

**Student involvement in the quality
assurance processes in HE in FE:
perceptions of students, teachers
and managers**

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Declaration

I, Elizabeth Anne Scott, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

In Higher Education (HE) in England, much attention is paid to the importance of obtaining student feedback through quality assurance processes. However, the vast majority of that written on this subject deals with students in the main university sector and either ignores those enrolled on HE programmes in a Further Education college (HE in FE) or allows them to be subsumed into the mass of statistics. In particular there has been a lack of research into what these students themselves say about their experience of quality assurance processes.

This study took a qualitative case study approach to finding out how students in English HE in FE perceive their involvement in the quality assurance processes, and how teachers and managers perceive student involvement. Five focus groups involving a total of 22 students, and individual interviews with six managers, eight teachers and one member of support staff were implemented, with key themes identified through thematic analysis. All parties showed a conviction that students should be involved and have an important role to play; however none of these groups was satisfied that the current systems were delivering what they promised. A number of different perceptions and tensions were uncovered both within and among these groups, showing that involving students in the quality assurance processes is more complex than it would first appear, as each group made assumptions about the motivation of the other, leading to well-intentioned words and actions sometimes having unintended consequences.

The findings of the study shed light on the complexities of involving students in quality assurance, and show that the context of HE in FE influences the nature of the issues that arise. Recommendations are given with the aim of developing a more coherent approach to quality assurance in HE in FE, that incorporates meaningful student engagement.

Impact Statement

This study has given a voice to those working and studying in HE in FE, who have not previously had opportunity to explain their perceptions of the quality assurance processes used to involve students. It has allowed students to speak for themselves and has allowed their perceptions to be compared with the teachers and managers who work with them. The findings will have an impact within HE in FE institutions and more widely in the HE sector.

This study will impact on professional practice within HE in FE. While students, teachers and management within HE in FE seem to have a consensus on the type of teaching and learning that is consistent with the ethos of such an institution, they have not yet reached a consensus on how students should be involved in the quality assurance processes. Currently there is recognition that, in HE in FE, the relationship with teachers is valued by students, but it has not previously been recognized that there is a disconnect between how this plays out in the teaching and learning process, and how it plays out in the quality assurance processes. An institution that acknowledges this and follows the recommendations in this study will be empowered to review their quality assurance processes and methods to ensure they are clearly justifiable according to the values of the institution. The result will be that methods used will strengthen, rather than weaken, the student-teacher relationship, and students will be comfortable working with both managers and teachers to the benefit of all.

This research has shown that students are being shaped by what they believe is expected of them, but understanding what is expected is not easy for them. Managers and teachers are unaware of the extent to which the language they use is shaping students' expectations, and even creating expectations that cannot be met. Recognition of the factors uncovered in this research will empower teachers and managers to take a more coherent and considered approach that prevents many of the complexities and misunderstandings arising in the first place, allowing students to engage in a meaningful way.

This study will impact on how HE in FE is seen by policy-makers. The view that dealing with students as customers is the best way to ensure a high quality learning experience has, for some time, enjoyed widespread and uncritical acceptance at the heart of much education policy making. If the HE in FE sub-sector accepts the challenge to expose and critically review the underlying ideologies leading to different approaches, then they will be able to make an informed decision on how to ensure the outcome of student involvement is a high quality teaching and learning experience. If HE in FE institutions have more confidence in their distinctiveness and ethos they will be empowered to engage with policy-makers, ensuring that future policy will encourage HE in FE institutions to celebrate and develop this ethos, rather than expect them to meet the same expectations as large, mainstream universities.

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Reflective Statement

In this statement I consider my learning experience over my time on the EdD programme and show how the different elements of the programme have contributed to my development both as a researcher and as a professional working in an educational institution.

When I embarked upon the EdD programme, I was teaching both further education (FE) and higher education (HE) classes in a college that was predominantly FE, and had recently taken on the role of curriculum manager. Within the first few years of the programme, the focus of my role moved to being solely HE, and this move is reflected in the work I have produced over the course of the EdD; the topics for the early assignments related to FE in general, but by the time I reached my thesis I was focusing purely on HE in an FE setting.

I began the EdD programme shortly after completing my MA *Teaching in the Post Compulsory Sector* (also in the Institute of Education). My decision to continue onto a research degree was influenced by the benefit I gained from carrying out the research for my MA dissertation, which had left me with a sense that doing applied research could shine light on complex situations and enhance both professional understanding and practice. I therefore embarked on the EdD with a desire to consider some of the issues that brought complexity to the work of a middle manager in education. The first module of the EdD, *Foundations of Professionalism*, allowed me to explore my understanding of professionalism in my own work context, giving me more awareness of my own underlying values and how they affected how I operated as both a teacher and a manager. Through writing this assignment, I became convinced that there is evidence of ambiguities and contradictions in any managerial or professional role and that it is necessary to acknowledge these and bring them out into the open, as to pretend that they do not exist is only to create a different set of problems.

The module *Methods of Enquiry 1* allowed me to gain experience of planning research and developed my awareness of the complexity of any research and the importance of the planning stage if any value is to be attached to the final results. It helped me understand how the different theoretical approaches to research could be applied and how the research question influences the approach taken. In writing the assignment, I learned how to take a broad research idea and focus it into an achievable research question. I also realized that I am more interested in the type of research questions that are answered by qualitative research methods rather than quantitative methods. I see qualitative research methods as tools that can help me to investigate people's perception of a situation, and how they are influenced by the people and the structures around them; gaining such understanding can be a springboard to change. An aspect I explored in the module was the ethical implication of doing insider research, and the assignments were valuable in helping me clarify both the benefits and the difficulties associated with researching in my own institution. I had to learn to use my familiarity with the people and the organization to gain a holistic understanding of a situation, while also listening to what they say as if I was an outsider with no pre-conceptions of what they may be thinking.

The module *Methods of Enquiry 2* gave me an opportunity to carry out an exploratory study with middle managers in my college. The experience of carrying out interviews proved valuable as it gave me opportunity to work out how to allow the participants to raise issues that they find important rather than merely respond to issues I raised. It also provided useful practice in analysing transcripts and summarizing findings, where I could see how easy it would be to use someone's words to provide a partial and possibly misleading account of what they said. As I struggled to find sufficient information to answer some of my secondary research questions, this also emphasized to me how important it is to make sure the initial research questions are answerable and that the methods used are suited to the question.

The specialist module, *Post Compulsory Education, Training and Lifelong Learning*, enabled me to develop my understanding of quality assurance in colleges; where previously I had seen it as a comparatively recent development that affected me in my work, studying it gave me a much wider perspective, taking in its long history and the different philosophical perspectives on which it is based. This study also helped me to understand why many experience a sense of ambiguity about quality assurance, seeing it as both a necessary instrument for improvement and also a restricting and stultifying force.

I used the *Institution Focused Study* (IFS) to examine a staff development initiative that had taken place in the college over the previous two years, to see if it was delivering what it set out to achieve. The case study approach allowed me to look at this initiative from different points of view and revealed the contradictions and ambiguities involved when managers are trying to engage teachers in pedagogical dialogue. The focus of the staff development was 'transformational learning' and the research revealed that different people, in spite of being given the same information, came to different understandings of what was meant by the term. This, therefore, led to them using the same terminology but actually talking about different things.

Feedback on the assignments and the IFS helped me to develop my research and writing skills in preparation for doing the thesis. I greatly benefitted from formative feedback that pointed out where my writing could be improved, for example in focus or criticality, allowing me to revise my work before final submission.

My intention from the start of the programme was that I should focus my research on areas relevant to management of FE and that seemed to be complex or ambiguous in some way. However, by the time I had completed the IFS, my professional role had changed so that, although I was still working in the same college, I was only involved in HE. I therefore wanted to ensure my thesis was focused on a topic of relevance to the management of HE in FE. Consideration of the threads running through my previous

assignments together with deliberation on the emerging issues in HE in FE led to my thesis topic of student engagement in the quality assurance processes. The assignment I completed for the specialist module gave me a background knowledge of quality assurance, its history and theoretical basis as well the controversies around its implementation. This previous study I found to be valuable as I started reading to learn what was being discussed in the literature about student engagement in quality assurance. The work I covered for my research methods modules contributed to my thesis in that they focused on the complexities inherent in the role of the middle manager and heightened my awareness of the ambiguities that have to be dealt with every day and the need to make these explicit rather than ignore them. In my experience of involving students in quality assurance, there were ambiguities that I was aware of, and I wanted to use my thesis research to make these explicit. The IFS showed me that even though people use the same words when speaking of a particular subject or issue, and have participated in the same training, it cannot be assumed that they have a common understanding. This is another aspect of student involvement in quality assurance that I suspected was the case, and this was instrumental in my choice of research topic.

The experience of carrying out the research and writing up my thesis was long and often difficult. I read widely and found so many aspects of student involvement in quality assurance interesting, that I had a number of false starts, trying to incorporate too many different viewpoints or cover too much breadth. Eventually I settled on my final research questions and carried out the fieldwork. Having such a large dataset to transcribe and analyse was a challenge and necessitated my listening to recordings and reading transcripts multiple times to gain a holistic understanding of the contents. Writing up my findings took several re-drafts, as I struggled to move beyond an approach that was largely descriptive. However, I kept going as I knew that the data I had gathered contained the explanation for a number of the apparent ambiguities that had been troubling me when I chose the research topic. It was pleasing that all those who participated in the research trusted me sufficiently to give me their thoughts. In the difficult times, this motivated me

to bring the work to completion so that their thoughts could be brought to light and that the frustrations expressed by the participants could be given some explanation.

The most important way that the EdD has affected me in my professional context is that it has enabled me to think through my approach to issues in a much clearer way. I can now see how many decisions are made on the basis of an unquestioning acceptance of ideas that are promoted as received wisdom, and communicated in 'soundbites' with no more than shallow justification. As a result of this, the different people involved may well interpret the idea in different ways to fit their own underlying beliefs, leading to people using the same terminology, but meaning different things. After working through some of these ideas to uncover the presuppositions that undergird them, and recognizing the effect of my own presumptions, I have found that this knowledge has been empowering as it has helped to explain some of the consequences of following these ideas that had previously seemed to be inexplicable ambiguities. Going through this process for myself has also enabled me to start asking probing questions of my colleagues to enable them to reflect on both their own presuppositions and those behind some of the ideas that are promoted to them in the professional context.

I believe that the best applied research comes from taking as a starting point something that is niggling you, something that seems ambiguous, a question that you can't answer to your own satisfaction. It is important that we sometimes allow time to take a step back and interrogate in a robust way what we are doing and why. In the end, the experience of doing this research has convinced of the power of qualitative research to stimulate professionals like me to think about phenomena in a new way and to unravel ambiguities related to professional practice.

Glossary of terms

Area head – the manager responsible for curriculum and academic staff covering one or more subject areas. They report to the Dean.

BIS – abbreviation for the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, the Government department which was responsible for Higher Education until 2016.

Board of study – academic management meeting chaired by the area head and attended by programme leaders, teachers, HE Operations Manager, the Dean, student representatives and delegates from support areas. This feeds into a college-wide HE committee.

College management group – a group that includes college executive and another level of academic and support managers, including the Dean.

College executive – the most senior management group, which includes the Principal and the Vice Principal interviewed for this study.

Dean – the member of College Management Group who has responsibility for HE. They report to the Vice Principal.

FE – abbreviation for further education.

Governor – as a member of the Board of incorporation, the Governor interviewed for this research had responsibilities related to the college as a whole, not just HE.

HE – abbreviation for higher education.

HEI – abbreviation for Higher Education Institution, which includes mainstream universities, and excludes HE in FE.

Learner voice group – a group of student representatives, both HE and FE, that meets with a Senior Manager to give feedback.

NSS – abbreviation for National Student Survey.

OfS – abbreviation for the Office for Students, regulator for HE from 2018.

Principal – the Principal and Chief Executive of the whole college, including FE and HE. They are a member of the Board of Governors.

Programme committee – meeting chaired by a programme leader and attended by teachers, student representatives, and relevant support staff. This feeds into the board of study.

Programme leader – the teacher responsible for a programme and the students on it. They report to the area head.

QAA – abbreviation for the Quality Assurance Agency.

SS – abbreviation for student support staff member, who trains and works with student representatives on quality assurance. They report to the Dean.

Student representative – elected representative normally representing one year group on their programme. They are expected to work with the programme leader and SS, and attend programme committee, board of study and student representative meetings.

Student representative meeting – meeting organized by the SS to provide training for, and to gain feedback from, student representatives.

SWS – abbreviation for the Student Written Submission, which forms part of QAA review.

Teacher – the teachers interviewed or referred to in this research all teach on a higher education programme. They could be full-time, fractional or hourly paid. Some, but not all, hold programme leadership responsibilities. They report to the Area Head.

TEF – abbreviation for the Teaching Excellence Framework.

Vice Principal – the Vice Principal interviewed for this research is a College Executive member, one of whose responsibilities is HE. They report to the Principal.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

Great importance is placed on the student experience in higher education (HE) today. National, and often international, attention is given to how students report this experience. HE providers find themselves under pressure to demonstrate that they have satisfied students. As never before, students are continually being asked to give feedback on their experience, and whether their expectations are being met. Student feedback and student satisfaction measures are being used to assess quality in both academic and non-academic aspects of the student experience within institutions. Tables of ratings against performance indicators are pored over in HE management meetings. League tables are compiled to judge institutions against each other. The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) places great weight on student satisfaction ratings when grading HE providers as Gold, Silver or Bronze. Prospective students are encouraged by parents, schools, and the media, to look for a university with a high proportion of satisfied students. However, the same press that gives headline attention to student satisfaction league tables, also publishes articles questioning the importance that is put on student voice and satisfaction surveys. Claims are made that the current emphasis on student satisfaction can lead to a lowering of standards (Warren, 2016), and a confusion of teacher and student roles, putting teachers on the defensive (Fox, 2013). Teachers contribute articles saying that their confidence has been undermined by student surveys (The Guardian, 2016a), and that students think they are over-surveyed (The Guardian, 2016b).

While headlines are written about ‘universities’ in general, it is often overlooked that HE is delivered, not just in mainstream universities, but also in mixed economy colleges (commonly referred to as Higher Education in Further Education (HE in FE)), where Further Education is the main business of the college. The same HE regulations and requirements apply to HE in FE as in mainstream universities, and every year a sub-set of HE applicants make a decision to study in this sub-sector. However, media or research

attention is rarely given to concerns that are specific to this sub-sector or this sub-set of students; HE in FE is either ignored or subsumed in the data generated from the HE sector in general. In particular, no attention is paid to finding out whether the issues around student voice are the same in HE in FE as in mainstream HE, or whether they differ and therefore deserve focused investigation. The mixed message about the role of students in giving feedback as part of the quality assurance processes and how teachers and institutions respond to it in HE in general, calls into question our understanding of the factors at play.

