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for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level“**

IBAR

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IBAR Project

Work-Package 9

Quality and Stakeholders – survey of institutions UK

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Introduction

This report presents data from four UK higher education institutions, three from England and one from Scotland, about the management of their internal quality assurance systems as they relate to stakeholders in higher education. The report was produced between June and September 2012 by the IBAR project team at the University of Strathclyde and Durham University

The report focuses on the policy and procedures for including stakeholder views in the management of education quality in UK higher education. It draws on data from four UK institutions and also examines the broader higher education policy and national quality management environment that influences institutional practice in this area.

This report will form part of the data informing a synthesis report for this work-package of the IBAR project that will make recommendations about future guidelines on stakeholders in the context of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area Part 1 (ESG1).

Currently, ESG1 includes the following standards, which describe much of the territory and activities relevant to stakeholder engagement (specific references to stakeholders are italicised):

1.1 Policy and procedures for quality assurance

Standard:

Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture that recognises the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality.

The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. They should also include a role for students and other stakeholders.

Guidelines:

Formal policies and procedures provide a framework within which higher education institutions can develop and monitor the effectiveness of their quality assurance systems. They also help to provide public confidence in institutional autonomy. Policies contain the statements of intentions and the principal means by which these will be achieved. Procedural guidance can give more detailed information about the ways in which the policy is implemented and provides a useful reference point for those who need to know about the practical aspects of carrying out the procedures.

The policy statement is expected to include:

- the relationship between teaching and research in the institution
- the institution's strategy for quality and standards
- the organisation of the quality assurance system

- the responsibilities of departments, schools, faculties and other organisational units and individuals
- for the assurance of quality
- the involvement of students in quality assurance
- the ways in which the policy is implemented, monitored and revised.

The realisation of the EHEA depends crucially on a commitment at all levels of an institution to ensuring that its programmes have clear and explicit intended outcomes; that its staff are ready, willing and able to provide teaching and learner support that will help its students achieve those outcomes; and that there is full, timely and tangible recognition of the contribution to its work by those of its staff who demonstrate particular excellence, expertise and dedication. All higher education institutions should aspire to improve and enhance the education they offer their students.

1.2 Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards Standard:

Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards.

Guidelines:

The confidence of students and other stakeholders in higher education is more likely to be established and maintained through effective quality assurance activities which ensure that programmes are well-designed, regularly monitored and periodically reviewed, thereby securing their continuing relevance and currency.

The quality assurance of programmes and awards are expected to include:

- development and publication of explicit intended learning outcomes
- careful attention to curriculum and programme design and content
- specific needs of different modes of delivery (e.g. full time, part-time, distance-learning, e-learning) and types of higher education (e.g. academic, vocational, professional)
- availability of appropriate learning resources
- formal programme approval procedures by a body other than that teaching the programme
- monitoring of the progress and achievements of students
- *regular periodic reviews of programmes (including external panel members)*
- *regular feedback from employers, labour market representatives and other relevant organisations*
- *participation of students in quality assurance activities.*

1. National policy context

The use of the term stakeholder in relation to higher education is a relatively recent phenomenon. Modern usage derives from the corporate context where a stakeholder,

often through self-legitimised claims, asserts that they have an interest in how the policies, objectives and activities of an organisation might affect them, directly or indirectly.

Whilst that definition means almost everyone can claim to be a stakeholder, normally it is accepted that not all stakeholders are due equal consideration. Of course, relative rough weightings between stakeholders are likely to vary depending upon the context, introducing a further source of complexity. There are vital reputational and symbolic components of relationships between universities and external interests. Sometimes these considerations directly influence the nature and quality of provision in the higher education institution, but frequently that link is more opaque and difficult to identify and specify.

Local communities typically attach high value to their local institutions and universities generally seek to promote close links with these communities and key local constituencies. Simplistically, this could be seen as the playing out of market considerations: to help universities attract students, to identify and secure jobs for graduates and for other complex exchanges and provision of services, which both parties might require. In the UK local communities are frequently represented on formal bodies of universities and/or consulted about their views and needs.

