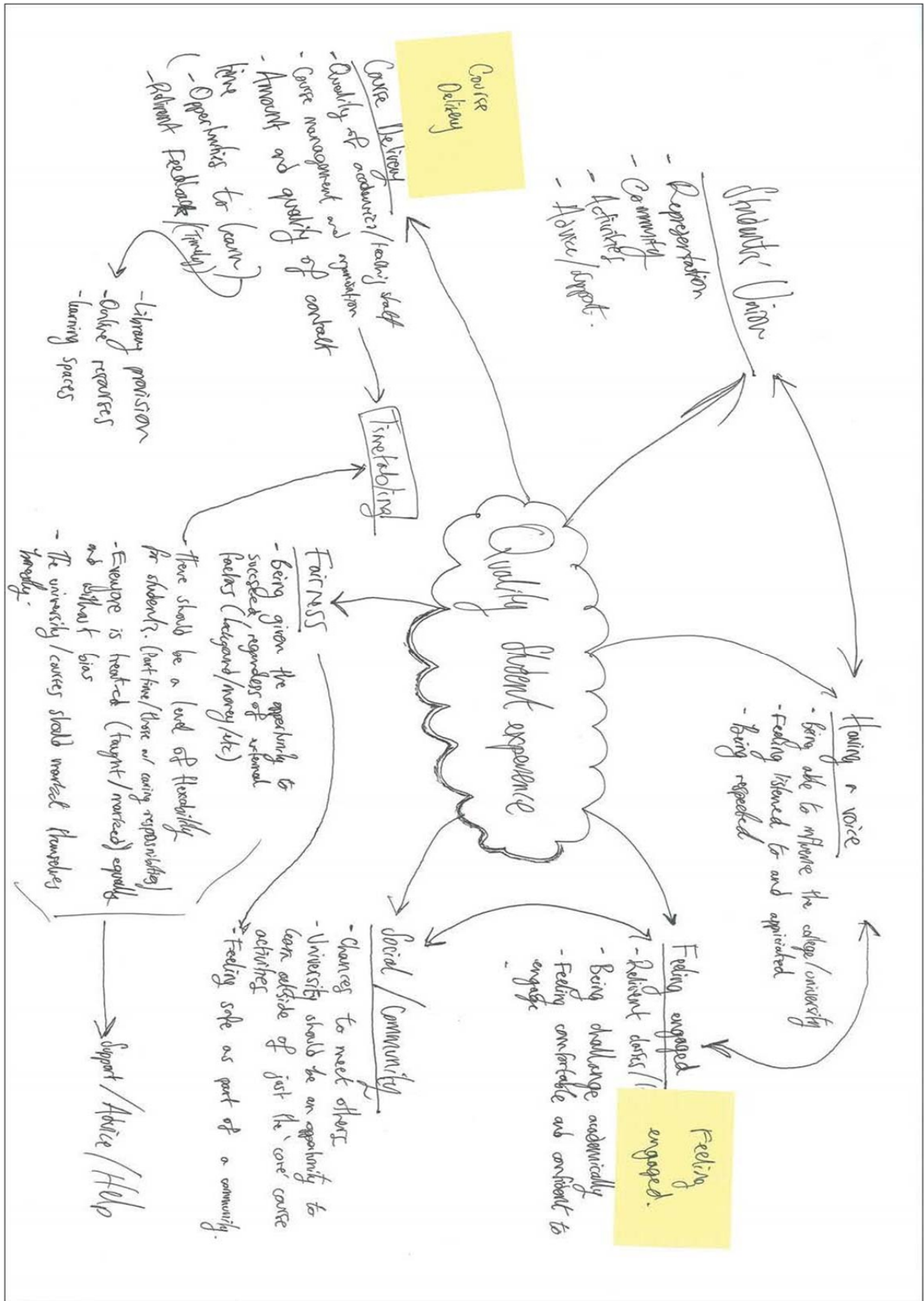
Figure 5. Snapshot of Concept Map 5. Third year, Male, Fine art, Specialist institution.

Standardisation

Course leaders were regularly referred to as the person who 'knew what was going on' and had an overall perspective on the course; when that position was absent students noted confusion and disorganisation throughout the course. Whilst variation and personalisation were desired, students were frustrated with inconsistency. Most commonly this was due to poor organisation and management of courses. Most of the joint honours students noted they did not have the same access to resources or information, and they regularly were not given updated timetables or course information. Such students complained about clashing timetables and assessments, for instance.

There was a lack of clarity around feedback on assessments and marking. Students noted general consistency of timing of feedback, but enormous variation in format, quality and quantity of feedback across tutors and modules. Many students expressed a desire for greater regulations for feedback given to students, as students noted variation between assessors ranging from pages of comments to single lines of text. Several students were also confused by positive comments with low grades, and vice versa.

The use of technology in courses and modules also varied widely. Students noted that some lecturers refused to use the university VLE system, so there were no on-line resources available for



Map 5. Third year, Male, Fine art, Specialist institution.

that module. Access to on-line materials varied, with readings, videoed lectures and other resources regularly not being available when promised.

Personalisation

Treating students equally did not imply treating students in a standardised fashion—as many student participants had provision for particular disabilities or had commitments to balance that they felt merited flexibility—but rather that the institution was seen to offer flexibility or subsidy on a consistent basis. Extensions on assessment deadlines, for instance, were a point of contention for some students when they felt that others had been offered flexibility that academic staff had not made generally available. Yet despite the interpersonal nature of much academic practice (particularly assessment marking), there was little – if any – discussion of issues such as academic favouritism: experiences falling short of minimum benchmarks tended to be viewed more as the product of incompetence than malice.

One student remarked that their course tutor was responsible for him staying on his course when personal circumstances arose. Students needed support from personal tutors for managing physical concerns, such as accidents or illness, challenges relating to disabilities, particularly for those related to mental health, and personal commitments, such as childcare or family issues. It was important for students to have someone to go to, even if that person only listened to them and directed them to centralised support services. However, most students had either never met their personal tutor or had annual perfunctory meetings. Most students were hesitant to take pastoral issues to their academic personal tutors, and some had no access to them.