This study aims to take a closer look at how students are being involved in the quality assurance processes in HE in FE, and try to understand the views and understandings of those involved, in the hope that this will throw light on the problems raised above.

1.2. Professional interest

As an Area Head responsible for a section of the higher education programmes in an HE in FE college, ensuring the success of students is an essential element of my role. Within and without the college, there are many who express strong opinions about what students want and what they need: for example teachers, managers, the quality assurance body, the press, and of course students themselves. The problem is that not all agree, but what they say demands my attention. I am exhorted to ensure that my students are always satisfied, and to continually ask them to verify that they are, but while doing so I feel a nagging doubt that this may not be what the students need, or even want. As they are paying fees, should I meet their customer requests? Or are students paying me to take responsibility for providing what they need? In my own experience, while students are emphatic that they should be listened to, many are uncertain about what they should be saying, many do not want to complete satisfaction surveys, and few will take on the role of student representative. Teachers, whose only wish is for their students to do well, sometimes appear to onlookers to contradict this by disregarding survey results. Managers endeavour to gather student views,

and yet some students get the impression that they do not care. Misunderstandings ensue as different parties speak at cross purposes. Everyone is making an effort, but confusion abounds. If student feedback is going to be used to measure and shape HE provision, it is unacceptable to ignore this confusion; research must be carried out with a view to clarifying the issues involved, so that all those involved have confidence in the validity of this measure.

It has been noted that much research into higher education deals with different types of HE providers together, rather than considering them individually (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005). However, HE in FE differs from mainstream universities in having students with a greater range of previous experience and often different expectations (Parry et al., 2012; King et al., 2010, 2013). This raises a further question as to what understanding there is of how student voice and student satisfaction issues play out in such institutions. A good starting point, therefore, would be to investigate the perceptions of those in an HE in FE college with regard to current practice of student involvement in the quality assurance processes.

1.3. Research Setting

The research is set in one of the 241 FE colleges in England that also provide HE programmes in a partnership arrangement with a university (HEFCE, 2017a). The college has approximately 1000 higher education students on the same campus as the majority of its 11,000 FE students. Undergraduate programmes including Foundation Degrees and Honours degrees, and a very small number of postgraduate programmes are delivered as part of a partnership arrangement with an established mainstream university. In keeping with the ethos of an FE college, subject areas covered are mainly of a vocational nature, for example Construction, IT, Performing Arts, Teacher Training. HE operates as a department separately from FE, although some teachers work across both levels. HE students in the college are formally involved in the quality assurance processes through surveys and student representation. Students are

normally taught in groups of 25 or fewer, giving programme leaders opportunity to supplement formal feedback methods with informal approaches.

1.4. Organization of the thesis

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature showing that, while much has been written about student voice and student involvement in the quality assurance processes, there is no general agreement, and a number of aspects are still under-researched, including how it works in HE in FE. In Chapter 3 the methodology used in the research is described and justified. Chapters 4 to 6 present the findings from three discrete groups: students, teachers and managers. Chapter 7 brings the findings together in a discussion that provides a number of insights, making it possible to provide recommendations for practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This review describes the constitution of the student body in HE in FE and the reasons why students choose to study in this sub-sector, highlighting that these students are likely to have different expectations to those in the main university sector, making it imperative that research is carried out separately in HE in FE. The importance of studying student involvement in quality assurance in the UK context is justified through tracing the political developments that have thrust student feedback and satisfaction into prominence. Attention is paid to the fact that the view of student-as-consumer is pervasive but not inevitable; while universities have accepted at institutional level the consumerist philosophy underlying the political consensus, others have critiqued it, and propose alternative rationales for involving students in the quality assurance processes, with implications for practice. The practical expectations to which institutions must adhere are described, showing the methods commonly employed, noting that, even though a number of concerns have been raised about the quality of data generated, it is commonly used to drive change at both institutional and course level. Consideration is given to what is known about the view of managers, teachers and students on their perception of these processes, highlighting the lack of research that has been carried out in relation to student feedback and quality assurance in HE in FE specifically.

2.2. HE in FE

Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) assert that too much research treats all HE providers as homogenous, when in fact they are not. HE in FE is one of a number of sub-groups within HE; HEFCE (2017b) recognizes three different sub-groups: 'Alternative Providers', 'Further Education' and 'Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)', using the term 'HEI' to include all mainstream universities, although there is considerable variation even within that sub-group. While the academic standards and regulations to which HE in FE adheres are the same as HEIs, there are essential dissimilarities between the

two settings, relating firstly to differences in the type of student and their expectations, and secondly to differences in the type of institution.

In studies carried out to find out how the HE in FE student body is constituted, there was agreement that, compared to mainstream universities, HE in FE was different in areas including type of qualifications studied, age of students, pre-entry qualifications and the proportions of part-time and full-time students (Esmond, 2012; Parry et al., 2012). While many mixed economy colleges provide Honours degrees and a small number provide post graduate courses, the majority of students enrolled in HE in FE take programmes below Honours degree level such as Foundation Degrees or HNC/D (HEFCE, 2017a). HE in FE had more mature, and more part-time, students, with competing demands from work and family responsibilities (Esmond, 2012; Parry et al., 2012). The range of pre-entry qualifications was greater, with many studying on programmes below Honours degree level, and on subjects that were vocational in focus (Parry et al., 2012). Many students were local and only applied to one institution (King and Widdowson, 2012), with many not necessarily being aware of what another institution would have offered, or understanding their place in relation to the college's partner university (Parry et al., 2012; Gray et al., 2014).

Many of the reasons students give for choosing an HE in FE college relate to teaching. Those who teach in HE in FE try to make their teaching student-centred, seeing students as individuals. The process of learning is paramount, and they appreciate small class sizes allow flexibility in teaching methods (Burkill et al., 2008; Turner et al., 2009; King and Widdowson, 2012). This approach was cited by students as a reason for their choice of institution, as they liked small classes, teaching expertise and ready access to extra support (King et al., 2010; 2013). Some made their choice due to good experiences of previous study in the college (King et al., 2013), with working class students in particular finding the HE in FE context more familiar than a mainstream university (Reay et al., 2010).

Ramsden (2008) described how students with diverse backgrounds tend to measure their student experience against what they have known in other areas of their lives. Consequently, HE in FE institutions with a high proportion of mature or part-time students, or those on programmes below Honours degree level may find their students have different expectations and reactions to those in HEIs whose students are primarily young, full-time and studying Honours and postgraduate degrees.

There is also a need to recognize that HE in FE and universities are different types of institutions and therefore are affected by different factors. Temple et al. (2014) and Tomlinson (2017) found evidence of consumerism having greater impact on institutions of lower 'prestige' and those that are not research-intensive, as more competition means selling themselves more to potential students. Lea and Simmons (2012) and Creasy (2013) explore ethos in HE in FE institutions and suggest that there are influences that can more easily lead to the degree being seen as a product and the student a consumer, which affects the whole culture of the organization. This therefore obstructs any attempt to create or maintain a separate HE culture, thus HE in FE provides a different experience to what is traditionally known as higher education. If such differences occur among different types of higher education provider, then the only way to obtain clarity in a particular sub-sector such as HE in FE is to acknowledge the lack of homogeneity and carry out research separately in those institutions.

2.3. Quality

According to government guidance, the purpose of 'quality assurance' is to provide evidence that standards of teaching and learning are being met (BIS, 2016). The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) emphasized the need for evidence in their definition: 'At its core, the purpose of QA is to be transparent and to demonstrate quality in overt and measurable ways' (Barnes and Bohrer 2015:63). What is meant by 'quality' in education has long been debated (Harvey and Williams, 2010). Harvey and Green (1993) identified five perspectives from which quality can be viewed: exceptional;

perfection (or consistency); fitness for purpose; value for money; or transformation. While each of these aspects has relevance to some aspect of higher education, there is an appeal to the more focused definition given by Cunningham (2015): 'Quality in higher education exists when we are confident that students are being effectively and efficiently provided with the teaching, resources, support and environment to allow them to achieve their full learning potential' (p46). Although quality can be conceptualised in different ways, in practice there is a political dimension (Harvey and Williams, 2010), and institutions have to adopt a definition that is determined by the quality assurance systems to which they must adhere. This is discussed in relation to the role of students in the quality assurance processes later in this chapter.

2.4. Political developments

While the attention paid to the student experience by current government bodies could provide justification for a study of student involvement in the quality assurance processes, it is however important to note that the policy position is not simply a reaction to student demand, but a considered stance. Since the late 1990s, successive government administrations have been in agreement with the idea that students should take responsibility for funding their education, and therefore students should be 'at the centre' of HE, having a say in how it should be defined. In 1997, the Dearing Report, *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (Dearing, 1997), highlighted the gain that came from participating in higher education, and therefore suggested that students should bear a high proportion of the cost. Dearing raised the idea of 'students at the centre of the learning and teaching process' (p114) saying that teachers will need to support a 'more discerning and demanding' (p114) student population. The New Labour administration, in their response to Dearing (DfEE, 1998b), and in their policy document *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998a), supported the proposals made, as they shared the belief that the responsibility for, and funding of, learning lay with the individual (Hodgson and Spours, 1999). In formulating policy, the Government drew on the ideas of David Robertson, who championed

personal student choice and student contribution to funding (1994). He proposed that students would be seen as ‘purchasers in a learning market’ (1997:23), making informed choices, and expecting to have greater influence over the nature of the product they purchased (Robertson, 1996; 1997). The White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003) confirmed the introduction of student fees, emphasizing that students would need to be provided with comprehensive information regarding the quality of provision at universities, enabling them to make informed decisions about where to study. Much of the information published would be derived from a new national survey of student views, with the intention that students, as ‘intelligent customers’ (2003:47), would use data from this survey to compare institutions, resulting in the overall quality of higher education being driven up.

Although a Conservative-Liberal Democrat administration came in during 2010, developments in policy continued in the same direction. This is seen in The Browne Review, *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education* (Browne et al., 2010), and the White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS, 2011). A fundamental change to the funding system was proposed, giving institutions the freedom to charge higher, variable fees, and placing even more responsibility on students to make an informed choice about where to study. It was again emphasized that student choice was expected to ‘drive up quality’ (Browne et al., 2010:29) as institutions would have to compete for the custom of more demanding, paying students. The White Paper (BIS, 2011), promoted student choice and supported the need for students to give feedback about their experience, including learning and teaching. Both aspects – students giving feedback and students making informed choices – were seen as drivers forcing improvements within HE provision. To this end, the Key Information Set (KIS) was set up to provide such data for students to make their informed choice, including both institutional data such as entry requirements and student feedback data in the form of survey results.

Green and white papers published in 2015 and 2016 developed the market approach to HE. *Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, emphasized the idea of students as customers in its reference to the demands that were coming from paying students:

‘Students who now fund more of the cost of their higher education demand higher quality, transparency and value for money’ (BIS, 2015:10).

The rationale for the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) was set out, arguing that TEF would provide a measure of the quality of teaching, not only informing student choice, but also providing an incentive for HE providers to improve teaching quality (BIS, 2015). The white paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy* (BIS, 2016), articulated how the HE market economy would work, saying that full and accurate provision of information is ‘critical’ to the proper working of a market where informed students are making decisions about their education and career. This further cemented the idea that students are central to higher education, not only in that they should have a good educational experience, but that as their money pays for it, their voice should have a role in defining it, thus driving up the quality of higher education provision. With this policy firmly in place, it is crucial to have an understanding of both the rationale behind it, and how such student involvement plays out in practice.

2.5. Political rationale for involving students

Government papers give a clear message that the quality of HE provision will improve with a market approach:

‘We need to ensure that our higher education system continues to provide the best possible outcomes. These come from informed choice and competition’ (BIS, 2016:43).

With the market approach, transparency and accountability are key, and student involvement is vital if quality in the HE sector is to improve. A further incentive would come from students challenging universities to show accountability:

‘A competitive and dynamic higher education sector needs students who actively and regularly challenge universities to provide teaching excellence and value for money’ (ibid:53).

In order to ensure this happens, a new market regulator, the Office for Students (OfS) was proposed to ‘support a competitive environment and promote choice, quality and value for money’ in a way that is ‘explicitly pro-student choice, a champion of transparency’ (ibid:63), with a remit to protect the interests of both taxpayers and students.

In summary, the expectations set out by BIS in 2016 were that:

- HE providers collect data from students to show how satisfied they are with their experience
- Students should have a fully formed set of expectations prior to application
- Students should make their choice based on measurable data, including student satisfaction data
- HE providers should compete on the basis of student satisfaction data
- Students should challenge their university to give them a good experience.

With these in place, it is expected that providers will be able to demonstrate accountability and quality will be forced up. Thus institutions are being measured by how they meet student expectations, obliging them to act in accordance with a view of quality as student satisfaction.

2.5.1. Support for political consensus

The government was supported in their expectations by the main universities, demonstrated by the reaction of the 1994 Group, an influential group of research-intensive universities, active between 1994 and 2013. The report *Enhancing the Student Experience*, produced by the 1994 Group in 2007, agreed with the principle of working with students as consumer partners. They saw the provision of ‘transparent and accurate information around the student experience’ (p12), especially National Student Survey (NSS) data, as an important tool for institutions. The promised benefit was to show which areas needed to be improved to enhance student experience, thus increasing student satisfaction rates. Currently HEIs show that they are operating in

accordance with Government expectations in this area, as they participate in the NSS and eagerly promote their position in various league tables of student satisfaction¹.

2.5.2. Political consensus challenged

In spite of the support given to the official view of the role that student feedback should play in HE, many commentators show unease with the underlying view and how it plays out in practice. Areas questioned include:

- That student satisfaction data is valuable in an educational setting (Bramming, 2007; Elwick and Cannizzaro, 2017; Hamshire et al., 2017; Richardson, 2005; Staddon and Standish, 2012)
- That students can have a fully formed set of expectations prior to application (Ramsden 2008; Bay and Daniel, 2001; Ness and Osborn, 2010; Bramming, 2007; Staddon and Standish, 2012; Biesta, 2015; Barnett, 2013)
- That students should be encouraged to challenge their institution to provide good quality (Staddon and Standish, 2012; Williams, J, 2013)
- That quality is driven up through an emphasis on student expectations and satisfaction data (Staddon and Standish, 2012; Cheng, 2017; Ball, 2003, 2008; Biesta, 2015; Ness and Osborn, 2010; Stroebe, 2016).

The nature of the objections related to each of these points is examined below.