If it is accepted that not all stakeholders commonly exercise similar levels of influence upon the quality of education provision then we suggest that in practice, in higher education in the UK, the main groups of stakeholders are:

- government and its various agencies
- regulatory and professional bodies
- students
- staff
- employers
- alumni

Throughout the UK, government is a major source of funding of public provision in higher education institutions. In addition, government guides and steers the quality of provision primarily through bodies such as the UK Higher Education Funding Councils and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. Government also exercises influence and oversight through the work of statutory and regulatory bodies, and a range of quangos¹. Further, it can shape discussion about higher education policy and direction through White Papers and other parliamentary instruments.

One obvious example of direct government influence has been the recent UK-wide push to enhance the status of the student voice, recognising the importance of their role as a set of stakeholders in quality deliberations. In Scotland for almost a decade a student has been one member of each external review team in the process of Enhancement Led Institutional Review (ELIR). Institutions have been encouraged to model that practice in the composition of the cyclical internal reviews of programmes, which they are expected to conduct and to make available as evidence as part of the

¹ Quasi-Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisation. These are organisations that are funded by taxpayers, but not controlled directly by central government.

ELIR process. The UK National Student Survey (NSS) can likewise be viewed not only as a means of collecting student views of provision but through publication of the outcomes ensuring these are visible and subject to scrutiny, discussion and action. Similarly, the subject benchmark statements and codes of practice for quality assurance published by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) emphasise the use and importance of stakeholders in curriculum design and review.

Historically, staff in British universities have been viewed as the champions and custodians of academic standards. That remains the case although it has become more complicated because of factors such as the emergence of mass higher education, the emergence both of new subjects and academic permutations, the extension of forms of assessment, the impact of Europeanisation and internationalisation, the massive growth of part-time study and of students working part-time during study.

Government has in recent decades positioned higher education in the UK as a major source of innovation and economic dynamism. An unsurprising correlate has been the push to enable employers and professional bodies to play a more active role in topics such as curricula, skills development and standards. There is a long tradition in the UK of the professional community (usually through professional bodies) setting the standards, the content and the guiding ethos of relevant professional degrees. In some cases, university managers can struggle to get institutional objectives taken seriously when departments offering professional degrees gave clear precedence to their professional accreditor(s).

Recent literature has also questioned the current ability of university decision-making structures to keep pace with the changing nature of university activities, with the changing needs of stakeholders and with the increasing diversification of university workforces. Whitchurch and Gordon (2011)² consider the extent to which the increasing numbers of university practitioners in areas such as health or social care and the needs of university professionals in non-traditional roles (for example, to support widening participation, e-learning, and business partnerships) are fully able to participate as stakeholders.

The trend to complexity impacts upon every major set of stakeholders. The multiplicity of voices and perspectives pose difficulties for those seeking to listen to views and act upon them. Perhaps inevitably, lobbies and groupings may appear to have gained greater influence. Although the internet does allow many interests to express views, and increasingly it is used by institutions and other key stakeholders, judging by published summaries collective responses to consultations often appear to carry greater weight. Whilst that may not be surprising it does pose a challenge for what is often cherished as the rather individualistic traditions of the philosophy of teaching and learning in British higher education.

The challenge for institutional leaders, at any level, is to make sense of potentially massive ranges of sources of feedback and guidance, to heed collective and cumulative views but to ensure that different, even dissenting opinions are heard and evaluated. In an age when speed of decision-making is increasingly emphasised, this

² Whitchurch, C. and Gordon, G. (2011) 'Some Implications of a Diversifying Workforce for Governance and Management', *Tertiary Education and Management* 17(1), 65-77

requires highly-skilled processes and procedures and places a great deal of responsibility on the shoulders of the gatekeepers of the business agendas and the writers of policy analyses.

Despite the longer list of key stakeholders identified above, references to stakeholders in ESG1 Section 1.2 imply more limited territory:

- *regular periodic reviews of programmes (including external panel members)*
- *regular feedback from employers, labour market representatives and other relevant organizations*
- *participation of students in quality assurance activities.*

This foregrounding of three stakeholder groups: external academics; employers and professional bodies; and students closely mirrors the groups specifically legislated in quality policy documentation at the universities participating in this study and in the discussions conducted with participants. Where other stakeholder groups are identified they are either perceived as currently under-utilised (for example, in the case of alumni) or as recipients of forms of engagement that both encompass and transcend quality processes (in the case of government and national agencies).

2. Methodology

Institutions surveyed

The four institutions selected represent a sample of the variant types of higher education institution in the UK. After the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, polytechnics in the UK achieved degree-awarding status and became universities. Our sample was selected to demonstrate the diversity of higher education in the UK and to ensure that the data collected offered a rich picture of practice across the sector.