From the concept maps, students noted the importance of the social aspects in their ‘personalised’ experience, along with smaller class sizes and involvement in student union activities. Another key aspect was the support students received. A substantial proportion of students remarked how they were happy with the support of disability services, in contrast to more negative remarks about career services.

Students did not only expect support from the institution, in the maps many students described their student experience as a time to develop as a person. Several students raised questions on their maps about whether they were up to the challenge of higher education, asking “can I do this?”

- **Recommendation 19**

There needs to be recognition that students enter higher education on different trajectories, they need different kinds and levels of support, and the institution needs to be responsive to students’ needs. A considered balance needs to be sought between having clear and consistent procedures and being flexible and accommodating for students.

- **Recommendation 20**

The role and function of personal and academic tutors may need to be revised at some institutions. Students should have clear avenues for support that they are comfortable using for personal and academic concerns.

Framing of the institution

7. Students as stakeholders? Community, engagement and belonging

The importance of community and a sense of belonging was a frequently mentioned aspect of students' higher education experience. Community was generally seen as developing from face-to-face experiences and involved students being known, being welcomed and having opportunities to participate in the institutional community. For some students this was largely limited to the students and staff on their course, particularly for mature and part-time students. Students' views of their role in the institution took on more of a sense of collegiality and friendliness than a strong partnership approach- most students did not mention wanting to be more involved in decision-making, they focused on wanting individual problems they had resolved.

Community

Students discussed what shaped a community, the role of extra-curricular activities, the importance of physical spaces to foster a sense of community at the local level and what diminished their sense of belonging. Staff and students' attitudes, particularly on open days and during interviews, strongly impacted upon students' choice of institution and sense of belonging once enrolled. For many students, particularly in urban and larger institutions, higher education was an opportunity to expand their horizons, meet diverse people from different cultures, backgrounds and countries. Other students referred to their campus as 'homely' and 'like being at home'. The sense of belonging also had a developmental aspect, many students spoke about their university community making them feel welcome and catalysing social and personal development.

Proximity to home or work locations was, unsurprisingly, one of the major factors in whether an institution enabled students to feel part of the community. Students with dependents or in caring roles noted that they had selected the institution to attend based partly on its ease of access, proximity to home, and, in one case, car parking arrangements. For others being able to maintain existing networks of contacts and activities, including work and extra-curricular activities, influenced their institutional choice. These decisions do not directly reflect on issues of quality, but rather emphasise that what particular students value about an institution differs. For international students travelling many thousands of miles to attend an institution, locality and proximity are clearly of less concern than other factors (such as academic reputation), yet for students with family and work commitments in a geographic area it is exactly because the institution is local that it is valued. The question of what is 'good' about a particular institution should thus be framed within the contingent question of what a student is looking for in an institution, which may or may not be academic reputation.

Participating in a variety of university activities was commonplace within the data, although far more so for those who studied full-time and had limited other commitments than for those with family or employment commitments outside of the course. Extracurricular activities, and the provision of extracurricular opportunities, were thus important for the majority of students, predominately –

although not exclusively – because of the need for developing employability to advance in desired careers.

Students with significant investment into extracurricular activities noted that balancing time spent on these activities and time to complete course work could be difficult. Given that most students felt extracurricular activities were very important to their experience (either for employability or to maintain a balanced lifestyle) there was a sense of frustration about the perceived lack of accommodation for them within the programmed educational experience.

Extra-curricular activities were often seen as both socially desirable (particularly in respite from intense study) and vital for building employability. As such, commitments to extra-curricular activities were seen as highly important, in some cases a more important commitment – or perhaps more accurately, a more important group of commitments – than study. Although this view was not universal, it highlights how even activities seemingly ‘additional’ or ‘optional’ can be viewed as central deployments of students’ time and put pressure on students’ to manage these activities and studying.

Facilities were also important in conveying the impression of being in an adequate learning environment. One student recounted the phrase ‘Shiny Building Syndrome’ and noted that there is a tendency to feel more adequately provided for in comfortable, well maintained surroundings, even if, in practice, those surroundings do little to aid one’s learning experience. Another student used broken blinds (in the interview room) as an example of the way in which the university felt shabby and thus did not encourage an impression of offering an adequate learning infrastructure.

Such comments appear to position facilities not merely as functional learning infrastructure (e.g. a computer to use) but also as symbols of quality that need not be entirely impinging on learning experiences, but which can influence the sense of the educational experience. The use of facilities as symbols of quality might hint at how far quality is discursive and metaphorical, as well as empirical, which in turn implies that expectations and discursive framing of educational experiences might be as important for discussions of quality as the empirical reality of courses.

- **Recommendation 21**

Institutions need to foster a welcoming and supportive sense of community, between staff and students, and involving all staff (e.g. academic, professional and administrative). For students this involves a sense of shared aims, shared identity and shared spaces—at the subject level and institutionally.

Engagement

The most common way engagement was conceptualised was not in a “representational” context, but rather in the context of each individual’s engagement with the institution, and the institution with them, for the enhancement of the overall learning experience. Students related to the academic community at the course-level. This indicates the importance of local-based partnership work for engaging students and suggests institutions should avoid overreliance on representational forms of student engagement. Students’ views suggest more of “a partnership of aims” with staff on

their course rather than “a partnership of means”, indicating more of a sense of collegiality with staff, rather than large-scale, high-level partnership work. Quite a few students viewed the institutions’ approach to student engagement sceptically:

It almost feels as though the university decides when it wants to view the students as a consumer and then it wants to view it as a partner. And it seems to be best fit to whatever the university is trying to achieve at the time.

[Fourth year, Male, Management, Teaching-intensive institution]

We found limited evidence, for instance, for students wanting to or feeling qualified to co-author their educational content, such as designing curricula or participating in planning committees, particularly questioning the benefit of such activities for the student:

Yes. I mean, you can also talk about the curriculum as well. Where does it end? That's the thing and it's, like, as much as students, I can appreciate how it's, like, yes, sometimes even I've had courses or parts of my courses and I've thought, what am I doing this for? It's so nonsensical, it's not going to help me in any way, shape or form. But at the same time, do I feel qualified to set a curriculum? No.