Student satisfaction data

A number of commentators argue that the use of student satisfaction data is not necessarily beneficial in an educational setting, and that using such data to shape academic experience could actually reduce the quality of a student's education. Richardson (2005) argued that there is an assumption that satisfaction data is straightforward and homogenous, whereas it is in fact complex. The concept of 'satisfaction' is derived from consumer theory and

¹ It is worth noting that universities continued to support the NSS, even as students pledged to boycott the survey, believing that its use to further the marketization of higher education was actually working against student interests (NUS, 2016).

is determined by the difference between expectations and perceptions (ibid), relating more to checking a list of preferences on external factors rather than evaluating an educational experience. A distinction is made between 'satisfaction', which is consumer-related, and 'happiness', which is purpose-related and gives a sense of well-being (Dean and Gibbs, 2015; Elwick and Cannizzaro, 2017). Satisfaction represents closure, as an individual feels a desire for something, and makes a choice they think will satisfy that desire. However, the energy that drives education is the sense of openness, with always more to learn, where the initial desire may change and develop, but never actually reach closure. Therefore elevating student choice and satisfaction is actually in danger of restricting students' experience of education (Staddon and Standish, 2012). In this case, satisfaction is less relevant than a student's sense of purpose and well-being. For those who take a transformational view of education, a focus on measuring satisfaction is not meaningful, as real intellectual gain is associated with challenge, discomfort, and even crisis. This makes it likely that a student who is at a difficult stage of the learning process is unlikely to present as 'satisfied', even though high quality learning may actually be taking place (Bramming, 2007; Elwick and Cannizzaro, 2017; Hamshire et al., 2017; Richardson, 2005). Therefore expecting students to be satisfied at all times is unrealistic, as education is meant to be unsettling (Hamshire et al., 2017), and such an approach could lead to students not gaining the benefit that is derived from passing through the difficult stages.

While caution in the use of student satisfaction data is urged, it is not totally rejected. The value of listening to students is not disputed; as Cunningham (2015) explains, it is necessary to listen to students as they are the ones who have experienced a particular programme in a particular institution and their perspective, while not being the whole story, is a vital component. That student satisfaction data could measure quality of non-academic aspects of student experience is accepted by Richardson (2005) and Temple et al. (2014), as they see a conception of student-as-customer having some relevance in areas such as accommodation and facilities, but not in the evaluation of teaching. As a result, Richardson (2005) proposes that

teaching and facilities should not be evaluated together, using the same methodology. Temple et al. (2014), however, point out the difficulty of keeping the two areas separate, as moves to treat students as customers in non-academic aspects of their experience inevitably filter through to academic aspects. Therefore if an institution wishes to restrict use of the student satisfaction approach to quality assurance to certain areas, it is vital they have a clear rationale for its use.

Student expectations

The idea that students can have a mature set of expectations prior to application, enabling them to make a valid choice about their education, has met with a number of criticisms. Consumer law now provides protection to students, enforced by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), to ensure that HE providers meet student expectations. HE providers must be able to make their offering explicit and students are expected to have a clear understanding of their needs. Much information is made available to prospective students, through course advertising and the KIS data, to help with the decision of where to study. However, the sort of information presented is seen by some as directing students to a particularly instrumental way of thinking about their education (Barefoot et al., 2016). By the very nature of the data available, it cannot measure aspects related to a deeper, transformational learning experience (Williams, G., 2013; Williams, J., 2013).

Ramsden (2008) suggested that the expectations of students, prior to their experience of higher education are often not fully formed, as they do not have a coherent understanding of what it will entail. Others have suggested that students may only realise years after completing their education whether they gained what they needed from the programme; therefore encouraging them to believe they should make their choice only on the basis of their initial expectations is not only unrealistic, it is misleading (Bay and Daniel, 2001; Ness and Osborn, 2010). Barnett (2013) criticises what he sees as the message the Government gave in their 2011 White Paper that higher education is a kind of product that the purchaser can view before they commit to it. He sees a genuine higher education as something that 'cannot

be completely and explicitly described in advance of it happening or even when a student is enrolled on it' (Barnett, 2013:73). Under a transformational view of education, students cannot pre-define their expectations of education, as, if you are transformed, your initial expectations won't have been met – they will have changed. A good teacher would be expected to open up new possibilities to students and move them beyond what they thought they wanted when they started (Bramming, 2007; Staddon and Standish, 2012; Biesta, 2015). Therefore to use students' pre-defined expectations as the basis for decisions about the provision precludes the idea that there is a transformational aspect to a quality education, and could be restricting their whole educational experience.

In an extension of the argument against giving great weight to student expectations, Ramsden (2008) argues that HE providers, rather than simply reacting to student expectations, should realise the influence they have in shaping those expectations. He believes that, if students are assumed to fit the student-as-customer model, and are treated accordingly, then there is a possibility that they will act consistently with the model:

'Hard evidence that students in higher education are more passive and consumer-minded than they used to be is slim; but this dystopian picture of today's students and the likely students of tomorrow has the incipient signs of a self-fulfilling prophecy' (ibid:16).

This view is supported by Bunce et al. (2016) and Tomlinson (2017) who believe that Government and universities referring to students as customers and using terms such as 'value for money' leads to internalisation so students learn to see themselves in a particular way. Therefore an unintended outcome of promoting consumerism is that it has led to more passive students (Naidoo et al., 2011). This ability to shape student behaviour, therefore, makes it critical that institutions accept responsibility for the effect of their expectations on students, and have a clear rationale for engaging with them.

Student right to challenge

The promotion of the idea that students should be encouraged to challenge their institution to provide good quality is questioned, on the basis that it has a negative effect on the relationship students have with teachers and their institution. Williams (J., 2013) suggested that KIS is promoted to stop vulnerable students being misled by universities – ‘eroding trust’ even before they start, through the assumption that unless a contract is in place, academics and their institutions will not provide a decent education. Even beyond this, she claims that there is ‘a pervasive sense that lecturers and students have opposing interests that require external regulation’ (ibid:82). Similarly, Staddon and Standish (2012) argue that an institution placing too much faith on the ability of students to make decisions about quality in areas such as pedagogy, curriculum and strategy shows a lack of confidence in itself, and is unlikely to provide a positive learning-teaching experience for either students or teachers. While they see this lack of confidence as a problem, they point out that current policy distorts reality by encouraging it, promoting it as in the student interest.

Driving up quality

The idea that the emphasis on student expectations and data as encouraged by the Government is justified as a means of demonstrating accountability and driving up quality is questioned, suggesting it leads to distortion of practice at both institutional and course level. Cheng (2017) and Gibbs (2012) explain that an unplanned shift has taken place, whereby data, whether valid or not, is driving change in institutions more than ever before, with data indicators, including student satisfaction ratings, now being more influential than QAA audit. Encouraging institutions to compete can lead to defensiveness, so students are persuaded to give good ratings, for the benefit of not only the institution but also the students in the marketplace, leaving the validity of the data open to question (Staddon and Standish, 2012).

If data is to be used to drive up quality, it is imperative that there is a clear rationale for what is being measured. Most of the factors affecting the quality

of higher education are neither included in the NSS nor reported on in standard quality assurance procedures (Gibbs 2010). According to Ball (2008), the need to demonstrate accountability by providing evidence leads to an over-emphasis on the 'countable', resulting in less importance being given to the educational outcomes that are more difficult to measure but are actually more important. This has given rise to a culture of accountability by performance indicators, raising the question if we are measuring what is valuable or valuing what is measurable (Biesta, 2015). The less confidence an institution has in the education they are trying to provide, and indeed what a good quality education looks like, the more time and effort they will put into monitoring and measuring systems (Biesta, 2015; Ball, 2003), giving rise to proceduralism. As Staddon and Standish state:

'Lacking confidence in the ends of the activity, we focus on the procedures themselves, and the more structured, the more formal these become, the more we feel secure within them' 2012:639).

As a result, the time and effort put into reporting what is being done can easily exceed the time and effort actually doing it (Ball, 2003; 2008), calling into question the contribution this makes to improving quality.

It is also argued that the emphasis on student satisfaction data has a distorting effect on course design. Ness and Osborn (2010) found that teachers spoke of feeling both explicit and implicit pressure to ensure a high student satisfaction rate, so they respond to the short-term felt needs of the students rather than working towards knowledge needed in the longer term. Stroebe (2016) highlighted the possibility of other unintended consequences such as grade inflation, when teachers trying to please students award grades that are higher than the work merits. Cheng (2017) added that a focus on short-term benefit for students is not compatible with a teaching approach that expands student learning. Situations like this can give rise to 'values schizophrenia' (Ball, 2008:221), as teachers experience a sense of conflict, acting in a way they believe proves their performance, but which is contrary to the best approach according to their professional judgement.

This emphasis on data, therefore, can have the effect of distracting both teachers and managers from the pursuit of a high quality educational experience, to developing practices and procedures that will generate data, whether educationally valuable or not, and then evidencing that they are reacting to that data. Thus what is being measured as good quality could be just adherence to a set of procedures.

2.6. Alternative rationales

While successive administrations appear to have settled on a rationale for student involvement that sees students as consumers, it is important to recognize that there are others who want to involve students but have a different rationale for doing so, leading them to engage with students in a different way. The rationales for involving students in the quality assurance processes are categorized by Luescher-Mamashela (2013) who proposed four cases: consumerist; political-realist; democratic and consequentialist; and communitarian. Under the consumerist case, in which students need to be involved to ensure their demands are met, student satisfaction measures are used competitively as a means of driving up quality. The democratic and consequentialist case differs, as it presents student involvement as a way of preparing students for citizenship beyond their education, with the act of involvement providing a means by which they can develop their skills and experience. This view sees student satisfaction during the course as not particularly relevant; it is more important that the students are changing and developing throughout, and may only realise years after their education whether it met their needs. The political-realist case sees students as internal stakeholders, who will be given opportunity to contribute to, rather than make, decisions. Under this view, measuring student satisfaction is not entirely relevant, as it is more important that students understand and feel aligned with the goals of the institution and the qualification. Finally, the communitarian case involves students because they are full members of the community who are expected to participate as such, and are therefore entitled to have influence over how things are done. Student satisfaction is necessary to gain their co-operation in the co-production of their education.

Each of the cases described above is promoted as a viable case for student involvement. Temple et al. (2014), examining how universities manage the student experience, found that at senior management level there is a clear move to acceptance of the student as a more assertive consumer. However, this model is not universally embraced by those within HE, and, while many use the term 'customer' or 'consumer', a variety of approaches are argued for. McCulloch (2009) and Kotze and du Plessis (2003) argue for students to be seen as co-producers, broadly in line with the communitarian case. They will be expected to participate as partners in the learning community and will need to be 'managed' to make sure they are participating in a way that allows educational outcomes to be met. The emphasis on participation is seen as allowing deep learning to take place, where students engage with subject material, teachers and peers in a way that ensures a thorough understanding is gained.

A variation on the co-producer view is promoted by Streeting and Wise (2009) as they see the 'equal partnership' aspect of co-production as being too challenging, resulting in them promoting a 'community of practice' approach, where students are seen as a member of a community that includes students and staff, with relationship-building being of key importance. Thus it is recognized that each has a different contribution to make, and that power is relational, changing throughout the period of a student's time in the institution. This results in a combination of the communitarian view and the democratic and consequentialist view, where students are involved to both help them develop and to prepare them for the future. Bunce et al. (2016) promote a student identity as a learner, in line with the democratic and consequentialist view, as they found that students with 'learner' identity were more likely to achieve their high grade goal than were those with a 'consumer' identity. Their approach to student satisfaction data is that changes should not routinely be made in reaction to such data, as it could lead to changes being made that would lower standards. The observation made by Trowler and Trowler (2010b) that when an individual takes on the role of student representative, the student, the institution and

society all benefit, is in agreement with the democratic and consequentialist view. Clayson and Haley (2005) argued that an educational organization needs to take responsibility for developing and advancing the learners to meet the longer term needs of society. They hold a democratic and consequentialist view of student involvement which, they believe, gives more value to the student and their development than does the consumerist view, where students can choose a route of least effort should they so wish. They therefore see student satisfaction as not relevant, and warn that paying attention to it could lead to the provision of less challenging, and therefore less beneficial, education. They also suggested that, under the consumerist view, if a student showed dissatisfaction with a class, it would be logical for management to assume that the teacher was at fault, until proven otherwise. Bay and Daniel (2001) suggested a collaborative partnership which should be for mutual benefit, where students realise that their actions have an effect not only on their education but also on the education of others; this is only possible if the institution has a distinct mission and then seeks students with corresponding values, in line with the communitarian view.

Although alternatives to the consumerist model have been proposed, they are refuted by some. Seeing students as customers to be satisfied is defended as the best strategy for a higher education institution to take in order to be successful (Mark, 2013; Obermiller and Atwood, 2011; Eagle and Brennan, 2007), with student experience and student choice justifiably taking a primary position (Sabri, 2010). Mark (2013) suggested the greatest threat to the successful appropriation of the customer model would be those academics who rejected the concept, based on an outdated idea of the customer as a passive and demanding individual. Mark (2013) and Eagle and Brennan, (2007) argued that the type of customer envisaged should be clarified, as customers need to be educated on the nature of their role, shaping their expectations to be consistent with the aims of the institution. The contemporary conceptualisation of a customer, according to Mark (2013), is no longer the product-based approach, but is a services-marketing approach, requiring the participation of the customer. According to Obermiller and Atwood (2011), to argue against use of the customer

metaphor is misguided and is to argue against considering the wants and needs of the students. They, along with Eagle and Brennan (2007) argue that student-as-customer view is not incompatible with the recognition that students are not the only stakeholders in the educational system.

The fact that there is a plurality of views on the rationale for involving students in the quality assurance processes means that, while the consumerist view is widespread, it is not the only approach that can be taken. This raises the possibility that, even within one institution, a range of views could be held by managers, teachers and students, giving rise to variations in practice and possible misunderstandings.

2.7. Quality assurance practice

As the body that assures quality and standards in the HE sector across the UK, QAA supports the political consensus that students should be given sufficient information to make informed choices about their education and that their involvement in the quality assurance processes will drive improvement. In the QAA Quality Code, no attempt is made to justify involving students in quality assurance, rather it is assumed as normal practice. The purpose of this involvement is also stated without justification, showing a focus on improvement:

‘It is widely accepted that the views of students, individually and collectively, should inform quality systems with the purpose of improving the student educational experience both for current and future cohorts’ (QAA, 2015:4).

Feedback from the student union at the institution is taken as part of a QAA review. Universities now accept that this Student Written Submission (SWS) identifies problems that they need to address, even to the extent of influencing institutional policy (QAA, 2017).

In reviewing HE providers, QAA applies the same expectations to HE in FE as to mainstream universities. It has clear expectations on how institutions approach their quality assurance, the methods they use and the evidence

they provide. In chapter B5 of the quality code, the expectation in relation to student engagement with quality assurance is set out:

‘Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience’ (QAA, 2015:4).