Our sample includes:

University A is a research-intensive, collegiate institution, which dates from the early 19th century. The University has around 11000 undergraduate and 5000 postgraduate students and its main functions are divided between academic departments, which undertake research and provide teaching to students, and a number of colleges, which are responsible for the domestic and pastoral needs of students, researchers and some academic staff. University A features prominently in UK and QS university rankings and is a member of British and international groupings of research-intensive universities. It is consistently rated as one of the top universities in the UK.

University B was a former polytechnic that opted to become a university under the powers of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Subsequent mergers with colleges in the region added Nursing and Midwifery to the academic profile and three smaller campuses. The University has around 16000 students spread across five campuses. It also offers foundation awards in conjunction with partner further education colleges. Some 5000 students study in Europe and Asia for University B awards. There is a strong commitment to employment-related provision.

University C dates from the late nineteenth century. It became an independent institution in the 1960s. Further academic diversification occurred through growth and, in the 1990s, via merger with higher education colleges. Currently it has some 17000 students and a strong professional orientation. Distance learning students account for almost 20 per cent of the student enrolment. University C has some world-renowned areas of research excellence and has a growing reputation for the quality of its student education.

University D is one of the newer universities in the UK, progressing from the status of a higher education college, to that of a University College and then full university status in recent decades. Mergers during that phase also diversified the academic profile. It has around 8000 undergraduate students, of which 1300 are studying for further education qualifications. Almost half of the student population comprises mature students.

Conducting the research

Data collection for WP9 was conducted in four ways: firstly, as a desk study, using documents publicly available on the websites of the four institutions to uncover policies and information about institutional activities related to student assessment. During this first phase of data collection, a number of key individuals at each institution with particular responsibility for/or interest in the governance of educational quality were identified. These included senior managers at institutional level (for example, Directors of Student Experience, Head of Student Registry, Directors of Quality); senior academics with responsibility for overseeing decision-making processes at School/Faculty level (for example, Deans of Faculty, School Directors of Quality); academic staff with responsibility for programme design and monitoring; and students (in particular Student Presidents and sabbatical officers of the Students Union or members of the Student Council). In all, 64 university representatives were approached to participate in this study, 16 from each institution.

A second phase of data collection involved the distribution of a short questionnaire to the aforementioned categories of respondents in each institution.

The third phase of data collection comprised focus groups and semi-structured telephone interviews with those individuals identified in phase one of the data collection who were available to speak to the team.

A final phase of data collection comprised desk-based data collection to inform a consideration of the sectoral and/or national policy context of stakeholder engagement in higher education in the UK.

3. Responses to the research questions

1. Policy context

*What national legislation or frameworks govern the inclusion of stakeholders in university decision-making about the quality of student education?
Have any recent changes (in the last 5 years) in legislation or frameworks resulted in changes in the ways in which stakeholders are used at the university?*

Participants identified the influence on the university sector of a variety of government reviews and reports on higher education, some which have made direct recommendations about changes to the ways in which external stakeholders are represented in university governance structures (for example, the 2003 Lambert Review which strongly encouraged universities to develop stronger links with industry) and others (for example, the 2010 Browne Review) which have not examined the role of stakeholders in university structures directly, but have made recommendations for significant changes in the sector which inevitably impact on the ways in which universities make decisions, and on which stakeholders views should be prioritised.

The 2004 and 2009 Committee of University Chairs³ Code of Practice on University Governance and the rules laid down by HEFCE/SFC in their terms and conditions for payment of core funding grants were both cited by senior managers as important influences on the design, composition and conduct of university governing bodies, including the increased use of external stakeholders.

A majority of participants cited the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA ad QAA Scotland)'s code of practice for the assurance of quality and academic standards⁴ as a key document in the use of external stakeholders to inform the management of quality at lower levels of the institution (for example, as part of quality arrangements at School/Faculty/Department level).

The QAA Code of Practice states that:

“When evaluating policies and practices for programme design, approval and review [...] it is important to consider whether due account is taken of external reference points, including any relevant subject benchmark statements, national frameworks for higher education qualifications and, where appropriate, the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), employers and any relevant national legislation/national commitments to European and international processes.”