[Third year, Female, Computer engineering, Regionally-focused institution]

There was disharmony when there was a lack of partnership of aims, such as an institution’s research focus that excluded students and alienated students from staff. Students saw very different roles for them and for staff.

The [Students’ Union] will let you know if they've been to that particular meeting or they've had talks with, like, the Dean, or whatever. And you'll get the feedback to say what's happened about it, but as far as how seriously it's taken? I really don't know. I don't know, because it's, like, you're not at that level so it's very hard for you to know what's actually been said and how seriously it's been taken, because you can't judge how that person's taken that information. I don't know really. I really don't know.

[Second year, Female, Engineering, Regionally-focused institution]

Interestingly, Students’ Unions featured more in students’ concept maps of their experience than in discussion of issues related to quality and standards. Students’ Unions were frequently mentioned as coordinators of extra-curricular activities, offering students convenient socialising or study spaces and in terms of social activities. Representational structures were rarely mentioned by students. Such structures existed more as a quiet partner, there in case things go wrong and students needed representation to resolve serious problems. For students, most issues were resolved within the departmental context rather than being escalated beyond that. There was very low engagement with Union in their ‘union’ function, and when such engagement was discussed it was usually by those directly involved as representatives or sabbatical officers. Some students questioned the structure of Unions:

This year I got involved in a society, I'm the secretary, and I was quite surprised when I first get into close contact to...with the student union that the academic aspects - not the society's activities and services, that it's...I don't know how it is in other universities, but for me it was really surprising that the student union is actually led by external professionals and not really students. And they make the regulations.

And of course, in the main polls there are students sitting, but... actually the student union is run by employed people from whatever discipline, from whatever place. And for me it was a bit weird that our student union is not really ours, if that makes sense. And it...I guess it maybe influences the free time activities, the societies, the sports facilities, the unions, but I'm not really sure if this is a good thing. So...maybe they know better what they are doing, but still, they are not students, so this is something I don't really like.

[Second year, Female, Biological Sciences, Research-intensive institution]

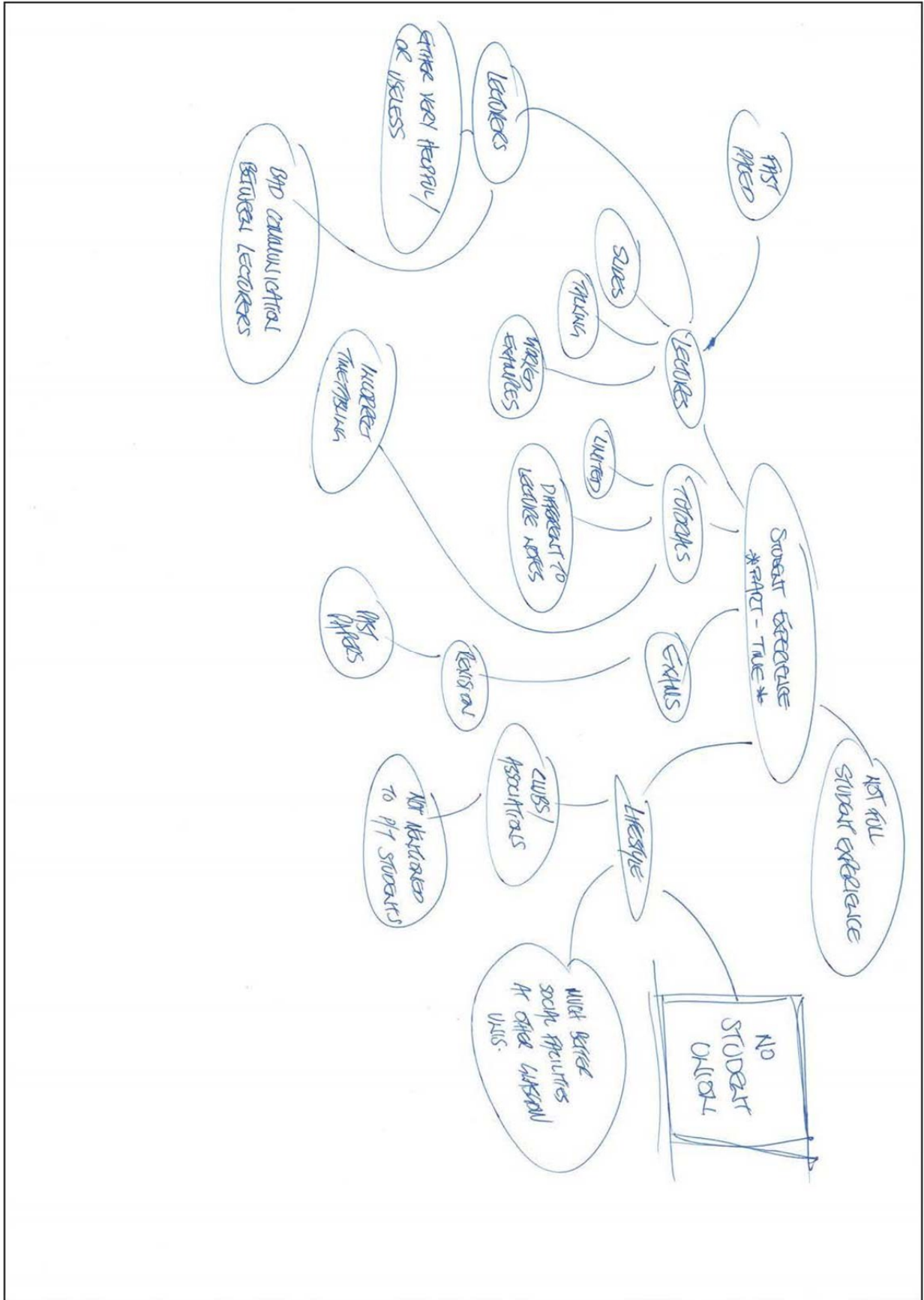
Many students had very limited contact with the Students' Unions, particularly groups such as mature and part-time students, students on time-intensive pre-professional courses, and students who were not interested in a sporting or drinking culture (see Figure 6 and Map 6). In the interviews and throughout the concept maps, quite a few students spoke of wanting more institutional, and Union, activities that were not centred on drinking. Students indicated a variety of reasons for this, including wanting to get to know people better, wanting to participate in activities that could enhance their employability, finances and religion.