This expectation is followed by seven ‘indicators of sound practice’, showing that all institutions should demonstrate structures and procedures whereby students can be involved as partners in quality assurance and enhancement. Institutions should be able to provide evidence of the benefits that result from student involvement, with the structures being regularly reviewed in the light of this. (For a list of the indicators, see Appendix 1 for the extract from the QAA Quality Code (QAA, 2015:12).)

Predominant methods

QAA’s emphasis on seeing evidence of structures for student involvement and reaction to the feedback generated has led to widespread use of formal methods. Little et al. (2009), in a study of a range of HE providers at systems level, found that the methods used were similar across all HE – primarily questionnaires, student representatives, and staff-student liaison committees. Student representation was considered by managers across different institutions to be effective, although difficulties were highlighted in HE in FE, where the role of the Student Union was much less significant than in universities, and not many students volunteered for the role.

Commentators noted that questionnaires are widely depended on in quality assurance (Trowler and Trowler, 2010b) as they give the whole population of students an opportunity to be involved (Richardson, 2005). Managers, including in HE in FE, consider their use to be effective (Little et al., 2009). Clayson and Haley (2005) observed that surveys are increasingly being used as the main influence on decision making in education (Kulik, 2001), and as a proxy measure for teaching quality (Palmer, 2012). Some argue that an assumption of data quality is unjustified, and that even invalid data is being used to drive institutional behaviour (Hamshire et al., 2017; Grace et al., 2012). Harvey and Newton (2004) claimed that methods are often adopted

because they are convenient or predominant, with neither clear justification for their use, nor consideration of their appropriateness.

With regard to how students respond to questionnaires, three issues have been identified: many students are averse to completing them (Porter et al., 2004; Nair et al., 2008); a student can give different satisfaction ratings at different times; and students can interpret questions differently (Bennett and Kane, 2014; Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2009; Hamshire et al, 2017; Yusoff, 2012). Gibbs (2010) argued that students have varied conceptions of what they consider to be 'good' teaching, and combining the results from a range of students into one average satisfaction score is not necessarily meaningful. In addition, Rowley (2003) pointed out that there is no clear answer to the effect of factors such as student prior expectations, expected grade or willingness to engage.

As a result of the concerns above, Halbesleben and Wheeler (2009) argued for careful interpretation of results. Palmer (2012) warned that an institution must have confidence in the validity of the methods and tools used, otherwise chasing the 'right' results may not see any improvement in quality and may even have a harmful effect. It is therefore imperative that an institution understands the factors that affect the quality of the data they generate and use to drive changes at course and institutional level.

2.8. Evidence of research

While much effort is put in by providers to gather student opinion on the quality of their HE experience, there is less evidence of research to gather students' understanding of the quality assurance processes and their involvement therein. Neither is there evidence of much research into the views of teachers on student involvement, or how it relates to them. In a review of the literature, Trowler and Trowler (2010a) found little written about student engagement in governance apart from Little et al.'s study (2009) (discussed above). Little et al. (2009), found that management believed the main purposes for student involvement were to improve 'student experience',

recognize students as customers, and listen and be responsive, so that developing problems are tackled early. In HE in FE, they found a strong culture of continuous improvement, and a sense that student-customer needs must be met, as otherwise students could take their custom elsewhere.

A small number of studies captured teachers' views, in relation to their opinion of quality assurance and student evaluation, however, none of these included HE in FE teachers. Cheng (2009; 2010) found that, although they had an underlying sense that having their work measured by quality assurance systems showed a lack of trust in them as professionals, many teachers were starting to accept the demand for them to show accountability. Teachers realised that they had more power than students because of their subject knowledge and role in teaching and assessing. A minority thought that giving students increased power through quality audit would help to improve teaching, while most thought it would result in a lower quality of education, as students would make more demands upon teachers for support, and therefore not develop independent learning skills. Cheng (2010) found that teachers showed more interest in course evaluation results than NSS results as the former was more closely linked to their own course and teaching, while in a European-based study, Rosa et al. (2012) found a different view, with academics being positive about quality assessment directed at institutional level, rather than at individual teachers.

As well as there being little research to show how teachers view student involvement in quality assurance, Sabri (2010) noted an absence of reference to academics in UK higher education policy. She noted that policymakers work with institutions and students, while academics are referred to as generic practitioners who are only one of a number of staff groups who contribute to the 'student experience' as a whole. Academics are seen as a self-interested group who have to be held to account to ensure they meet students' needs. Rosa et al. (2012) argue that it is of vital importance to have the support of academics for the quality assurance system and their collaboration in working with it.

A study by Cheng (2011) compared the teacher and student perception of quality, and found a difference in each party's perception. Students had their focus on the end product and wanted to pass their exams, seeing a good learning experience as depending on having teachers with good knowledge and teaching skills to direct them, while teachers saw good quality as the process of helping students to develop independent learning skills and experiencing transformative learning.

How students see themselves in relation to their institution and to quality assurance has been the subject of a few studies, but they have been based in HEIs rather than HE in FE. Kandiko and Mawer (2013), in research with students in the UK, found that students showed a need to feel they were getting 'value-for-money' in terms of contact time, resources and return on investment, while also speaking of valuing a sense of collegiality and community. Choosing to highlight the discussion of 'value for money' rather than the sense of community, Kandiko and Mawer came to the conclusion that students showed a consumerist ethos. In a European study, Cardoso et al. (2012) found that student views were consistent with 'market and managerialism-driven discourse' as they represented themselves as consumers. Halbesleben and Wheeler (2009), however, found students variously identified with a number of models in their USA-based study of students in a Business School. They measured students' identification with a number of models: customers, employees, co-producers, or junior partners. They found that students identifying as customers or employees had lower satisfaction, while those associated with students taking more responsibility – co-producer or junior partner – had higher satisfaction and higher grades. They therefore suggested that teachers encourage discussion about student and teacher roles to encourage students to move towards seeing themselves as co-producer or junior partner and therefore engage more with the learning.

The studies cited above show more consistency in views at institutional level than at teacher or student level, where a range of views are expressed. However the lack of research carried out to include teacher and student

views is notable in relation to mainstream universities and is even more notable in relation to HE in FE.

2.9. Conclusion

HE in FE is recognized in the literature as having a student body that is constituted in a different way to mainstream universities, and whose primary motivation for choosing to study in a college is related to the teaching. However, the literature relating specifically to this sub-sector is sparse, and does not address issues around student involvement in the quality assurance processes. This review of the literature has explained the rationale behind the prevailing promotion of student voice and student experience, and how this affects practice within institutions. It has shown how, in spite of the fact that providers support this approach at institutional level, others hold and justify alternative approaches, arguing that the consumerist focus on student satisfaction has many unintended consequences, which could actually reduce the quality of a student's educational experience. They also question the dependence on survey data in decision-making, in particular querying whether the data is valid and reliable to begin with. The different rationales uncovered, and the differences in practice that result, make it likely that, even within one institution, different parties are operating under different conceptions of what is going on, giving opportunity for misunderstandings. The lack of research previously carried out to find out how teachers and students perceive student involvement in the quality assurance processes makes this an important area to study. In particular the absence of HE in FE from previous research has been evident. With this in mind, this study aimed to carry out research that is dedicated to HE in FE, focusing on student involvement in the quality assurance processes.

2.10. Research Questions

The review of the literature reinforced the initial idea that the grounds for the current practice of involving students in the quality assurance processes are contested. Nothing was found to provide reassurance that either policy-makers or HE in FE institutions have a clear understanding of how practice in

this area affects, and is perceived by, the key parties involved. As a result the research questions were formulated to gain a holistic understanding of how this plays out in practice, looking at the issue through the eyes of the three main stakeholder groups within the institution:

- What are the perceptions of students of their involvement in the quality assurance processes?
- What are the perceptions of teachers of student involvement in the quality assurance processes?
- What are the perceptions of managers of student involvement in the quality assurance processes?

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter provides the methodology. It presents the research context and describes the underlying philosophical perspective, showing how it influences the study. Justification is given for the approach taken and methods used for data collection and analysis. Finally, it gives an overview of the process of implementation, and explains the ethical issues considered.

3.2. Research context

The research is set in an FE college in England that has worked with a mainstream university for validation of HE programmes for around 50 years. With more than ten times as many FE as HE students, FE is the predominant focus of the college. The senior management team have responsibility across all provision, with HE functioning as a separate department under the Dean. This is further divided, with six Area Heads each responsible for a subject area and acting as line managers to teaching staff. The majority of staff teach only HE with a minority working across HE and FE.

The organization has established procedures in place for quality assurance, including expectations for the involvement of students. In my role, I have direct involvement in these procedures and it is my responsibility to know what procedures are carried out, when and how. Student representation and satisfaction surveys are formal methods used to involve students in quality assurance. At the end of semester, all are asked to complete a module evaluation questionnaire, and eligible students are encouraged to complete the annual, externally administered NSS. Appendix 2 contains a detailed schedule showing how these are administered over the year. Each cohort elects a student representative, who is invited to attend various meetings: meetings with support staff; learner voice group where HE and FE student representatives come together with a Senior Manager; programme committees with teaching staff; and boards of study, which are departmental meetings with teachers, managers and support area representatives. For the

meeting structure, see Figure 3.1. The programme committees feed into the boards of study, which feed into HE committee. Although HE committee does not have students in attendance, the boards of study feed into that meeting, therefore student feedback can inform the agenda. The student representative meeting and the learner voice group do not feed directly into the other meetings, but relevant items are passed to teams or individuals as required. In addition to these structured opportunities programme leaders seek feedback through less formal communication with students during group or individual tutorial sessions.

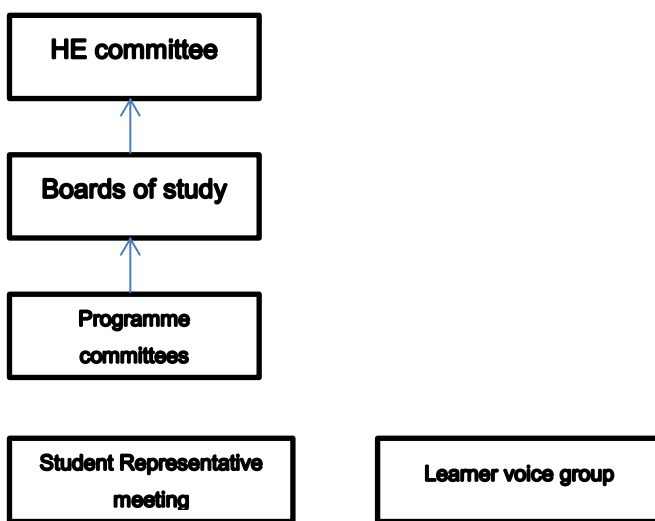


Figure 3.1 Meeting structure

3.3. Philosophical perspective

The ontological understanding I bring to this study is that the world has an objective reality and exists whether humans comprehend it or not. The social world exists and the structures therein both affect and are affected by human activity. According to Bhaskar (1979), 'society must be regarded as an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions which individuals reproduce or transform, but which would not exist unless they did so' (p45). The individual enters a particular social or organizational setting with a physical presence, but also with aspects of identity such as psychological and socio-cultural identity, meaning that how individuals see themselves and how they act may be different depending on how they have been affected by

their social and cultural groups, such as family, school and work. When an individual joins the setting, they encounter the pre-existing structures and expectations, but their presence changes the setting. They, in turn, are changed by influences and expectations in the social world they have entered. Therefore, at any point, a combination of forces is at work causing or influencing events.

Theories about the world are an attempt to understand the objective reality but are subject to cultural, historical and other influences. While acknowledging that different people see the world in different ways, this epistemological relativism does not see all interpretations of the world as equally valid. As these views purport to relate to an objective reality, rather than being merely our own constructions, they have an important role in trying to explain real phenomena, and it is important that they should be subject to rational scrutiny (Maxwell, 2012).

This study is concerned with both formal procedures, and people, and sees them as inextricably linked. Taking a realist view 'empowers us to analyse the processes by which structure and agency shape and re-shape one another over time and to explain variable outcomes at different times' (Archer, 1998:203). The social world is not independent of the people within it, but neither is it reducible to a simple product of the wishes of those people. This study is based in an organization that existed before any of the current staff worked there. There have always been procedures employed to run the institution, and these have evolved and changed over the years. When a new employee starts, they enter a pre-existing context with a set of structures, processes and expectations which they must accept if they are to work successfully in the organization. Although the new employee brings all their values and prior experience, the new set of procedures and expectations will cause change in them. Likewise, the new employee entering the context with their values and experience at once changes the composition of the context, leading to a continued evolution of the procedures and expectations. Similarly, when new students start, the institution has an effect on them, and they on the institution. Such interplay

between procedures and people is an important aspect of this study. Quality assurance procedures are established to involve students and collect their thoughts, but the very existence of such procedures give a message of expectations to the students, and may change what they think.

The idea that different people might have different understandings of the same situation is pertinent to this study. As part of the institution's quality assurance system, procedures are set up to involve students in assessing the quality of provision. The outcome of this, however, is not always as predicted; for example, in spite of extensive efforts to get all students to participate, many do not, and some appear to participate reluctantly. As with any such process, the values, understanding and assumptions of those who control the procedure drive the implementation, and shape the process. It cannot be assumed that the intentions behind the initial establishment of systems and procedures are the same as those of the ones who carry out the procedures (Bhaskar, 1979). Therefore the reason why a student engages as a student representative may well be different to the reason management had in mind when establishing the system. If it is the case that the values and understanding of students are different to those assumed by management, both parties may be working at cross-purposes without realising. Allowing the different actors to speak will aid our understanding of how they relate to the current organizational and social context.

3.4. Research strategy

The strategy chosen for this research was a case study as the phenomenon of student involvement in the quality assurance processes was being investigated in its real life context (Harrison et al., 2017; Yin, 2014). A case study 'focuses on individual actors or groups of actors, and seeks to understand their perceptions of events' (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995:317), allowing for exploration of multiple perspectives in context (Lewis and McNaughton-Nicholls, 2014). This is particularly relevant as this research seeks to understand the perceptions of students, teachers and managers in relation to the phenomenon. The case study is appropriate where

understanding the context is necessary for understanding the case (Harrison et al., 2017), again an important aspect of this research, as how students perceive their involvement in the quality assurance procedures cannot be considered in isolation from the context of the structures and processes which make their involvement possible. This is allowed for in Yin's (2014) definition of case study as:

'an empirical inquiry that

- Investigates a contemporary phenomenon, the 'case', within its real-world context, especially when
- The boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident.' (p16)

The blurring of boundaries is caused, not only by the inextricable link between the context of the quality assurance processes as they are set up in the organization, and the phenomenon of student involvement in those processes, but also by the influences that the actions of each party have on the other.