During 2012, the QAA has undertaken consultations on a new Quality Code⁵ to be adopted later in the year. The new code of practice takes into account the increasing focus across the UK on student engagement in the quality of learning. The draft of the new QAA Quality Code includes a new section on student engagement. This section sets out the following expectation about student engagement which higher education institutions are required to meet:

“Higher Education providers [should] take deliberate steps to engage students, individually and collectively, as partners to enhance their learning experience.”

³ See: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2009/200914/>

⁴ See: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/code-of-practice/Pages/default.aspx>

⁵ See: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/quality-code/Pages/default.aspx>

Evidence from this study suggests that UK universities are very well placed to meet QAA expectations on student engagement. Universities participating in this study have well-established mechanisms for soliciting student views on a wide variety of issues relating to the quality of educational provision. All of the institutions surveyed have worked to strengthen these mechanisms recently in response to the increased pressure to recruit undergraduates precipitated by the 2010 Browne Review. In particular, the universities participating in this study described ways in which students are increasingly included as partners in decision-making at the highest level of university governance (for example, as full members of University Senates, Councils and key committees). Student participants in this study noted an increase in the influence of student associations and evidence of real partnership working between student presidents and sabbatical officers and senior managers at their institutions. Similarly, all of the universities surveyed are working to increase student representation at local level, within Schools or Faculties. At University C, for example, a new network of Student Presidents at School/Faculty level has been established to help strengthen local representation, to ensure that School/Faculty views are heard and acted upon and to aid Schools/Faculties to further develop representation at programme/module level.

Respondents to this study noted the challenges faced by university managers in creating the right balance between pursuit of key institutional strategies and support for local innovation and local responsibility for student education. Two opposing trajectories are apparent: firstly, institutions are appointing named senior staff and under-taking re-structuring activities to support institution-wide delivery of core objectives. This includes centralisation of some aspects of stakeholder engagement, including systematic collection and analysis of student satisfaction data through institution-wide student surveys, and centrally-managed committees to solicit employer views on university provision. Conversely, the institutions we surveyed are also working to encourage greater ownership of quality processes at local level and have undertaken re-structuring of reporting lines, roles and activities to strengthen local practices and to support local alignment with institutional priorities.

One of the most influential external influences on the ways in which universities engage with their stakeholders in recent years is the UK National Student Survey⁶. The NSS is a national initiative, conducted annually since 2005. The survey runs across all publicly funded Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and the majority of HEIs in Scotland. Results from the survey are used, along with other data, to calculate university positioning in league tables and are perceived by the universities participating in this study as a key driver of changes in the way universities communicate with their students.

2. Institutional rules on stakeholder engagement

What institutional rules determine how stakeholders should be used to support decision-making about the quality of student education? Have there been any significant institutional changes in the last 5 years?

⁶ See: <http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/>

All of the institutions surveyed have institutional policies that determine and guide the use of stakeholders at local (School/Faculty/Department) level. Typically, these guidelines are part of each university's published policy for quality assurance. Institutional quality assurance guidelines are most likely to set out institutional expectations for the following activities involving stakeholders:

- Use of external academics as part of annual monitoring of modules/exam boards
- Use of external academics or other stakeholders (typically professional bodies or employers) in periodic subject review
- Guidelines on the relationship between the university and professional bodies for programmes which receive external accreditation
- Guidelines on the participation of students in quality assurance activities (for example, as members of staff/student committees, as members of review panels etc.)

Typically, local quality frameworks or guidelines are designed to ensure that the institution and its staff act in a way that is consistent with the QAA code of practice and with relevant funding council directives. However, in a context of increased competition, universities in the UK are developing distinctive approaches to the management of education, including arrangements for communicating with stakeholders. The universities participating in this study are not merely seeking compliance with QAA guidelines, but instead are considering how stakeholders can become a source of competitive advantage. Strategic approaches to stakeholder engagement differ according to the strategic priorities of each university.

A number of senior managers participating in this study described how local guidelines or policies determine not only the ways in which the university communicates to its own stakeholders, but how partnership relationships are built between the university and other individuals, groupings or organisations, reflecting that the university itself is also a stakeholder within its organisational environment. Typically, this means that university representatives hold office on the governing bodies of feeder colleges, civic organisations, charities etc.

3. Stakeholder representation and influence

What is nominal and real stakeholder's representation in institutional decision-making bodies? Has it changed and why?