Figure 6. Snapshot of Concept Map 6. Third year, Male, Engineering, Regionally-focused institution.

- **Recommendation 22**

Since students related to the academic community at the course-level, this indicates the importance of local-based partnership work for engaging students and suggests institutions should avoid overreliance on institutional-level representational forms of student engagement. A local-based approach requires multiple forms of, and more localised approaches to, partnership between senior management, central services, academic departments and Students' Unions.



Map 6. Third year, Male, Engineering, Regionally-focused institution.

- **Recommendation 23**

As part of a focus on a 'localism' approach to representation, there needs to be greater evidence-based decision-making, particularly at the local level, in response to student concerns, teaching quality and course management.

- **Recommendation 24**

Institutions should collect their own data on the student experience, representing a local and devolved approach to quality enhancement.

- **Recommendation 25**

Students' Unions may want to promote the availability of non-drinking-associated activities, societies and clubs.

- **Recommendation 26**

To offer opportunities for the full range of students there may be need for dedicated institutional staff to work in partnership with Students' Unions and course-level management, mediating engagement with those students typically insulated from the Students' Union.

Belonging

The feeling of community and opportunities for students to engage with the institution helped to give students a sense of belonging, however, students at all types of institutions struggled to balance personal commitments with those from their course. Educational returners frequently discussed family and caring roles whilst younger 'traditional'-route students more often discussed part-time work and differing academic commitments (such as course reading and assignments).

The choice of which institution to attend often related to the commitments that students needed to balance in taking up study, with those who had no dependents or work commitments having greater flexibility when selecting an institution at which to study. For students on courses with placements, organising their time and meeting personal and study commitments was a constant challenge. Mature students regularly mentioned challenges of balancing their family commitments with being a student.

Those students with family commitments – such as children or dependent relatives – typically found balancing studies and these commitments challenging. Organising child care during course contact hours was a challenge for several students, particularly when protracted periods of contact time were required. Commitments differed amongst students, but negotiating full-time study and either work, volunteering, or family (or all three) was widely regarded as very difficult.

Even for students without extensive family or employment commitments, balancing activities in which they participated could prove troublesome. Part-time work could impinge upon the time students could allocate to studies, requiring particular attention during high intensity periods of study. Whilst part-time work alone did not problematically take time away from study, it contributed

an additional activity that must be balanced alongside commitments to study, extracurricular and employability engagements and social lives.

Successfully balancing commitments required both careful management on the part of the student and curriculum planning on behalf of the institution. Some courses were structured to facilitate the balancing of multiple commitments by condensing academic timetables. Higher education courses run at a local college campus, for instance, condensed contact time into one or two days to enable students to be in full-time employment and/or balance family commitments with their study. Such courses were valued by some students (but not all) of those studying them as facilitating their return to education when otherwise this would be impossible. As such, flexibility within the curricula design, and design with specific groups of student in mind, were well regarded as offering opportunities otherwise unavailable. From the concept maps, as with the individualised experience, the sense of community had a significant social component, which was crucial to students' well-being and regard for their course.

Despite many institutions adopting them, there was not a single mention of student charters in the interviews. Although charters may be seen as an efficient way to inform students about higher education policies and practices, they seem to have negligible impact on students' expectations.

- **Recommendation 27**

Students wanted opportunities to meet and interact with other students, engage with their course and participate in extra-curricular activities, both social and academic-related. This requires sophisticated promotion and coordination of student services, within institutions this means building relationships between Students' Unions, institutional student services and support and departmental activities. Management and leadership can be provided at the institutional level through Directors or Pro-Vice Chancellor of Student Engagement positions. Across the sector this requires greater support, promotion and development opportunities for those in student-facing roles.

- **Recommendation 28**

Institutions and sector agencies should consider the purpose, role and effectiveness of student charters.

8. Transition into higher education

The transition into higher education involved a trajectory from where students had come and into a new environment, academically, intellectually, socially and often physically as well. Many students spoke of moving into higher education as a 'transformational' experience, individually and in terms of social positioning and career prospects. Students' incoming expectations stemmed from family and friends, secondary schooling and further education and the general media and political discourse. Students' experiences of transition typically related the difference between previous college, sixth form, or employment settings and the higher education institution. Returners to education, mature students entering higher education after a substantial period in employment, noted that the transition was rarely seamless.

A key feature of transition for students was balancing the various demands of higher education, and what support the institution provided for them. However, there needs to be a balance between what the institution can offer and with a 'marketing' approach. A group of students at one institution felt they had been advertised a traditional campus university experience, but in reality they had a small college experience with little interaction with other colleges. Students also noted the need to balance experiences with others and developing autonomy and independent study. Students also struggled with adapting to new spaces, in terms of learning spaces and living away from home, lifestyle changes, including balancing study and social time and how to fit into a new community.

There was a recurrent theme about transgression of expectations, mostly these relate to expectations of higher education being shaped by the 'campus' discourse of the university, content and structure of courses, difficulty of work, availability of opportunities and degree of independent learning.

Multiple transitions

Transitional experiences often centred on the process of learning to be a student and to effectively manage the student experience. Whilst some returning students emphasised the academic facet of learning to be a student, others, particularly students entering higher education directly from college or sixth form, highlighted the transition into independent living. Managing accommodation, accessing inexpensive food, and making friends were all facets of transition accorded similar importance as adaptation to the academic environment. For some international students, adaptation to a new culture, system of education and, particularly, a new language were significant aspects of their transitional experience. For other students, these wider elements of transition were not challenging:

'I'd say it [university] was pretty much what I expected. I went to boarding college, so I already had quite a lot of experience about living away and, like, the whole pastoral care and, you know, living on campus and that kind of stuff. So I already had a lot of that and knew what it would, probably be like.'