A case study aims to give insight into, and a deep understanding of, a particular situation (Gerring, 2007; Mabry, 2008) making it suitable for this research, as one specific issue in one college is being studied. While generalizability is not a key aim of case study research, a close study of one case can aid understanding of a larger number of cases (Gerring, 2007). This particular study could be deemed to be a 'typical', rather than an 'atypical' case study (Mabry, 2008), as there are likely other colleges working in similar contexts, sharing similar profiles, that could use this study to gain insight into their own situation. Providing sufficient information about the context allows the validity of the research to be demonstrated, as the reader can check for both internal plausibility and external transferability (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The 'case' studied was the involvement of students in the quality assurance processes in HE in FE, and was restricted to the students enrolled on HE programmes in one college. Selection of participants was based on whether they have relevant experiences or characteristics and can help provide an

understanding of the area of study (Maxwell, 2012; Yin, 2014). The range of participants had to be wide enough to give confidence in the reliability of findings and check that there was some convergence in accounts (Miles and Huberman, 1994). To that end, participants included managers, teachers and students, as all three have a role in the quality assurance processes, and are part of the context, with the possibility of influencing or being influenced by the perceptions and actions of the others. All research was carried out within a six-month period during one academic year. To ensure that the study was carried out in context, the case was limited to students and staff current in their role, excluding previous students or staff. Viewing the processes from multiple perspectives thus allowed in-depth study with the possibility of exposing different understandings of the phenomenon.

Edwards et al. (2014) indicate that in-depth analysis associated with a case study lends itself to a study of causation. Studying people within their context allows for consideration of the interaction between different parts of the 'case', revealing what causes events in a way not possible if the context is not integrated within the study. To be able to understand what causes some students to engage with the quality assurance processes, and others not with the same processes in the same institution, would be a useful outcome, but can only be achieved if the influence of the social and structural context is acknowledged.

Qualitative research methods were deemed suitable for this research as they provide a way of discovering how people understand their experience in relation to the phenomenon being studied (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). If this research is to generate understanding of the perceptions of student involvement in the quality assurance processes, it must permit the voices of the different actors to be heard without any pre-suppositions of what they might say being allowed to cloud this. Methods such as interviews provide sufficient flexibility to allow participants to define their understanding and experience in different ways (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015) and even to allow them to develop their thoughts in the midst of the process (Yin, 2012). Differences in perspective should be expected, even where participants fall

into the same 'category', for example 'students' or 'teachers'. Qualitative methods allow minority opinions to be exposed rather than neglected in pursuit of the majority view. As Maxwell (2012) states, 'we need to use methods for social research that do not presume commonality or similarity or impose an illusory uniformity on the phenomena we study' (p51).

3.5. Data collection methods

The methods employed to collect data to answer the research questions were interviews and focus groups. Methods and sampling strategies are justified below.

Data related to student perceptions

Data related to student perceptions were captured through focus groups. Krueger and Casey (2015) suggest a number of situations where focus groups should be considered, three of which are applicable for this research: the need to gather 'the range of ideas or feelings that people have about something; the need to 'understand differences in perspectives between groups or categories of people', and the desire to 'uncover factors that influence opinions, behaviours, or motivation' (p24). A conversational research method was appropriate for drawing out thoughts and eliciting examples of experiences. Seeing students in groups was apposite as the focus of the research relates to processes that are a mutual experience (Michell, 1999; Krueger and Casey, 2015). Faced with the prospect of an individual interview, some may fear being singled out (Patton, 2002), whereas a group situation lessens this pressure as each person has the opportunity to contribute or abstain at various points throughout the discussion (Barbour, 2007). As all students are part of the same institution, it was considered that any combination of people would feel they had something in common, and that any differences could be used to fuel discussion rather than stifle it. Stimulation comes naturally from hearing what others say, as the thoughts of others give an individual a context for consideration of their own thoughts (Patton, 2002). Also, listening to participants discuss and develop their ideas collectively can be more

revealing than answers given to direct questioning (MacDougall and Fudge, 2012). Complications associated with focus groups had to be taken into consideration during planning and implementation. The facilitator must be skilled (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015; Wilkinson, 2015) as the setting allows for less control over discussion than an individual interview (Morgan and Spanish, 2012); tactful guidance needs to be given so that sufficient time is spent on salient topics, quiet participants are encouraged and outspoken ones controlled (Wilkinson, 2015).

Data related to teacher and manager perceptions

In order to gather data related to teacher and manager perceptions, individual interviews were considered most appropriate as this allows investigation of that which cannot be observed, but can only be gained from the participant sharing their thoughts (Patton, 2002; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). These 'qualitative research interviews' (King and Horrocks, 2010; Kvale, 2015) were used 'to understand themes of the lived daily world from the subject's own perspectives' (Kvale, 2015:27) as it was important that both teachers and managers gave their own perceptions of student involvement in the quality assurance processes. Individual interviewing was considered a suitable method as teachers and managers are confident in expressing individual views, the interviewer has opportunity to explore reasons behind actions taken and can encourage interviewees to provide examples of incidences to illustrate answers rather than rely on general opinions alone. Such accounts of specific events would allow me to derive the meaning on a 'concrete' level (Kvale, 2015). A semi-structured interview approach was used to allow me to control the topics discussed while giving flexibility to omit or add questions depending on who is being interviewed and what responses are being given (King and Horrocks, 2010; Patton, 2002; Robson, 2016). This flexibility allows the interview to be conversational, with leads being followed up naturally, so that maximum information is obtained from each participant. However, this must be done sensitively (Kvale, 2015), with the interviewer preparing well and practising 'reflection-in-action' (Schon, 1983:62) during the interview.

Student sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was used, as it allowed participants with a range of attributes to be included, increasing the likelihood that all relevant meanings emerged in the research (Patton, 2002; Mabry, 2008; Ritchie et al, 2014), thus giving confidence in the reliability of findings (Miles and Huberman, 1994). To allow for maximum variation in the sampling (Patton, 2002; Ormston et al., 2014), students came from a number of departments, for example, Music, Performing Arts, Social Sciences, Business, IT, with a mix of male/female, young/mature and student representative/non-representative. Five groups involving a total of 22 students (10 of whom were representatives) were set up. They were all on full-time programmes, either FdA/FdSc or BA/BSc. The first two focus groups were made up of student representatives only, one was non-representatives only, and the remaining two groups were mixed.

Teacher sampling

As is consistent with purposive sampling (Patton, 2002; Mabry, 2008) teachers with a range of different attributes were selected for interview, covering male and female staff across a number of departments and various lengths of teaching experience. Some with programme leadership responsibility were included, as they have specific responsibility for involving students in the quality assurance processes. After each interview, the recording was listened to and the ideas raised were noted; by the eighth interview, the sample was sufficiently large, as the diversity of the population was represented and saturation of information had been reached (Seidman, 2013).

In addition to teachers, a member of support staff was interviewed, part of whose role was involving students in the quality processes. They are in a good position to know how students, teachers and managers relate to student feedback, making their experiences and perceptions on the subject relevant to this study.

Manager sampling

The sample of managers was selected to ensure coverage of the different responsibilities in relation to the quality assurance processes. The sample consisted of two of the six area heads, the Dean of Higher Education, one Vice Principal, the Principal, and a member of the Board of Governors. This covered the range of experience and responsibilities necessary to gain an understanding of the perspective of managers in relation to the phenomenon.

3.6. The process

Development of schedules

Detailed schedules were developed for the interviews and focus groups to ensure I was fully prepared (Charmaz, 2015), and to help me take an objective approach. The first step in devising the schedules was deciding the key questions, to ensure I remained focused. The key areas to be investigated were the participants' understanding of quality assurance, their view of, and response to, student voice, and their view of the other parties' response to student voice. I designed open-ended questions that would allow participants to tell their experience and voice their opinions. Care was taken to include questions that checked that there was a common understanding of key terms (Patton, 2002), such as 'quality assurance'. Topics and questions were sequenced to be most conducive to getting a conversational-style interview. The wording of questions was reviewed for clarity and to ensure they were not leading the participant to respond with a particular viewpoint. Reflecting on possible responses, and the areas I wanted to ensure were covered, allowed me to develop prompts and probes. These could be used if needed as an aide memoir during the interview, allowing for flexibility in the discussion, but ensuring that important aspects would not be missed (Edwards and Holland, 2013). Table 3.1 shows an extract from one of the schedules, covering the topic of 'student voice'. The schedules for each group of participants were based on the same main topics, but with slight variations to ensure the questions related clearly to the role of each. Full schedules are in Appendix 4.

Table 3.1 Extract from focus group schedule

Topic	Question	Listen and probe for
Student Voice	Are you familiar with the term 'Student Voice'? What is meant by it?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they understand the term? • Do I need to give them examples to ensure we are talking about the same thing?
	Do you think students such as you should be listened to? As a group or individually? What status should your involvement/feedback have? (compared to teachers/managers/employers/external examiners etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they see value in it? • What challenges do they see? • Do they think some should be listened to more than others? • Do they mention customer-related reasons? • (What is influencing their thoughts?)

Piloting

One interview and one focus group were carried out as pilots. This gave an opportunity to pre-test the guide to check questions were understood as intended, allowing for amendments before next use if necessary (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015). The recordings were listened to, and the following aspects were reflected upon:

- Did the participant seem comfortable in the interview situation?
- Were the key questions answered?
- Was too long spent on any area?
- Were sufficient examples asked for and given?
- Were there any other questions that should have been answered?

Listening to the interview pilot, I realised the introductory section was too long, gaining minimal data of value; awareness of this in subsequent

interviews allowed me to avoid this issue. In the pilot focus group, I found that students were waiting for me to ask a question that they then answered, rather than engaging in discussion. When I encouraged them to discuss with each other, they participated in a more relaxed and informative way; in the remaining focus groups I ensured this instruction was included in the introduction. As there were no further problems with the pilots, data from both were included as part of the dataset.

Interviews

The Governor, Principal, Vice Principal, Dean and support staff member were individually invited to interview, while Area Heads and teachers were given the opportunity to volunteer to participate. The breakdown of interviewees is shown in Table 3.2. Please note 'Senior Manager' represents the Principal, Vice Principal or Dean.

Table 3.2 Interview participants

Role	Reference	Number
Governor	G	1
Senior Manager	SM1/SM2/SM3	3
Area Head	AH1/AH2	2
Teacher	T5/T8	2
Teacher (and programme leader)	T1L/T2L/T3L/T4L/T6L/T7L	6
Support Staff	SS	1

Before each interview, I emailed the information and consent form (see Appendix 3) to the participant, inviting them to ask if they needed further information. I voiced this question again just prior to the interview, but no-one raised any concerns. The majority of interview participants were known to me in some capacity, enabling a useful rapport during interview, so they did not appear to feel pressured by my questions. I was aware that in some cases it could have become too informal, but found that recording the interview was a helpful reminder to the participant that what was being said

was being used for a formal purpose. At the commencement of each interview, I emphasized that I was not there in my normal job role, but rather as a researcher. I then started with an introductory question about their role in the organization, even if I already knew the answer. This served as a good way to initiate conversation and they quickly became comfortable with the need to speak to me as a researcher rather than a colleague.

At the end of each interview I signalled that we were concluding by saying 'I have just one last question...'. I then asked if there was anything else they would like to add or if anything had been skimmed over that they wanted to add to; in a few cases, there was something to add, but most did not suggest anything. The member of the Board of Governors gave the following encouraging affirmation with her closing comments:

I sat and thought about it, and what would I say about feedback. And ... this morning on the way here ... I was thinking 'I'll say this, I'll say this...' but actually when you really start to think about the questions you've asked, and the way you've structured the questions, it's bringing out a broader....so if I had a preconceived view, the way that you've asked the questions has made me second-think, which I think is always good, so, good technique!

After the recording stopped, I debriefed the participants by checking they felt comfortable with the interview and gave them opportunity to discuss the purpose of the research. Positive responses were received. Although participants were assured (orally and on the consent form) that they had the right to see the transcript, none requested this.

Focus groups

Students were invited to participate and five focus groups were set up; participants included: representatives/non-representatives, young/mature, male/female and those from different levels and subject areas. Table 3.3 shows the composition of the focus groups indicating the representative/non-representative and young/mature breakdown.

Table 3.3 Focus group composition

Group reference	Total	Reps (R)	Non-reps	<=21yrs	>21yrs
F1	4	4 (CR/AR/BR/DR)		2	2
F2	4	4 (GR/ER/FR/HR)		2	2
F3	4	1 (JR)	3 (I/K/L)	4	
F4	4		4 (M/N/O/P)		4
F5	6	1 (RR)	5 (Q/S/T/U/V)	3	3

As with the interviews, participants were sent the information and consent form before the group took place and were given opportunity to request more information, but none did. When we met, we had an informal chat with snacks available. Once we started recording, it was clear they were somewhat restrained and spoke cautiously to start with, but they soon became comfortable with the situation. Some of the participating students were from my department and it was interesting to see that they did not feel inhibited by my presence; they still criticised some things in the department, but did so in a detached and tactful way.

3.7. Analysis

Approach to data analysis

The method of data analysis chosen was inductive, thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is not linked to a particular theoretical approach (Spencer et al., 2014) and provides a way of mining the data for meaningful themes in a way that is consistent with the critical realist approach taken in the design of the research (Braun and Clarke, 2008). This involved looking for patterns and the meaning at the core of what is being said (Boyatzis, 1998; Spencer et al., 2014; Patton, 2002), and allowed iterative review throughout the analysis (Mabry, 2008). An inductive approach was taken to the identification of themes, necessitating immersion in the data to detect key ideas emerging across it (Boyatzis, 1998; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2014; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015; Bryman, 2012). No pre-existing framework was imposed on the data so that imaginative interpretation was not hindered (Yardley, 2000) although I

ensured I already had a good understanding of the area of research to make it less likely that important concepts would be missed (Yin, 2014; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

Analysis was carried out separately on each of the datasets: student focus groups, teacher interviews and manager interviews, allowing for the possibility that different themes may emerge from each group. I decided to analyse the support staff interview as part of the teacher dataset as they were on a similar level operationally.

Process of analysis

The data were analysed using the phases recommended by Braun and Clarke (2008) and explained below. While this helped to adopt a systematic approach, it was flexible enough to allow a recursive approach to be taken, with phases being revisited in order to review decisions.

Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with your data

The initial stage of analysis involved listening to the recordings repeatedly to get an overview of each, and to ensure I understood the context. The recordings were transcribed using 'intelligent verbatim' rather than 'strict verbatim'. Therefore 'erms', coughs etc. were not recorded, as they did not affect the meaning of what was said. (See Appendix 5 for a complete transcript.) After transcription, the recordings were listened to again to check that the written version truly represented the conversation. This familiarization stage was important to ensure maximum understanding of the emerging themes (Howitt and Cramer, 2014), and both recordings and full transcripts were re-visited a number of times during analysis.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

The second stage involved taking a dataset and going through each transcript in turn to identify initial codes that would highlight the essence of what was being said. Where relevant, a section of text was assigned multiple codes to ensure no meaning was lost. Throughout the process, this involved

revisiting previous transcripts to ensure consistency in coding. Table 3.4 shows an illustration of the initial coding process in an interview extract.