Externality in university decision-making at a senior level is supported primarily by the membership of each institution's governing body, which includes representatives from external stakeholder groups. Data from University D shows that the university plans to review the membership of its governing body to include more representatives from industry and key employers, in line with its institutional strategy. It is reasonable to assume that other institutions may seek to undertake similar reviews of membership as competition between universities in the UK intensifies and graduate employability remains a key performance indicator.

A number of respondents noted that although governing bodies oversee all university activities, specific responsibility for student education rests at a lower level, usually within a university Senate or Council or a sub-committee of these bodies. These bodies are much less likely to include any external memberships, although student representation is increasingly common. University C has sought to enhance the external views available to its Learning and Teaching Committee by convening an Employability Committee, which includes representatives from local industry and reports to the university Court.

Respondents reported a generalised trend towards increased stakeholder influence in all areas of decision-making. In particular, student respondents (including Student Presidents, Sabbatical Officers and members of Student Councils) described their enhanced status at all levels of University governance and policy-making.

Student officers at University B described their perception of an institution in which student views are taken very seriously, in which there is a real sense of students being given every opportunity to contribute to university strategy and in which opportunities for regular dialogue between students and senior management, including the Vice-Chancellor, were readily available. Almost all of the participants in this study described the student-centered nature of university decision-making and quality processes as a key strength of their institutions, reflecting a generalised shift in UK higher education. It is interesting to note that student officers, student council members, university managers and academic staff were all very likely to agree that students are a core part of university decision-making.

Respondents at all the institutions surveyed noted that some stakeholder groups are under-represented. In particular, alumni are perceived as under-utilised at present. Some respondents noted that diversification of university business (for example, overseas provision, partnership working with colleges or other providers and increasing blurring of the boundaries between research, knowledge exchange and education) means that universities are developing different kinds of relationships with their communities.

4. Local variations across institution

Are there differences in local level (School/Faculty/Department in how stakeholders are used (for example, in curriculum design/approval, exam boards etc.)? Can you point to any challenges or any examples of good practice?

All of the institutions surveyed noted significant variations across departments in the ways in which external views are included in many aspects of quality management. Most importantly, subject areas that receive professional accreditation tend to have very well developed procedures for ensuring that the design, delivery and assessment of courses is undertaken in consultation with professional bodies.

However, even though professional bodies are well-established partners in the management of quality in many subject areas, this does not preclude innovation. Respondents at University D, for example, described how the university's School of Health includes patients and carers in decision-making about the management of quality, including the recruitment of staff and students.

In subject areas that do not require professional accreditation, the use of stakeholders to provide external views is generally less well developed. However, many respondents noted that the increased focus on graduate employability has been a factor in an increased concern to make contact with key employers and/or alumni.

All of the universities surveyed have worked to strengthen policies and guidelines on the ways in which students are included in decision-making about the quality of education. A number of respondents noted that their universities were undertaking similar strategic reviews of other aspects of stakeholder engagement (particularly those involving employers) to improve the consistency of practice across the whole institution.

5. Use of stakeholder views

To what extent do stakeholder views contribute to:

- *Learning outcomes, graduate profiles/attributes/curriculum design?*
- *Exam requirements/curriculum review?*
- *Employability/skills development?*
- *Other quality assurance processes*

What is done well? What would you like to improve? What barriers do you recognise?

In subject groupings that receive professional accreditation, institutional and/or local policies determine the nature and scope of collaboration with professional bodies to define and develop curricula, including learning outcomes, assessment requirements and methodologies and skills development. Typically, accreditation procedures are conducted in tandem with periodic subject reviews, although special dispensation from the university may be required if the accreditation timetable is longer than the scheduled timeframe for periodic review (typically five years). Additional externality is achieved by the required use of external examiners in annual exam boards and external members in subject review panels.

In subject areas that do not receive accreditation, direct links with employers and/or industry representatives can be less straightforward to secure. Typically, externality is achieved by the required use of external examiners in annual exam boards and external members in subject review panels. Given the UK's focus on graduate employability, there is increased pressure on subjects that do not receive external accreditation to strengthen alignment of curricula and skills development with employer needs.

For some universities participating in this study, particularly B and D, emphasis on graduate employment has greatly increased the amount of contact that departments have with employers. One respondent at University B noted that "the majority of awards areas now have high and significant industry contacts and to some extent they shape the curriculum." Although participants in universities A and C noted evidence of good local practice in non-accredited subject areas, these institutions are also addressing this challenge by creating centralised employer forums in which messages

about programme effectiveness can be collected and circulated across the whole institution.