[First year, Female, Medical Pharmacology, Teaching-intensive institution]

Different kinds of challenges are faced by students and different forms of institutional support were valued. Generally, pro-active institutional support appeared of greater value to students than a broad range of services and opportunities from which they must structure their own engagement with the institution; particularly early in the degree experience. Although the challenge of academic transition unites students, the pastoral and wider elements relating to language and living are specific to groups of students. Mature students commuting to campus did not report concerns regarding grocery shopping or managing their accommodation, unsurprisingly, but rather establishing a balance between work, family and study lives. Similarly, non-native English speakers more readily expressed difficulties of transition to academic English than their English native-speaking peers.

Students generally felt all of the information they needed was available, but too often it was overwhelming and difficult to effectively prioritise. However, they did not want marketing materials and some were sceptical, upon reflection, of the claims institutions made in such materials.

- **Recommendation 29**

Institutions should consider where they can offer targeted, direct, and pro-active support – such as telephone conversations with students, ‘halls representatives’ who fostered community in student accommodation, and peer mentoring schemes.

- **Recommendation 30**

Institutions need to provide more realistic information about their course, including what they should expect and what was expected of them.

Learning to become a student

Notably, learning to become a student was an issue for both returners to education and students entering the degree directly from college or sixth form. Whilst the overall level of difficulty varied, many students were challenged by the shift toward a self-directed learning approach:

‘I was not prepared for uni, let’s say in terms of how to actually learn...that was a massive, massive shock to me in terms of, you know, how to proactively go to the library and get all this information...I think I was maybe hoping for some more guidance in the first year maybe just so you kind of knew what you were doing was okay.’

[Second year, Male, International Politics, Research-intensive institution]

Many students struggled with the transition from a more hands-on support system in schooling to the autonomy required in higher education (see Figure 7 and Map 7). There was a stark contrast between, particularly, sixth form colleges, with high taught contact time and minimal self-directed learning, and large higher education institutions. For students with few contact hours on their courses, the change in teaching and learning approach was profound and the source of much transitional difficulty. For some students these difficulties were resolute and concerns remained about the level of academic guidance available, whereas for others the transitional experience was more ephemeral and could better be considered as a process of enculturation rather than a shortcoming of either the institution or student.

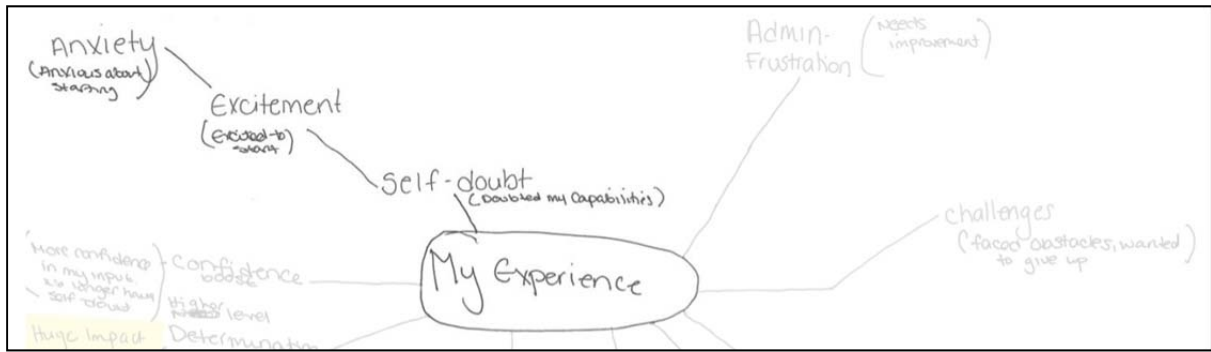


Figure 7. Snapshot of Concept Map 7. Second year, Female, Law, Specialist institution.

- **Recommendation 31**

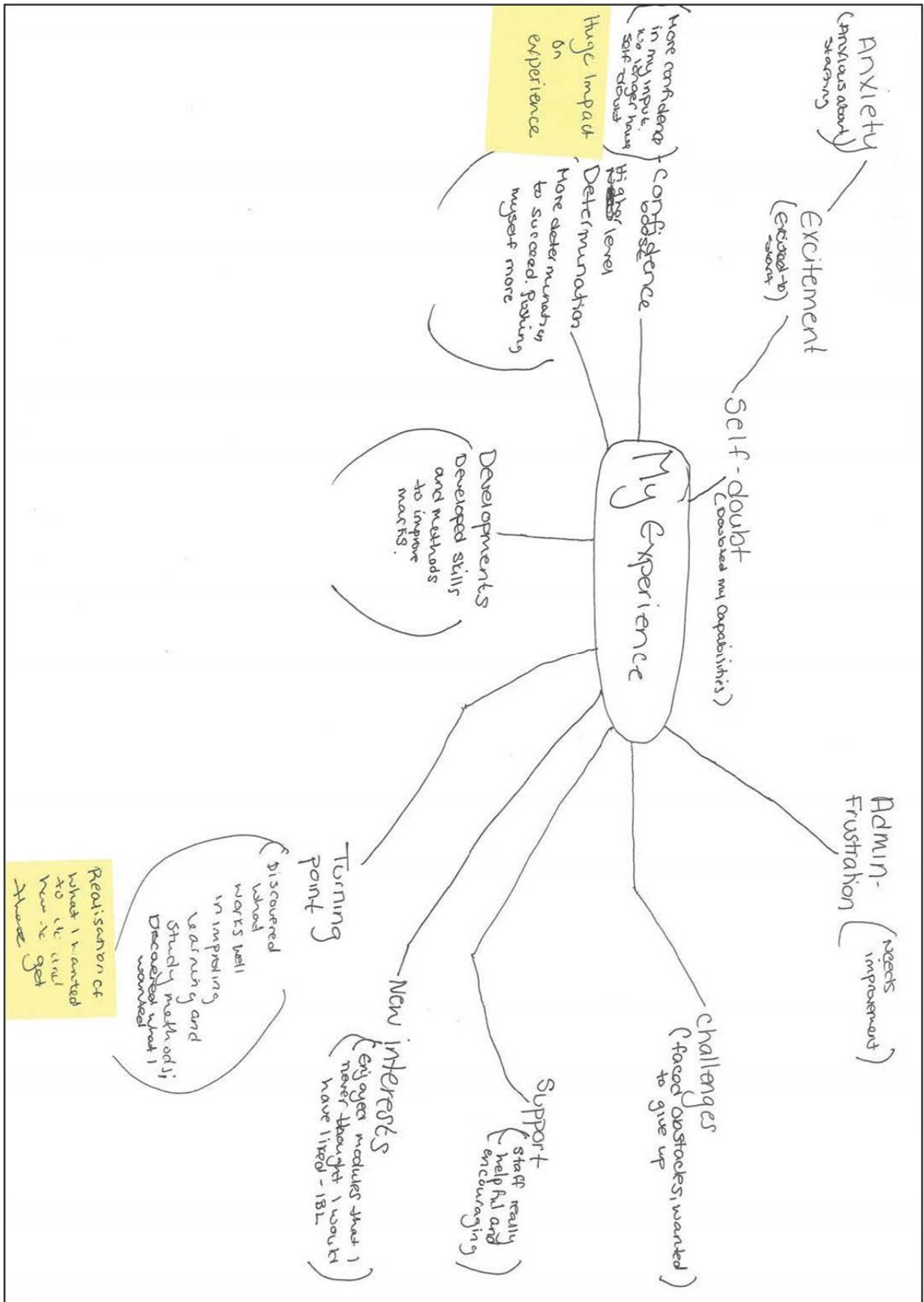
Students need more support for the transition from school or college and into higher education, particularly in terms of how to study, the level of support provided by the institution and the expectations for students. Improvements in transition needs to be balanced between higher education institutions and Schools, as higher education institutions alone cannot respond to ‘consumer choice’ when consumers are trained in a certain environment with subsequent expectations. Students suggested videos and websites that could help prepare them for the academic expectations of higher education