Table 3.4 Initial coding process

Interviewer	What do you see as the challenges of listening to students?
Respondent Trying to get to the essence of what they are saying	Trying to take out what's really at the bottom of it, what's really important and the general issues where you can say to them, 'There are some things we can do, we can change or we can put in place, but there are other things that would take quite a while'.
Interviewer	Can you think of any examples like that?
Respondent Students should be listened to It is important that teachers follow up students' concerns Group voice is important	Okay if students complain about, say a general one, we could have like refectory couldn't we, we could have something like that, where it's not within our powers but we could say to them we will put forward your views at the next meeting and the students are listened to. But we need to report it, but it's out of our hands as to how we can deal with it. On the other hand if a student complains about a room, they feel it's not adequate for their session or whatever, then sometimes that is within our range to be able to say, 'We'll look into it' and if it's possible we'll definitely do it. That way they feel they are being listened to, it's not immediately going, 'No, no way'. It is being dealt with. So there are some things we can deal with and then obviously if students get to you and they complain about something and you listen to their complaints, you know that you can go and talk to your line manager and discuss it with them and they can work out how to deal with it. But you're listening to them because it's really important that you do get ... and especially if several people are saying the same thing then you know that there is a real concern and the line manager should be informed of it to see what can be done.

Phase 3: Searching for themes

After the initial coding, the dataset was examined as a whole and coded data was extracted and grouped in different ways to try to identify themes. This was represented in tabular format, allowing easy movement of extracts between sections during analysis. Care was taken to ensure each extract was labelled so that its source was easily identifiable and that the original transcript could be revisited to check the context of a quote if necessary.

Table 3.5 shows an illustration of grouped quotes used in searching for themes.

Table 3.5 Illustration of grouped quotes

Emotion	
Fear of being identified	... when it is online there is a little bit of hesitation. You have to log in and you think 'whatever I say, someone is going to know that I said it (CR)
Fear of being seen as causing trouble	They just don't like giving that feedback. They feel they would be singled out as causing trouble. (CR)
Stress makes students negative	[Board of study] meetings are always just before an assignment hand-in, my students in my class say if they did it just after a hand-in then they would probably get more positive feedback, but because they're all stretched they are negative. (BR)
Being rushed makes students negative	But it wasn't a relaxed atmosphere, I didn't have time to think back, literally 4pm everyone's leaving, so obviously I thought of all the negative things. I think you need to be prepared – 'we're going to do this today at this time. Please think of all the things on the course.' (AY)
Reaction to response received	Being a rep for years, I don't think I have been to any meeting so far this year exactly for that reason. I have spoken to all of the students, I have went out of my way to speak to everyone on my course. This is what I've got to say, and you can go through, and while you're speaking, that's a no, that's a no, that's an excuse, that's a no, they might look into that in a few years' time. (CR)

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

Next, the themes were reviewed to see if they gave an intelligible representation of the data in relation to the research questions. This involved discarding some that were weak or less relevant, and combining some to give a more coherent pattern. In some cases data was reallocated to a different theme and in others it was discarded from the analysis.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

With coded data compiled into themes, a draft of the narrative was written for each theme. During this process, the meaning, relevance and order of each quote was once again considered. At this point, themes were finally defined and subthemes identified.

3.8. Ethical issues

In preparing for and carrying out this research, I followed ethical guidelines produced by the British Educational Research Association (BERA), which focus on the responsibilities of a researcher (BERA, 2011). I also consulted the Code of Ethics and Conduct produced by the British Psychological Society (BPS) and considered my practice in relation to the four ethical principles proposed by BPS: respect, competence, integrity and responsibility (BPS, 2009).

Responsibility

The question of responsibility is central to any consideration of ethical research (BERA, 2011; Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995). I have responsibility to the community of educational researchers to ensure my practice does not bring research into disrepute, and also to the general public as education and its development are considered to be in the interest of society in general and my research should not misrepresent the situation. I also have responsibility to my employer, who has part-funded me, and to the staff and students who make up the organization, as the findings may influence future practice.

However, the people most directly affected during the operation of the research are the participants, and I have responsibility to them to act with respect, competence and integrity.

Respect

Respect for the participants was shown by ensuring they had sufficient understanding of both the process and their rights within the process. Informed consent (Brooks et al., 2014; Kvale, 2007) was given by participants in advance of the research meeting. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and focus group participants were asked to respect the confidentiality of all. As part of the informed consent process, participants were assured they could decline to answer any question or withdraw at any point. I endeavoured to show sensitivity to participants (Yardley, 2000) to limit any inhibition related to power issues. I was aware that, while the researcher has control over questions asked, the participant controls the release of information, the examples shared, and the slant put on their story (Kvale, 2007).

Competence

In order to bring competence to this research, I decided that it should be carried out, 'with a scientific attitude' meaning 'systematically, sceptically and ethically' (Robson, 2016:18). The research was carried out 'systematically', with advance preparation of interview schedules. I had to give them opportunity to answer questions fully, even if I felt that I already knew what they thought or did. In that sense, the research was carried out 'sceptically' (Robson, 2016), as I had to face the fact that my experience in the organization meant that I came to the study with some assumptions about what was happening and what participants might be thinking. I therefore ensured that I listened carefully to the answers and probed where necessary to gain a full picture, enabling me to maintain objectivity.

Integrity

In order to maintain the integrity of the research, I had to be aware of possible conflict between protecting participants and the institution, and the

need for the knowledge gained as a result of the research (Tangen, 2014). This was taken into account throughout the process, involving decisions about: choice of research area, to ensure value; data collection and analysis, to ensure perspectives were truly represented; and reporting, to ensure appropriate levels of anonymity were used, views were fairly represented and any criticisms were presented in a constructive way.

3.9. Insider research

Many of the ethical issues related to this research were affected by the fact that I am part of the institution being studied. From a positivist viewpoint, research should be carried out objectively, and procedures regulated so that no effect comes from who the researcher is or what their relationship may be with the participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). However, from a naturalistic viewpoint, a situation can only be understood by someone within it; therefore a researcher must either already be an insider, or be prepared to become an insider for the purpose of the research. According to Merriam et al. (2001) and Sikes and Potts (2008), insider research is just one of many different approaches and, like any approach, the researcher needs to work in a way that is 'scholarly and rigorous' (Sikes and Potts, 2008:7). Outsiders can have the advantage of the curiosity that comes from being in an unfamiliar situation, and the ability to ask 'taboo' questions (Merriam et al., 2001); however, insiders have the advantage of knowing the culture and situation, and should be able to carry out research that can have an immediate impact upon a situation (Trowler, 2011).

My status as an insider researcher comes from having been employed in the organization for more than ten years. Being part of the institution has heightened my sense of the need for me to complete the research ethically. My behaviour as a researcher influences how the participants react; if the participants see that I am acting ethically, they are more likely to trust me to deal sensitively with their thoughts and feelings, and will be more likely to contribute to the research in an open and honest way (Israel, 2015). Also, after the research has been completed, I have to continue to work with the

participants, and it is important to me that they should have gained, rather than lost, respect for me through this.

Although the organization has not been named, it would not be difficult to infer. As a result, senior management who contribute to the interviews could also be identified. During interviewing, there was no evidence that this was a concern; they were reassured that if there were questions they considered to be sensitive, they were free to decline to answer.

Particular aspects related to power and identity arise when the researcher is part of the organization. It was important that participants recognized that I was not there in my normal job role and would not pass any information gained to anyone else in the organization outside the context of the research. In the case of staff and students who already knew me, it is likely that they would not have agreed to participate if they did not trust me to carry out the procedures in the ethical manner promised. With those who did not previously know me, I needed to ensure that a certain rapport was built up so that they trusted me to treat their contribution ethically.

3.10. Summary

This chapter outlined and justified the qualitative, case study methodology adopted in this research. The data collection methods used were focus groups and semi-structured interviews and an account was given of the process of sampling, data collection and analysis. Ethical issues were highlighted and actions taken to ensure ethical practice were described.

Chapter 4: Student perceptions of their involvement

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from five focus groups carried out with students in the college, and reveals how students think about their involvement in the quality assurance processes. From the data gathered, seven main themes and associated subthemes were identified (see Table 4.1). This chapter shows how each theme reveals an aspect of student thinking about their involvement in the quality assurance processes, how that opinion affects the extent and/or nature of their involvement, and, where relevant, how their involvement affects the theme. The themes relate to the purpose of student involvement, what their expectations are, the power roles accepted or questioned by students, the role played by emotion, the significance of relationships, and the complexities related to engagement.

Table 4.1 Themes and subthemes

Theme	
1. Purpose	Overall purpose
	Information for management
	Ideas for improvement
	Effect of the view that the purpose is improvement
	Engagement affecting student view of the purpose
2. Expectation	Involvement
	Confusion
3. Power	Roles accepted
	Roles questioned
	Student empowerment
	Effect of participation on sense of power
4. Emotion	Emotional state affecting engagement
	Engagement affecting emotional state
	Anonymous feedback and emotion
5. Relationship	Effect on engagement
	Effect on relationships
6. Complexity	Complexity of engagement
	Complexity of student thoughts
	Complexity of student body
	Complexity of response

As a reminder: all participants were students on higher education programmes, and a number of them were student representatives. Throughout the chapter, group members are normally referred to as 'students'; however, if it informs the context, they are identified either as a representative or non-representative or alternatively as a young or mature student.

4.2. Purpose

The theme of purpose relates to what students saw to be the overall purpose of quality assurance, and in particular what they saw as the reason for their involvement. The key purpose was seen to be 'improvement'. This had an impact on both whether a student engaged or not, and on the nature of feedback they gave. Students also showed that their engagement affected their belief in how they could contribute.

Overall purpose

Students were aware of a process through which features of the provision would be checked for quality. They saw quality assurance as both making sure that everything is being done correctly and driving improvement. Examples given of aspects that would be expected to have a quality check were: teaching quality, attitude of the staff, access to staff, course content, equipment, environment and facilities. However, they showed that they were aware that they did not have definitive information:

I would imagine it includes things like the building, the facilities, but that's just me guessing ... I imagine that [course content] would come from the Uni, because they're signing off on it. (N)

All groups started with the premise that they should be involved in the quality assurance processes, with none questioning this. They associated student voice with this involvement:

[Student voice] is involving them in the quality assurance process. (CR)

To me it means that the opinions of the student body are listened to and taken into account with regard to decision making. (GR)

The overall purpose was discussed in four groups, showing they related it to continuous improvement:

It's about effecting change, isn't it, if something needs improvement. (DR)

But obviously the idea should be that there should be some improvement unless it's all perfect, and obviously it never is! (Q)

In three groups, student representatives said their motivation came from the idea they are making improvements for both current and future students:

If something can improve, then I think it is a good thing. The way I look at it, it's going to be good for us and for those coming after us. (DR)

Students in two groups said that management involved them in quality assurance to contribute to an improved reputation for the college, as students will only provide a positive image of the college if they feel their voice is being heard and their needs are met:

... they want to establish themselves with a better reputation ... reputation-building and quality. (CR)

... people will vote with their feet. They will go elsewhere if they don't feel it's meeting their standard, or meeting their needs. Or they often say if you disagree with something or they don't like something, you'll tell 10-12 people, if it is bad, whereas if something is good you might tell one. (O)

Information for management

All groups believed that management needs to know whether students' needs are being met:

If something is not meeting your need, like course content, then that coming from the students is really important because they are the ones experiencing it. (DR)

Student representatives thought they could make a contribution by interpreting what their fellow students say and bringing forward to management matters for action:

You should be in a position where you know how your fellow students work, the mentality so to speak. You observe them, you know the way they speak and I think you have got to use your own judgement on what would be classed as serious matters and what would be classed as people saying they want this and then being laughed out the door. (HR)

In all groups, students believed they could evaluate whether a programme is good quality or not, therefore measuring student satisfaction is equivalent to measuring the quality of the course:

I think student satisfaction – that lends itself to getting an overall picture of the quality of the course. (RR)

I reckon our student rep meetings have a lot to do with providing quality assurance. (BR)

Students considered that their feedback would be genuinely useful to decision-makers, as without it they would not know what was going on at student level:

[Student feedback] should be the bulk of what they base some of the biggest decisions on though really, shouldn't it? (BR)

Because it keeps them informed of what is going on on the ground level so to speak. It's all very well sitting in an ivory tower so to speak but you have to know what is happening with the workers. If you get no feedback from the little people, then the big people are never going to know what is going on. (HR)

Ideas for improvement

Students believed they could contribute ideas for improvement, in areas such as facilities, curriculum and teaching practice. They gave an example of a practical change that was brought about by students speaking out:

... students are full of ideas. And they're the final recipient. (OM)

... last year, one of our things was there was no water in this building and we got water tanks put in and everyone uses them. (AR)

One student representative gave an example of a change that had been made to their curriculum when the previous group gave feedback that triggered module revision:

Our course leader said that our module we just started in has changed as a result of the feedback from the year before. ... The teacher made a lot of changes and spent a long time deciding what was the best of both modules and put it into one. So I just feel like it was a good thing. (DR)

They also believed they made a positive contribution by indicating how teaching practice could change:

And even when it's negative – not negative, ...constructive, it's still positive really, if the lecturer can think, well four people said that, maybe I do need to...(N)

Effect of the view that the purpose is improvement

This focus on improvement influenced student participation in a number of ways. If a survey was for purposes other than driving internal improvement, students showed little interest in it. For example, in discussing NSS, students placed less value on it than module evaluations, as they saw NSS as not contributing to their experience:

But it doesn't really feed back any information. It's not going to make a difference here. (O)

Is that for future students, for sixth formers that want to come here, to get the whole idea of it? Whereas I want to look at [module] evaluations, they're more internal. (AR)

This view of surveys being for the purpose of driving improvement resulted in some students thinking it was not worth participating if they were content with their programme; without suggestions for change and improvement they saw their feedback as valueless:

I didn't really want to complete it, because I knew that the course I wanted to do was the course I wanted to do, so any aspect within that, I would have accepted, but the only thing I would have criticised would have been the bad things, but as yet I haven't found anything bad that I could say about this course. So the only thing I can do is on the 1 to 5, just say very happy, very happy, very happy. ... I just don't feel personally that it is [worth doing it]. (U)

The sense that it was not worth completing the module evaluations if they were happy was explained further in three groups, as they revealed a feeling that it was their duty to be as critical as possible, considering the module evaluation to be essentially an invitation to indicate what could be improved:

I go straight for the negative. But isn't that the point? Because if I fill them all out 5 star rating, brilliant job – everything is perfect, no point in having that, it is about being critical but being constructive about it, not saying I hate this tutor, this could be better, that could be better. I'm always really critical with them. (CR)