Students are universally recognised as key stakeholders in the design, review and management of curricula and all of the institutions participating in this study have well-established mechanisms for capturing student views on educational provision. Typical activities include: class-based and institution-wide surveys, class-based student representatives, local and institution-wide learning and teaching committees including student membership, increased representation at senior management level (including, for example, multiple student places in senior governance bodies) and increasingly common participation in subject review boards and, in some cases, in annual exam board meetings.

Alumni, in the form of recent graduates, are increasingly used as a resource in subject review. At University C, for example, a panel of current students and graduates are interviewed by both external and internal review boards to solicit information about the effectiveness of programmes and opportunities for enhancement.

All of the institutions participating in this study emphasised the centrality of the student voice in all aspects of quality management. Student presidents and other sabbatical officers described their enhanced status as partners in senior decision-making. At University B, the student president commented that “we are in a great place” regarding student involvement in quality. Similar responses from other student representatives suggest that UK universities are increasingly perceived as highly responsive to student needs. However, some challenges do remain. Overseas students and part-time students remain widely under-represented and further challenges face student bodies in institutions that offer large numbers of partnership courses with other providers. Many participants in this study reported that, whilst their student executive teams are highly effective, it can be hard to recruit enthusiastic and well-informed students to fill representation roles at lower levels (for example, on departmental staff/student committees). Questions also remain about the extent to which students should be asked to give up their time to develop curricula or to participate in subject reviews. Some academic staff expressed anxieties about students’ readiness and willingness to act as “quasi professionals” in the development of student learning. A number of students reported that they liked the use of surveys to solicit their opinions because surveys require little time commitment.

A number of staff members reported anxieties about the perceived expansion of role of employers in determining aspects of the curriculum and in the management of quality. There is a perception amongst academic staff that universities risk dilution of academic goals and of the distinctiveness of higher education. Employers are sometimes viewed not as “stakeholders” but as “vested interests” that are likely to steer universities towards narrower models of employee training and reject scholarship.

Even when staff reported more benign views of employer involvement in quality management, practical issues remain a barrier. Using employers as effective stakeholders implies the development of a long-term relationship rather than “one-off” engagements in which both parties need to have clear understanding of each

other's aims and working practices. Building and sustaining these relationships can be costly and difficult, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Some respondents rejected the validity of involving other stakeholders in curriculum design or management. A respondent at University A noted that: "It is appropriate for students and employers to have an input to decision-making about learning and teaching. I can see no reason for alumni or the local community to have an input. Our taught programmes are not designed to serve either of those groups." Although staff at other universities noted that alumni and other external groups were under-represented and under-utilised, they were more likely to perceive value in using these groups as sources of information about the impact of educational programmes. These differences inevitably reflect different institutional missions and differing historical relationships between universities and their local communities.

6. Stakeholders and other activities

Do stakeholders influence or support other activities at the university? For example:

- *Recruitment of staff?*
- *Internship or training opportunities for students?*
- *Professional development*
- *Research/knowledge exchange (for example, do external stakeholders supervise p/g research?)*

How do you see the role of stakeholders expanding? What benefits or challenges do you recognise?

At a senior level, the institution's governing body oversees recruitment of university managers, ensuring externality and stakeholder representation (including that of students) in key appointments. Appointing panels for other senior and middle-level posts are likely to include external membership (for example, academics from other institutions) and may include representatives from professional bodies in appropriate subject areas. Students are increasingly likely to be involved in some aspects of staff recruitment, particularly as members of key committees or other groupings. In some cases, other stakeholders may also be involved (for example, at University D, patients and carers are invited to feed into certain aspects of local decision-making in the School of Medicine, including recruitment of staff and students).

Given the current UK-wide focus on graduate employability, internships and other work-based learning opportunities (including entrepreneurial partnerships with local businesses and international placements) are increasingly offered by UK universities. Internships may be managed as credit-bearing components of an academic programme, as "add-on" elements of the co-curriculum or as university-initiated opportunities post-graduation. Some placements are managed solely through careers services, others by academic departments and some as a joint endeavour. In some cases, academic programmes are offered in partnership with industry providers (for example, the aeronautical engineering programmes offered by University B). In some subject areas, co-delivery of academic programmes with external providers is very well established. Examples include medicine, dentistry, nursing, social work, teaching etc. In these cases, responsibility for student assessment and management of student experiences during placements is very well-understood and regulated by

professional bodies. In other subject areas, relationships with industry providers is often less well-developed and can create practical and ethical challenges for academic staff.