Transition support

Institutional support was closely aligned with the relative difficulty of transitional experiences. Direct institutional intervention, such as institutions with a policy of contacting students before their course started, was particularly helpful for those students who had experienced it. Close contact with academic staff allowed queries to be answered, the structure of a degree programme to be explained in detail, and anxieties related to process and uncertainty to be largely quelled. Students generally valued support interventions from the institution. A somewhat related concern, however, was that in the maze of support services, extra-curricular offerings, and social activities students could have difficulty making decisions about what services to draw upon:

‘I think there are, like, so many different things available and it’s so much to learn, especially in the first year, like, when you need as many possible services as possible to, like, learn who does what, who do you go to for what kind of thing and, like, in order to access, like, the right services at the right time. It’s just so overwhelming...at the beginning of second year I don’t think I knew how to do all of those things. I went to Fresher’s Fair again in the second year just to try, just because that first year it was all just too much’

[Second year, Female, Education, culture and society, Specialist institution]



Map 7. Second year, Female, Law, Specialist institution.

Unlike the direct intervention of a telephone call to the student, the indirect approach of providing many services and opportunities from which the student would need to select the appropriate (or preferable) point of contact was more troublesome. It was common that students felt lost, unsure of what was expected of them and not sure of where to go for assistance in their transition to higher education. A feeling of being overwhelmed initially by institutions, particularly large universities, was commonplace and institutions themselves could do much to abate or exacerbate this feeling. Single points of contact and close support, including peer mentoring, were posited as effective tools for facilitating smooth transition, whereas merely having access to a wide range of support services – particularly when these services lack a central hub – was less effective. This distinction is conversant with a broader trend about the course-level focus of students and the effectiveness of gatekeeper approaches to support, rather than diffuse institutional services outside of departmental ambit, such as disability services.

- **Recommendation 32**

Institutions should consider direct interventions in students' transitional experiences, not only the general provision of services. Direct intervention strategies, such as peer mentoring of incoming students, were well regarded by students.

- **Recommendation 33**

Students need sufficient transitional support, and the recognition that students' transitional experiences differ widely (and wildly upon occasion); additional support can include materials and information sent before students enrol, extended Freshers' Weeks, such as 'The First 100 Days', and Re-freshers' Weeks for second year students.

The role of the first year

Perspectives were mixed on the virtue of formative years in which grades did not count toward the degree classification (usually Year 1, but sometimes Years 2 or 3). Some students noted that they valued the opportunity to make the transition into higher education without their initial difficulties affecting their final degree classification. Typically the first year of the course was related as a formative period in which the transitional experiences – notably learning appropriate study approaches, a new primary language and independent living – could be negotiated. Formative assessments were also sometimes viewed in this manner, offering opportunity for transition into new ways of working without penalising students for whom the transition may be more troublesome and may need support.

Nonetheless, some students had concerns about formative years of a degree. One student, for instance, indicated frustration at the lack of value attached to early work in a degree, arguing that the lack of impact on degree classification for work done in pre-honours years was demotivating and even describing the time as 'lost years'. Several students (from different disciplines) for whom industry placements and internships were commonplace noted that whilst the first academic year of a degree rarely counted towards final classification, it was still extremely important to secure high grades and take part in appropriate extra-curricular activities in order to secure a placement or internship. As such, the impression that 'first year doesn't count' was lamented as misleading and

unhelpful, something that should be actively combated by the institution where possible. There exists a large gap in students' expectations and experiences of higher education, and students often felt their initial expectations were misleading and they were ill-prepared in a variety of ways.

- **Recommendation 34**

A broad sector approach to increased public information about students in higher education could help students prepare them for the realities of higher education.

- **Recommendation 35**

As several students commented that their educational experience was 'not like American films' (see Map 3) there is a potential opportunity for British filmmakers in this area.