However, in two groups, there was disagreement among students, as some saw the module evaluations as not just about improvements, but about getting an overall picture, and stating the importance of satisfied as well as dissatisfied students giving their feedback:

If you had several people all providing negative feedback, on aspects that they weren't happy with, if you didn't give your 'very happy' feedback, then it's not so balanced, is it? (Q)

Student representatives also differed in their approach to bringing feedback when they attended board of study meetings; some filtered out anything positive, considering it to be their duty to concentrate on improvements needed and problems to be solved:

...with meetings, if you're there and you've got something to say it's got to be something that's bad, an issue you want to get resolved and if you sit there without saying anything then everything must be good. (HR)

Other representatives wanted to include some encouragement with positive feedback:

Everything that is good as well, we have a lot of positive feedback. (DR)

While students wanted feedback and complaints to be acknowledged, in three groups they recognized that giving students the opportunity, through the quality assurance processes, to highlight the negative and suggest improvements could bring problems. They spoke of a culture of complaining, even about superficial things, or things that just cannot be changed:

On my course most people care but sometimes there is very much a culture of complaining ... I feel that there comes a point where people complain so much that they forget what they're complaining about. (GR)

Engagement affecting student view of the purpose

Students showed frustration if they felt that feedback was not used for improvement. Final year students were keen to point out examples of feedback that had been given multiple times through the module evaluations with no changes being evident:

I think with the module evaluations, you fill them in, but you don't see anything from them, because a lot of the time, a lot of the problems are the same in every module, and we just don't see anything happening. Because it happens again the next term. (JR)

Representatives were discouraged when their efforts were resisted by their group:

I find that the people who don't speak up, who don't speak to the tutors, don't speak to me either. The minute I report 'I heard you moan about this

module, do you want me to raise that?' No, no... It's after the modules I tend to hear about the complaints. (CR)

There was recognition that the college may be trying to meet various requirements, possibly leading to management asking for feedback so they could tick a box to say they have collected feedback. This was not the purpose that students wanted to contribute to, rather they wanted management to see the feedback as useful for driving improvement:

I feel that sometimes there is a culture of ticking boxes – does it meet this, does it meet that – without actually checking that it does the job that it is supposed to do. (GR)

Sometimes it feels like they want to know so they can improve, but sometimes it feels like it's because they have to. I feel like it's a requirement for them, that they have to, not that they really want to change. (S)

4.3. Expectations

The theme of expectations relates to students' expectations of why and how they should be involved in the quality assurance processes. All groups believed students had a right to give feedback, and discussed their expectations, but showed confusion over the processes, affecting their confidence in engaging.

Involvement

All students showed a sense of entitlement to give feedback, expecting to be listened to:

That we have the right for our opinions to be heard. (Q)

As students tried to justify their entitlement, their perception of themselves as customers came up in four groups, with the fact that they are paying for their education being mentioned repeatedly:

We're paying a lot of money for this education. (Q)

We're the customers. (GR)

One group discussed their customer expectations and compared the purchase of the course with the purchase of a car:

N: £24000 debt, you want to leave with satisfaction. [*General agreement.*]

M: If, for example, you go to a car garage, you want a beautiful car, good emission, they charge you ... and you sacrifice to pay that money. That means you need good value for money. That's like us, at the end of the day, when we finish, whatever happens, we have to pay this money.

In two groups, students' perception that they are primarily learners participating in the education process arose as they discussed their entitlement to speak out:

We are just ordinary people, if that makes sense. We have the right to be heard, especially as we're the ones who are being taught the education, the skills that we need for later in life. (U)

We are eventually paying for our education but predominantly we are here to learn. (H)

To be convinced that feedback was taken seriously, they expected that it should be examined, discussed with them and possibly published, and that they would see changes as a result. One group suggested they just wanted an explanation of what issues will be addressed, how and when:

Q: That they look at the issues...

RR:...and respond to us. This is what we are going to consider for the coming term, this is what we can effect change immediately in, and this is what we can do over time.

Q: Yes. Because we don't need individual responses, but just say 'there were some issues, and we have listened to your concerns, we have taken them on board, and we feel that we can make some change by doing this'. That's what we really want to hear, don't we? That issues will be addressed.

It was acknowledged that there may be things going on behind the scenes that students know nothing about, but they expected management to communicate this to them:

[The Principal] might actually really be looking into all the information that students are saying, [they] might literally be taking into account everything. But until you evidence it, it doesn't mean anything. (N)

Getting a 'No' response to feedback was not always seen as a problem, provided the reasons are explained, justified and communicated back to students:

I would want to know what the reason was. ... If there were rock solid proper genuine reasons, you've gone to the person and said we want this on these grounds and they say they have looked at it and can't do anything about it then I would ask why. (HR)

Confusion

All students were familiar with module evaluation questionnaires, being aware they were expected to complete them each year. However, there were different understandings of the process. For example, when students were asked to consider who they thought they were 'speaking to', through module evaluation surveys, some thought of senior management while others thought of it as departmental:

The module one is going mainly to the lecturer and the head of faculty. (L)

It's going to the Board. I would hope so. (U)

When I fill out these things, I'm speaking to the highest possible person, to get things done. (RR)

We know it goes to the lecturers, but we don't know as high as it gets. (S)

Non-representatives showed they had different experiences as to whether they saw findings from module evaluations, and some were not sure if their representative did:

Obviously the course leader's seen it and they're coming in, to get our specific opinion on why the results were so bad or why they were so good, when they come into the lesson. (K)

I think [our student rep] said it comes up on the computer, the percentage, if there's a bad point it comes up, and then they read into that. But we don't get to see them I think. (S)

We give feedback, we have no idea what happens to it, where it goes, who sees it, what is done about it. (O)

In another group, one non-representative suggested that teachers should cover the survey results at a meeting, but through discussion with the student representative in the group, they realised that such meetings are already in place:

K: I think it would be beneficial to maybe have the lecturers all going to a meeting with minutes for the meeting. Maybe the students from that year get an email with the results from that meeting. Even if nothing happened for the next year, you can see 'well, they've talked about that, and that's what they thought'.

ES: Are you aware of the student reps being invited to any meetings?

JR: Yes but half the time, for reasons beyond our control we can't go, because they're always at times when we can't.

...

I: Do you get the chance to email in feedback?

JR: Yes.

L: But then you don't get the feedback from what's happened?
JR: We always get minutes of the meeting. They do send it to the reps.

When asked how they see NSS compared to the module evaluations, students showed uncertainty about the difference:

JR: I would say it is pretty much the same. ... Instead of talking about a module, it's about the whole thing.

...

L: It would be more government level, wouldn't it?

JR: I wouldn't have a clue, I just filled it in.

K: Obviously the educational institution would have to know about it to act on it.

L: Yes but I think that happens after, that it comes up and then down to them.

Among the representatives who actively attended meetings, confusion over their role led to different representatives engaging differently. Some saw their role as passing on everything students raised, while others felt a duty to filter and prioritise key issues:

Everything and anything that anyone has said, it is not your job to filter.
(AR)

I think it is about prioritising what the greater number of your class say. I don't actually say everything, I'll prioritise what the vast majority think. (DR)

In one group where none of the students were representatives, none knew what happened in the student representative meetings or what information they were supposed to get:

The rep meetings, are they summarised anywhere? 'These points were raised...' - I've not seen anything. (N)

4.4. Power

The theme of power relates to who students think holds power in relation to their involvement in the quality assurance processes. This arose in all groups, showing that they saw a number of people as having power, in addition to themselves, and this affected how students engaged. It was also seen that the student experience of involvement could alter their sense of empowerment.

Power roles accepted

Although students saw their feedback as of prime importance in the quality assurance processes, they did not expect their voice to have absolute power. All groups could mention a range of people expected to have input into programme quality, including teachers, internal verifiers, head of department, vice principal, dean, and university exam board:

Not just one set person, I would say it's down to everyone. (JR)

Students showed an acceptance that there were people with the power and responsibility to make decisions, seeing them as the 'bigwigs'. The structure of student representation allowed these decision-makers to be informed of student opinion so that it could be taken into account:

It's like a body of students that voice the opinions. Like we have student reps, one will be from each year or course or whatever. People from the course will talk about the problems, what's wrong with it or whatever, then the rep will speak on behalf of the students to the bigwigs. (U)

Students explained that there was a place for contribution from people in different roles depending on the issue, acknowledging there are areas where another's expertise makes their opinion more relevant than that of the student. This view allowed them to recognize that the teacher is in a better position to make decisions on teaching than they are:

If you are not getting what you need from a course or a part of a module, then that feedback is really vital. But that is about what affects us, obviously if it is something to do with teaching or something else, obviously the teacher's opinion is going to be more relevant than ours. It depends on the subject. (DR)

Power roles questioned

With regard to the power they saw appropriate for teachers to hold, students thought the teacher's voice was not taken seriously by management. So, although they thought that teachers are ideally placed to represent student needs, they thought teachers were either not empowered by management to do so, or that teachers felt they were not empowered:

They hold a lot of information, but probably are quite overlooked. (N)

Do you not get the impression that the tutors feel a little bit powerless?
[General agreement from the group] ... So although you are hearing what the students are saying, your power and influence may not be there, or you feel it's not there. (O)

However, one representative cited an example that showed that advice from a teacher could influence student engagement negatively:

The first two years, one of the tutors recommended that I didn't go to any [board of study] meetings because it will be boring. (CR)

Student empowerment

In four groups, students agreed that feedback coming from the group could be more powerful and is more likely to lead to change than individual feedback:

The group's probably going to have more impact. One person's opinion isn't as strong as lots of people. (L)

As well as recognizing group voice as a positive influence, students also recognized the ambiguities inherent in the process, and that group voice in the form of survey results could be used to exert power over teachers harmfully:

I would never want anyone to feel... you don't want to victimise someone, do you? One lecturer is weak in one area, but if we all picked up on it, and then they published it, that wouldn't be nice, would it? ... But then I wouldn't want anyone to think, because it's not published, we don't need to listen to it. (N)

With regard to an individual student's sense of empowerment, student representatives thought that some students felt powerless and could not raise issues themselves:

Everyone has a good opinion, but it's whether or not they give it, because they don't want confrontation. Because there are probably plenty of people on our course who have opinions but don't know how to raise it. (JR)

Effect of participation

Students showed that their experience of engaging with the quality assurance processes influenced whether they felt their voice had power or not. Student representatives quoted examples of using group voice to put forward student complaints on behalf of the group to achieve change.

Seeing results in this way gave them a sense of the power of student voice:

We were learning nothing and as a class we complained and that was rectified ... If you do have a genuine reason for wanting change and everyone is in agreement for wanting change then go for it and change will happen. (HR)

Student representatives took for granted that they would have direct access to the programme leader. However, one found they needed to raise issues repeatedly to make sure they were heard, giving them a sense that student voice only had power if student representatives are determined:

With my course I'm very lucky because my leader is very helpful. The only thing is that as a course rep I have to represent the students and sometimes you have to keep saying 'this is wrong, this is wrong' to the point that you get something done as if you don't keep emphasizing it, it doesn't seem as if it is important. (DR)

Student representatives expressed how their experience of providing feedback had the effect of showing them they did not have the power they had initially thought. They indicated that just because 'student voice' is encouraged, it doesn't necessarily lead to any action:

The student voice says 'Hey, yes, come and talk to me. Come and give me this feedback, come and do all of this', but that doesn't necessarily provide any action further than that, but there is a platform there. (AR)

You feel like you're kind of shouting into nothing, because there's nothing coming back other than you're hearing the same thing over and over again. (O)

For students to engage with the processes and then see results publicised was seen as a way of enhancing the student sense of empowerment, and would motivate them to engage:

Imagine how much the pupils would feel that their voice is being heard if you were publicising and saying 'this is what we've done and the response is...' It's power, isn't it, it gives a bit of power to the students. (N)

Students were unsure whether the data gathered was used or just collected for the sake of completing a process; to know that the data was being examined and used to inform actions would motivate them to participate:

If you say is it worth doing surveys still, yes because you need these statistics, but how do they collate this information and what gets done about it? ... So if those statistics exist, then of course it's worth doing, but if they're just being put in a drawer and forgotten about, then no it's not. (RR)

4.5. Emotion

The theme of emotional response arose in all groups as students admitted that their emotional state affected both whether, and how, they engaged, but

in addition, the act of engaging in the processes affected their emotional state.

Emotional state affecting engagement

One factor students admitted affecting the nature of feedback was that some gave responses that were more negative at times of stress. The emotional response was seen to vary with time, depending on the particular pressures:

[Board of study] meetings are always just before an assignment hand-in, my students in my class say if they did it just after a hand-in then they would probably get more positive feedback, but because they're all stretched they are negative. (BR)

Final year students were seen to be so focused on completing their studies that they didn't take time to engage at an appropriate time, but complained at the end of a module when under stress:

... a lot of people in my class have 3rd year syndrome. You ask is there anything that you want to complain about – no everything is fine – when they do want to complain it is a week before an assignment has to be handed in where nothing can be done. (CR)

Asking for feedback after grades had been received was seen to allow the possibility of an emotional response and some would give good feedback if they got a good mark and poor feedback if they got a poor mark:

They might give a comment on it based on their marks. (K)

Engagement affecting emotional state

For some students, the experience of engaging with the processes had an effect on their emotional state. In one group, student representatives discussed attending the boards of study. One spoke emotionally about the effect of getting a negative response at the meeting after putting a lot of effort into gathering feedback from their group:

Being a rep for years, I don't think I have been to any meeting so far this year exactly for that reason. I have spoken to all of the students, I have went out of my way to speak to everyone on my course. This is what I've got to say, and you can go through, and while you're speaking, that's a no, that's a no, that's an excuse, that's a no, they might look into that in a few years' time. (CR)

It was also acknowledged that, when asked to think about their experience, there was an emotional response making them think more about occasions when they felt something was wrong rather than when all went well.