Similarly, in professional subject areas including medicine, dentistry, nursing, social work, teaching, law, engineering, architecture etc., professional development pathways are clearly defined by professional bodies. Some academic staff in these areas will commonly combine academic work with professional practice. In other subject areas professional development opportunities may be less clearly-defined.

There is some evidence of external industry professionals acting in supervisory roles for p/g research. One academic expressed concern about the precedent this may offer for prioritising economic/industry-led outcomes rather than those of scholarship.

Most of the respondents to this study anticipate significant increases in the number and influence of stakeholders on university practice. Whilst most welcome the focus on students as key stakeholders in education, there are anxieties about how other voices are heard and how strongly external messages influence activities within the institution. There are also practical concerns about the boundaries of university work and the changing nature of academic identity as degree programmes increasingly include placements, partnership working with industry, entrepreneurship and other elements not historically recognised as “scholarly”.

7. Major findings and policy recommendations

7.1. Identification of barriers to the effective use of stakeholders with **relevance to supranational level**

Stakeholders have opportunities to communicate with, and influence practice at, UK universities at multiple levels and in many different ways. There is general recognition that consideration of stakeholder views and needs is beneficial to institutions and there are well-established practices that enable institutions to respond effectively to the needs of the communities and stakeholders they serve.

Evidence from this study suggests that UK universities are able to work effectively with different stakeholder groups to inform decision-making. There is evidence to suggest that UK universities may be a source of good practice for others across Europe in some areas of practice. Examples include the training and support provided to student sabbatical officers both within their institutions and by the National Union of Students⁷ (NUS) and sparqs⁸ and the innovative ways in which UK universities are re-defining partnerships with local businesses and industries.

The UK universities participating in this study reported the current under utilisation of alumni as a source of data about the impact of education programmes.

Recommendations:

⁷ National Union of Students Officer Development Programme
<http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/uniondevelopment/training/>

⁸ Student participation in quality Scotland: www.sparqs.ac.uk/

- ENQA might wish to consider whether an extension of ESG1 or ESG2 might offer opportunities to create national support for student officers in nation states that do not yet enjoy dedicated training programmes.
- ENQA might wish to consider whether further work at supra-national level to define or frame desirable employer/industry relationships with higher education might be valuable.
- ENQA might wish to consider whether an extension of ESG1 to include a wider definition of higher education stakeholders might add value to quality processes in particular, the inclusion of alumni).

7.2 Identification of barriers to the effective use of stakeholders with **relevance to national level**

Participants identified some anxieties about the difficulties institutions face in gaining a balanced view of the value and quality of educational provision. The recent pre-eminence of student satisfaction data tools, particularly the UK National Students Survey (NSS), which feed into national league tables on university performance is sometimes perceived as unhelpful. A number of senior managers noted that if universities have got the relationship with their students “right”, then good performance in the NSS should be a given. However, there is considerable temptation for universities to allocate resource to activities that may improve NSS scores but not necessarily offer innovation or real improvement in quality management.

Respondents to this study noted a number of barriers in relation to other stakeholders. Employers are perceived as valuable sources of information about graduate attractiveness in the labour market and about key components of curricula, but universities often find it difficult to secure the right kinds of engagement with industry. Employer organisations and professional bodies can provide useful expertise, but it is harder for universities to initiate and nurture relationships with other employers, particularly with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Initiatives such as those underway at University A, in which students and staff are supported to develop new small enterprises in partnership with existing businesses are one way of making longer-term connections with industry stakeholders and respondents from other institutions reported similar schemes. The diversification of educational experiences on offer in response to government pressure to improve graduate employability can therefore offer opportunities to create potentially productive links between universities and business. However, many respondents reported more generalised mismatches between the decision-making timescales of universities, the time commitment required from industry representatives to become effective sources of expertise in decision-making and difficulties in matching industry interests to higher education mission.

All of the universities participating in this study reported that alumni are under-

utilised as a source of information about the longer-term impact and value of programmes.