Additional recommendations

Student life

It is important to raise awareness of the totality of students' experiences, as it all impacts on their academic experience and the wider student experience, including: accommodation, cooking, gyms, transport and more. The following themes emerged from the analysis of the concept maps of students' higher education experiences, which provided a more holistic view of the student experience. Although many of these issues are not directly part of institution's academic remit, they do impact on students' experience and quality of education, such as problems with accommodation affecting students' ability to study. The following were the most common major themes from students' concept maps, in rank order:

- Study
- Social Life
- Support
- Career
- Accommodation
- Teaching
- Clubs
- Facilities
- Resources
- Students' Union
- Finance
- Self Development
- Feedback
- Exams
- Location
- Organisation
- Independence
- Placements
- Work
- Year Abroad

Further trends emerged regarding location, particularly in relation to social opportunities and costs. Urban institutions offered more of the former, but at the expense of the latter. Fees, loans and expenses regularly emerged, with quite a few students fitting in part-time jobs to generate disposable income. Several students noted disgruntlement with student loan provision, particularly the communication between loan providers and institutions.

Particularly on students' concept maps, accommodation, facilities, institutional catering and healthy, cheap food options all featured, with many students questioning if the institution could provide better opportunities for students. Many students noted how such issues could have a significant impact on their educational experience, such as inability to sleep due to accommodation or housemate problems. Some institutions, or Students' Unions, had clear opportunities for support

and guidance in such cases, but this was not universal. During some focus groups, students (often those more closely connected to Students' Unions) directed others to resources and support for their concerns that were raised.

- **Recommendation 36**

Regarding finances, students spoke as often about immediate financial concerns, such as money for food, rent and transport, as for tuition fees and student loans. There should be increased access to flexible part-time work, paid internships and educational maintenance loans and grants.

- **Recommendation 37**

There needs to be a collective, institution-wide response to support for student services and student affairs, offering a balance of course-based provision and access to centralised services coordinated at the course-level. This includes greater institutional responsibility, oversight and partnership with wider aspects of the student experience, including accommodation, transport, cheap and healthy food options, family-study balance and social activities.

Technology

Students spoke of technology primarily in terms of estates and access. They wanted technological infrastructure that was efficient and reliable, particularly well-functioning wireless internet access on campus. The main reason was for students to access resources on-line, such as Virtual Learning Environments such as Blackboard or Moodle. Students relied on these systems and it negatively impacted upon their learning experience when they did not function properly. Interestingly, students very rarely mentioned technology in terms of pedagogic practice, such as the use of discussion fora, wikis or other virtual spaces. When such practices were mentioned, it was usually in the context of the infrastructure breaking down and students not having access to resources. Students generally viewed learning platforms as information repositories rather than as extension of the learning environment or a community learning space. Despite media coverage, there was no mention of MOOCs or similar potential learning resources.

- **Recommendation 38**

Institutions should consider students' preferences for functional infrastructure and face-to-face interactions when allocating resources related to teaching and technology.

Summary

Students have positive perceptions of higher education, but also clear expectations in mind of what institutions should provide to support and enable their learning and enhance their career prospects. Students wanted to be challenged in their learning, but also supported by the institution. Students almost exclusively spoke of their educational learning experience in terms of their course. This raises the need for strong course-level management of curriculum, quality and standards, with a clear structure of academic management mirroring undergraduate student-facing aspects, including local feedback and evaluation, module and course review. There needs to be institutional-level support and management of quality enhancement and quality assurance of student engagement, individually and collectively, which can be coordinated through dedicated offices or senior appointments. Together this would allow for evaluation and feedback processes to be managed at the course level and coordinated at the institutional level, keeping in mind to seek, ask and report on feedback to and from students.

The trajectories of students into higher education and out of higher education are highly influential in shaping their perspectives. The question of what is 'quality' or 'good' about a particular institution should thus be framed within the contingent question of what a student is looking for in an institution, which may or may not be academic reputation. Whatever the institutional type, institutions need to develop a community and help students transition into it. Staff need to be supported by their institutions to provide the interaction and guidance that is important to students.

Across the sector there needs to be a focus on how students can enhance their employability within, related to and beyond their course. Students are investing significant amounts of time and money in their education, and expect institutions to do the same. At the same time, students need to be held responsible for their role in the institution, and further opportunities for students to engage should be encouraged. There is much work to be done across the higher education sector to support students, staff and institutions in this endeavour, working *with* not *for* students.

Appendix 1: Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1**

Institutions and the sector need to explain the relationship between fees and the quality and value of their degree. There is also a need for financial education and information for students on how universities are funded and where their money goes, as there is still a lack of understanding around the case for funding universities in a new way.

- **Recommendation 2**

Institutions should support departments in ensuring staff are qualified and trained and that students are offered sufficient small-scale seminars and tutorials.

- **Recommendation 3**

To support student choice, there should be greater information and transparency over of information on how money is spent on teaching and learning activities, what qualifications do academics have in their subjects and for teaching, how are academics hired and trained and how teaching is structured and allocated. Information could include nuanced statistics on size of tutorials and seminars, department-level teaching staff-student ratios and staff teaching qualifications to allow students to choose courses offering what is most important to them.

- **Recommendation 4**

There should be better coordination between academic staff and library staff about the availability and accessibility of resources. Academics should consider availability and costs of materials when recommending course materials to students.

- **Recommendation 5**

Institutions should be cautious of using technology as a replacement for face-to-face interactions, or as a substitute for developing an active and collaborative learning environment and community.

- **Recommendation 6**

Joint honours courses need stronger management and coordination by and across course leaders. Where students are allowed to do joint degrees, course leaders need to facilitate and oversee the organisational and structural elements of the combined course.

- **Recommendation 7**

There needs to be clear and simple statements communicated for the most important aspects of a student's degree, focused at the course-level. Institutions should be cautious of using these as marketing opportunities and setting unrealistic expectations or 'selling' an undeliverable experience.