Recommendations:

- Universities in the UK may benefit from national work to develop frameworks or models to integrate alumni and other stakeholder groups more effectively in decision-making and university outreach (for example commercialisation).
- Universities in the UK may benefit from national work to develop frameworks or models for effective partnership working with employers that retains the special nature of higher education provision.

5.3 Identification of barriers to the effective use of stakeholders with **relevance to institutional level**

The institutions surveyed reported differing perceptions of the importance of stakeholder views in university decision-making. Commonly, a “hierarchy” of stakeholders is apparent, with staff, students and employers enjoying prominent roles and other stakeholders (for example, community organisations or alumni) being less utilised and perceived in some cases as less immediately relevant to university business.

All of the universities participating in this study reported significant differences in local practice in some aspects of stakeholder engagement. Although there are inevitably differences in the ways in which different subject groupings are required to involve, for example, professional bodies in curriculum development and delivery, there is evidence to suggest that significant local variation in practice is seen as a weakness in some institutions. Work has already been undertaken to review some core activities (for example, the composition of governing bodies, the development of centralised committees to solicit the views of employers and the extension of student representation at multiple levels of the institution) but there remains room for further re-structuring and strengthening of systems and processes.

Universities B, C and D were very keen to stress not only the importance of stakeholder views but the ways in which their institutions are developing the scope and methods of stakeholder engagement and partnership working. Engagement with students and employers is seen as particularly important in a national context of increased student choice, higher undergraduate fees, increased competition between universities and a national focus on indicators such as graduate employability included in league tables and other data sources. At University A, the rhetoric of stakeholder engagement appears to be less pervasive. This may be because University A is historically a recruiting institution, with more undergraduate applicants than places, and is confident about its ability both to attract students and to create employable graduates.

A number of participants described their experiences of the tension between the speed of decision-making required to respond to environmental pressures and changes in external policy with the perceived need to retain collegiality and consultation in

across stakeholder groups, particularly university staff. Whilst senior managers participating in this study described their efforts to ensure that all university constituencies are represented in decision-making and have “ownership” of institutional strategy, the picture from lower down institutions is more mixed. Respondents reported that consultation activities do not always feel authentic, that some voices (for example, part-time staff members) are not always readily heard and that consultations can feel “tokenistic”

In some cases there is the potential for tension between stakeholder views at local or subject level (for example, in the design and validation of programmes) and larger, institution-wide initiatives (for example, those defining graduate attributes or seeking to enhance graduate employability) that threaten to supersede or override local or stakeholder views of good quality education. Evidence from this study suggests that institutions are increasingly concerned about demonstrating distinctiveness in order to attract students. One question is whether large-scale, university wide initiatives, which enable the university to market the overall distinctiveness of its educational provision, are a better route to “good quality” than locally owned, subject-specific and academically defined outcomes.

In particular, many respondents voiced concerns about the role of employers in influencing the content and delivery of curricula. Although graduate employability is widely perceived as a desirable outcome of higher education, a number of respondents expressed reservations about certain aspects of employer involvement in university activities. For some respondents, this represents an unwelcome dilution of the distinctiveness of universities as organisations primarily concerned with research and scholarship rather than “training” for national job markets.

Some respondents also expressed anxiety about the amount and usefulness of data generated by stakeholder consultations or other forms of engagement. Some data is perceived as “unhelpful” because of a “lack of understanding” amongst some stakeholder groups about the nature and purpose of institutional activities and mission. Some stakeholder groups are perceived as increasingly well-informed about university aims and this makes their contributions more immediately relevant. This appears to be particularly true of students. Three factors seem to be important: firstly, the training received by student sabbatical officers from the National Union of Students (NUS) and sparqs in Scotland and the increasing amounts of internal training and support available to class representatives and local student officers. Secondly, the increased resource and strategic focus being allocated to communication with the wider student body about quality and student experience improvements. Thirdly, the models of partnership working between student officers and managers at senior level. There is less evidence to suggest that similar opportunities or support are widely available to stakeholders from other groups (for example, alumni or employers).

Recommendations:

- UK universities may wish to consider undertaking strategic reviews of stakeholder influence and engagement at different levels of decision-making to help to clarify practice at central and local levels.

- UK universities may wish to review the nature, scope and utility of data collection from key stakeholder groups and to consider ways of increasing the value of stakeholder interactions.
- UK universities may wish to consider how employers, alumni and other groups can be supported to become more valuable partners in university decision-making.

Institutional Case Studies

See additional attachment.