- **Recommendation 8**

Students want more support for their employability, focusing on processes, guidance support available and development opportunities, including internships, placements and work experience. There is a need for more information on employability, with a focus on 'process' and development opportunities, rather than 'product' statistics.
- **Recommendation 9**

Institutions need to offer more course-level information and better organisation of their offering of internships, placements, work experience and skills support, all tailored to specific subjects, with support available from those with experience in those industries and fields.
- **Recommendation 10**

Because most students want to go into specific graduate fields, generic graduate employment statistics or wage statistics are largely irrelevant.
- **Recommendation 11**

Institutional feedback time targets may not be tackling the most salient issues in feedback quality. The pressure for quick feedback returns with limited staff time can exacerbate the problems students have identified with feedback detail and personalisation. Institutional policies should prioritise quality, format and timing of feedback in relation to other assessments, managed at the course level, over standardised feedback turnaround times.
- **Recommendation 12**

Institutions should ensure that feedback is collected and acted upon for both current and future students.
- **Recommendation 13**

Students almost exclusively spoke of their educational learning experience in terms of their course. This raises the need for strong course-level management of curriculum, quality and standards, with a clear structure of academic management mirroring undergraduate student-facing aspects, including local feedback and evaluation, module and course review.
- **Recommendation 14**

There is a need for local management of feedback processes in relation to the structure of the course, and that feedback and evaluation needs to be an issue for individual academics, a collective issue across a course and an institutional responsibility to assure quality across courses. Closing the feedback loop needs to be improved, particularly how information is fed back to students, and done at the local level as much as possible.
- **Recommendation 15**

There should be support for staff development and training (both initial and continuing support), public information about teaching qualifications, along the lines of the UK

Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) and institutional reward for teaching and recognition of teaching excellence.

- **Recommendation 16**

Staff should be supported, trained and developed to enhance teaching and learning; good teaching staff should be retained as a priority.

- **Recommendation 17**

Students' concerns about quality of teaching on their courses highlight the need for strong local management and oversight of teaching allocation, quality and enhancement.

- **Recommendation 18**

Staff need to be supported by their institutions to provide the interaction, support and guidance that is important to students. This includes manageable teaching loads, a balance between teaching and research responsibilities and meaningful reward, recognition and progression opportunities related to teaching and support activities.

- **Recommendation 19**

There needs to be recognition that students enter higher education on different trajectories, they need different kinds and levels of support, and the institution needs to be responsive to students' needs. A considered balance needs to be sought between having clear and consistent procedures and being flexible and accommodating for students.

- **Recommendation 20**

The role and function of personal and academic tutors may need to be revised at some institutions. Students should have clear avenues for support that they are comfortable using for personal and academic concerns.

- **Recommendation 21**

Institutions need to foster a welcoming and supportive sense of community, between staff and students, and involving all staff (e.g. academic, professional and administrative). For students this involves a sense of shared aims, shared identity and shared spaces—at the subject level and institutionally.

- **Recommendation 22**

Since students related to the academic community at the course-level, this indicates the importance of local-based partnership work for engaging students and suggests institutions should avoid overreliance on institutional-level representational forms of student engagement. A local-based approach requires multiple forms of, and more localised approaches to, partnership between senior management, central services, academic departments and Students' Unions.

- **Recommendation 23**
As part of a focus on a 'localism' approach to representation, there needs to be greater evidence-based decision-making, particularly at the local level, in response to student concerns, teaching quality and course management.
- **Recommendation 24**
Institutions should collect their own data on the student experience, representing a local and devolved approach to quality enhancement.
- **Recommendation 25**
Students' Unions may want to promote the availability of non-drinking-associated activities, societies and clubs.
- **Recommendation 26**
To offer opportunities for the full range of students there may be need for dedicated institutional staff to work in partnership with Students' Unions and course-level management, mediating engagement with those students typically insulated from the Students' Union.
- **Recommendation 27**
Students wanted opportunities to meet and interact with other students, engage with their course and participate in extra-curricular activities, both social and academic-related. This requires sophisticated promotion and coordination of student services, within institutions this means building relationships between Students' Unions, institutional student services and support and departmental activities. Management and leadership can be provided at the institutional level through Directors or Pro-Vice Chancellor of Student Engagement positions. Across the sector this requires greater support, promotion and development opportunities for those in student-facing roles.
- **Recommendation 28**
Institutions and sector agencies should consider the purpose, role and effectiveness of student charters.
- **Recommendation 29**
Institutions should consider where they can offer targeted, direct, and pro-active support – such as telephone conversations with students, 'halls representatives' who fostered community in student accommodation, and peer mentoring schemes.
- **Recommendation 30**
Institutions need to provide more realistic information about their course, including what they should expect and what was expected of them.

- **Recommendation 31**

Students need more support for the transition from school or college and into higher education, particularly in terms of how to study, the level of support provided by the institution and the expectations for students. Improvements in transition needs to be balanced between higher education institutions and Schools, as higher education institutions alone cannot respond to ‘consumer choice’ when consumers are trained in a certain environment with subsequent expectations. Students suggested videos and websites that could help prepare them for the academic expectations of higher education
- **Recommendation 32**

Institutions should consider direct interventions in students’ transitional experiences, not only the general provision of services. Direct intervention strategies, such as peer mentoring of incoming students, were well regarded by students.
- **Recommendation 33**

Students need sufficient transitional support, and the recognition that students’ transitional experiences differ widely (and wildly upon occasion); additional support can include materials and information sent before students enrol, extended Freshers’ Weeks, such as ‘The First 100 Days’, and Re-freshers’ Weeks for second year students.
- **Recommendation 34**

A broad sector approach to increased public information about students in higher education could help students prepare them for the realities of higher education.
- **Recommendation 35**

As several students commented that their educational experience was ‘not like American films’ (see Map 3) there is a potential opportunity for British filmmakers in this area.
- **Recommendation 36**

Regarding finances, students spoke as often about immediate financial concerns, such as money for food, rent and transport, as for tuition fees and student loans. There should be increased access to flexible part-time work, paid internships and educational maintenance loans and grants.
- **Recommendation 37**

There needs to be a collective, institution-wide response to support for student services and student affairs, offering a balance of course-based provision and access to centralised services coordinated at the course-level. This includes greater institutional responsibility, oversight and partnership with wider aspects of the student experience, including accommodation, transport, cheap and healthy food options, family-study balance and social activities.

- **Recommendation 38**

Institutions should consider students' preferences for functional infrastructure and face-to-face interactions when allocating resources related to teaching and technology.

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