Therefore being asked to complete a survey in a short period of time resulted in them recording all those negative feelings:

I think when I did it, the first thing that popped into my head were all the negative things. Whenever you think about a situation, first things are negative, this happened, this happened, and how you felt like this. To be honest, even the little things that did make it better you forget, and I know you shouldn't. It is naturally what you do. (AR)

Two groups discussed the effect on their motivation and responses if someone was persuading them to complete a survey. They admitted that being instructed to complete the module evaluations evoked an emotional response, not only on their motivation to do it, but also on the nature of their feedback, leading to negativity:

It was the end of our class, we were packing away, and then our tutor runs in and says we need to log in, we need to fill in those forms and that put me in a bad mood. (AR)

It was suggested that the tendency to negativity could be mitigated if the survey was approached differently and they were encouraged to prepare ahead and give more balanced feedback:

But it wasn't a relaxed atmosphere, I didn't have time to think back, literally 4pm everyone's leaving, so obviously I thought of all the negative things. I think you need to be prepared – 'we're going to do this today at this time. Please think of all the things on the course.' (AR)

One group liked the focus group approach they were taking part in for this research and thought group discussion for feedback was useful. However, it was recognized that some individuals were likely to find it emotionally difficult to engage, and might even suffer further emotional trauma as a result:

Sometimes it's harder to voice your opinions when you're with a big group of people, because it's very personal, and sometimes it can be quite intimidating, like social anxiety and all this sort of stuff. (U)

Anonymous feedback and effect on emotional state

In four groups, the value of anonymous feedback arose. It was agreed that, while some students prefer discussing issues in person, others find it difficult emotionally, and prefer giving anonymous feedback:

I think if there was that system, obviously you would get the people that are a bit scared about doing it, who would go straight to the online system and type it in, and the people that go to the reps now, would still go to the reps, because they've got no issue with it. (K)

However, engaging in the process of giving anonymous feedback could also have a negative effect on the emotional state of students, who had fears for either their own wellbeing or that of their teachers. Some were reluctant to give any feedback that might perhaps be held against them, and were not fully convinced that the online survey was anonymous:

They just don't like giving that feedback. They feel they would be singled out as causing trouble. ... when it is online there is a little bit of hesitation. You have to log in and you think 'whatever I say, someone is going to know that I said it'. (CR)

A fear for the wellbeing of their teachers was also expressed. Students worried that putting their feedback into an anonymous survey meant that they lost control of it in some sense, and that it could become something greater than they intended. They showed concern for their relationship with the teacher, and realised that giving negative feedback could seem like a betrayal of trust, with a negative outcome for the teacher, rather than the constructive one they wanted:

U: We're all nice people, we don't want to offend anyone, so if we say 'the standard of teaching wasn't as good as it could have been' then they'll obviously speak to the teacher and it might escalate way too quickly, and they might get fired from their job, which would be a huge impact just because of one person saying something – but that's all it takes really. ... It's a very thin line between you want to be honest but you don't want to hurt another person's feelings.

Q: Yes. And even if you are being honest about them, that might have been just one small area that you were dissatisfied with, but overall you may be quite satisfied. So you're worried about saying your true feelings about one aspect for fear of it escalating.

4.6. Relationships

The theme of relationship arose in all groups, focusing mainly on the student-teacher relationship, but also covering the value of working in a relational

way to get student feedback. The responses showed that the student-teacher relationship influenced how students engaged with the quality assurance processes, and also that this engagement could affect relationships.

Students acknowledged they had built up relationships with teachers, and believed that teachers knew them well:

... they know us, the relationship's there, they know our needs, what we want, they know what we like. (N)

Effect on engagement

The student-teacher relationship arose in four groups, with students feeling this was an important factor in their satisfaction with a programme and therefore the feedback they were likely to give. The way the students' opinion of a teacher, and their relationship with that teacher, colours their thoughts on the whole module was brought out:

I would say the main opinion is going to be based on the lecturer, because if you have a good lecturer, you're going to have a good module, so you're going to have good feedback. And, obviously, if it's not a good lecturer, then you're going to have the opposite. (JR)

At the end of the day you've got to have that student-teacher trust there as well for things to work. If there is no trust there then things are just going to collide all the time and it won't work. (HR)

In relation to feedback given through module evaluation surveys, students also talked about their relationship with the teacher and how it influenced what they wrote, showing concern that what they write should be helpful and not harmful in any way:

But do you not think that, because you have a relationship with that person, a professional relationship, I almost feel that I want to help you out. You took your time to come in here, you've done good lectures, you've done this... If you can improve someone's practice for the next group of people, perfect. (N)

Students showed they considered how they could give feedback about a teacher without it seeming to be personal:

There's the problem if it goes to the course leader, or the lecturers, and you've got 'I'm not happy with this for a certain reason', it does need to go beyond those guys, because otherwise it might become personal for them. (RR)

In all groups, students showed a belief that the most effective way to get a true picture of a situation was to take a relational approach and discuss it. They suggested that the best quality of feedback would come with not just having questionnaires, but having a face-to-face discussion on strengths and weaknesses, with the outcomes being escalated as appropriate:

Not just the questionnaire, the whole sit down and have a chat about it, what were the strengths, what were the weaknesses, how can we improve it, then that tutor would perhaps take it forward to the head of department, and then the head of department then takes it up the line. (O)

Effect on relationship

When discussing how their feedback was sought, students used the language of relationship and showed that they saw being asked for feedback at an appropriate time as a sign that someone 'cared'. In one case, their experience of the processes had a negative effect on their relationship with the course leader:

I feel like our course leader gave [the module evaluations] to us because someone at the university said 'oh do you know you are supposed to be doing that'. If anyone cared why wouldn't they have bothered earlier? (GR)

The belief that it is important to speak directly to teachers about issues relating to teaching was expressed, seeing it as developing the relationship:

It's a better way to make use of speaking directly. ... Because they get to know your opinion. It's more personal. He's not hearing it from someone else I guess. (JR)

Direct feedback to the teacher about everyone's opinion, I think that's needed. ... It's the best thing to actually talk about it isn't it? People don't know unless you tell them. (K)

One student representative believed that talking through an issue with a teacher allows early resolution. The tendency to resist engaging relationally could lead to a situation escalating unnecessarily as in one example quoted:

I encouraged them at the time to talk it out with him, they chose not to and eventually it ended up with five people making complaints to our course leader. ... and it had to be sorted out a lot more formally than it probably could have been if there had been just a more informal chat about it earlier. (GR)

4.7. Complexity

The theme of complexity arose in all groups as students highlighted issues they saw as factors affecting both how they engaged with the quality assurance processes and also how their contributions were dealt with. It was noted that there are aspects of the process that makes student engagement complex. They were also aware that the student voice is complex, partly because of the complexity of the student body and partly because of the complexity of individual student thoughts. Students recognized that this had the consequence of adding complexity to the interpretation of student feedback.

Complexity of engagement

In a group of non-representatives, the complexity of the role of student representative was highlighted as they discussed the difficulty of getting people to engage effectively with the role, saying a particular personality was required to contribute in meetings:

- O: The advocates that are supposed to be there aren't necessarily there. Trying to recruit a student rep and getting them to turn up to meetings...
N: And they never went to any meetings anyway, so we never got any feedback from that. Anything that we put forward didn't get put forward. ...You've got to have a certain personality.

The time commitment required to carry out the role of student representative was seen as adding to the difficulty, causing particular problems where there is a high proportion of mature students:

- O: Time. It's time and capacity.
N: Everyone's got kids, and people are travelling in quite far.

Student representatives themselves were aware that there were processes they should be engaging with but did not always do so, explaining that it was because of the time commitment:

- I'm supposed to be taking that kind of stuff up for you, and taking it to their meetings. But I have no time to get to their meetings, but I can still obviously do the minutes of an email with everyone's concerns in and send it if I can't get to the next meeting – I can get my information into that meeting. (RR)

Complexity of student thoughts

Students realised that the complexity of their thoughts affected how they engaged with surveys. They reflected on the difficulty of answering a questionnaire meaningfully, as it necessitated them reducing their thoughts to an over-simplified score. This led them to question the effectiveness of the questionnaire method and recommend instead a conversational approach:

ER: If I'm sitting there just doing 1 to 5 it is boring to me. I would rather just talk to the tutor and tell them. ... I'd rather have them hear me.

GR: I do often wonder how effective those things are. ...

ES: Are you saying by that that you are being asked for a one-tick response...

GR: Yes.

ES: ...where you would like to have a conversation?

GR: How effective was this, how effective was that? I suppose most of them ask have you anything further to add and I might put them but I feel it is more effective to have a one on one conversation for someone to respond to you and you build up some relationship.

This was further explored in the same group as students recognized that how students engage with a survey affects the quality of data produced. When asked if they thought that the module evaluation results give an overall picture that is correct, they gave a negative response, revealing that they thought quality was affected by a low response rate as well as the superficial approach taken by many of their peers as they completed it:

ER: No I don't think they are reliable data.

DR: Who does it? Not everyone does it.

HR: People click away saying everything is good but a week later they are the ones sitting in the classroom moaning.

Complexity of student body

The complexity of the student body, and how this led to different students engaging differently, was discussed by mature students across three groups. They claimed that their previous experience of life and work meant that they came in with higher expectations and different needs compared to younger students:

We probably do have a greater expectation because we have experienced the outside world, a work environment. You have a different set of expectations. ... The majority of the people on the course, ... a lot of them are homeowners, they've got kids, they're coming back into education. The percentage that travel and live here in the sense of university, teenagers, is two or three. (O)

Half of our course are 18-19. Everyone has different needs. (DR)

One younger student demonstrated a different level of expectation, believing that paying for the course meant they had a right to choose how much they engaged (or not) with the learning in a session:

In the end of the day, I'm paying the money. I'll put in as much as I want to take out. (U)

It was recognized that certain knowledge and skills were needed if students were to participate meaningfully. For example, new students may not have sufficient knowledge of what should be happening, compared to final year students, and therefore would be less likely to engage:

The first years ... might not want to comment because they don't know how it's all meant to be flowing, whereas in the third year you have full understanding of how a lesson needs to be done. (K)

The idea that the strength of the opinion held might be a factor that affects whether a student engages or not arose in three groups. Students admitted they were more likely to complete the survey if they felt strongly about something, otherwise they may take an apathetic approach. As a result, the data generated would not represent the views of the group as a whole:

If you really have something you need to say then you'll really want to get that heard, otherwise you may be a bit like 'oh, I may get round to it'. (S)

Complexity of response

The complexity of the student voice arising from the nature of the student body was recognized in all groups. Students realised that this would make the process of acting on student feedback more complex. This was seen to cause a challenge as feedback from students could never be one unanimous, objective view, therefore someone has to make a judgement as to how to deal with it:

I suppose the biggest one is quantity of people giving their opinion, because they're going to conflict a lot, well, they might conflict. (L)

... if you tell them the way they're teaching something isn't helping you, then there is a way they could try and adjust it so you could understand, but they can't change the complete teaching because there are other people on the course as well. (S)

Examples were given of changes made in response to student feedback from one group of students but later rejected by another group. While students wanted to have input into decisions, they also acknowledged that treating the feedback from one set of students as sufficiently reliable to base changes on could lead to problems:

BR: We've had one module last year, a 3000 word portfolio, and apparently a lot of them had to give feedback that it wasn't enough word count. So they have upped it this year to 4500 words, but we are saying it is way too much. ... You do need to have some kind of input because we have to write the assignments, but in terms of the content, I trust they know what they're talking about, they know what they're teaching.

CR: With the content I think you've got a bag of worms, ... If the students had to decide what was in modules/course there would always be someone missing out, someone is already expert, and someone else getting left behind.

Another situation where it may not be straightforward to meet student expectations related to group and individual feedback. Four groups recognized that, when an issue is raised by one or more students, it may not be immediately clear whether it is a group or an individual issue. They accepted that someone would have to take responsibility to discern whether it actually relates to an individual or to the group as a whole:

The individual can speak and the mass can be represented. (Q)

I think primarily as a group to be honest especially as a student rep myself, I feel I can say this, we tend to be the more outspoken kind of, this is rather natural, generally most are not quite as extreme as that. So if you listen to them all as a group it gets normalised out, but if you just listen to people who want to approach you and talk about it, there's millions of things wrong and they all need fixing. But as a group it might turn out that some people feel this needs changing, but for most people it is quite neutral. (CR)

It was also recognized that sometimes a few strong voices in a group can result in the extent of a problem being misrepresented, giving concerns about the wisdom of acting on the feedback given:

The email that was sent implied that there was a unanimous issue with the whole group. While I was saying there was a few vocal individuals; whilst their opinions should obviously be listened to and considered it was far from unanimous. (N)

4.8. Summary

Students believed their feedback was important to the college's provision of a good quality service and wanted to believe that it was valued. They saw the main purpose as improvement, and felt they were expected to point out issues and problems to be solved. They saw their participation as complex and showed confusion with the processes, admitting that this affected their engagement. They found questionnaire completion particularly difficult as they could not express their thoughts in tick-boxes, and they were not confident that questionnaire results gave an accurate representation of their experience. Students realised that they sometimes had an emotional response when giving feedback, and this could have a number of effects: it could mean that they struggle to make a decision about what to include, it could result in them giving responses that are overly negative, or it could stop them engaging at all. They also revealed that the very process of giving feedback had potential to affect them emotionally; if they were speaking in person, they worried about the response they might receive, and if they were giving anonymous feedback they worried that they were not in control of how it would be used. Students showed that good relationships were key to their satisfaction with their programme, and affected how they engaged with the processes. They also believed that the most productive way to gather information from student groups or to resolve problems was to use relational methods, believing that face-to-face interaction developed relationships.

Chapter 5: Teacher perceptions of student involvement

5.1. Introduction

This chapter sets out the findings from nine interviews carried out with teachers and a member of support staff. This chapter shows how teachers think about student involvement in the quality assurance processes and how that relates to student engagement. From the data gathered, five main themes were identified, with a number of subthemes (see Table 5.1). These relate to the teacher view of the purpose of involving students, the teacher impression of how students are influenced by emotion, the relevance of the student-teacher relationship, the perceived complexity of the process, and the relative power that teachers think is held by all those involved.

Table 5.1 Themes and subthemes

Theme	
1. Purpose	Overall purpose
	Student benefit
	College benefit
	Management purpose
	Teacher assessment of student view
2. Emotion	Effect on involvement
	Involvement affecting student emotion
	Teacher emotion
3. Relationship	Student-teacher relationship
	Working relationally
4. Complexity	Complexity of situation
	Complexity of student body
	Process making engagement complex
	Complexity of teacher response to surveys
5. Power	Teacher assessment of the student sense of power
	Management influence on the power balance

Throughout the chapter, interviewees are normally referred to as teachers; however, if it is necessary to the context, they are identified as a programme leader. Similarly, the member of support staff is included in the term

'teachers', unless the distinction is valuable, in which case 'support staff' or the abbreviation SS is used.

5.2. Purpose

The theme of purpose relates to how teachers see the overall purpose of quality assurance and the purpose of involving students in those processes. Teachers saw quality assurance processes as mainly for evidencing that standards are being met, with student involvement being a benefit to both students and the college. Teachers also discussed the purpose they believed management had for involving students, and how students saw the purpose of their involvement.

Overall purpose

There was unanimous agreement that quality assurance had something to do with meeting standards, and this was expressed in a positive way:

Making sure that the quality of assignments or procedures are carried through and at the best possible standards are continuous and consistent so that it meets the needs of the University. (T1L)

They indicated that procedures need to be in place and evidence provided to show they are being followed, thus attributing importance to the procedures themselves:

Standards, robustness, rigour, making sure that we are accountable, policies and procedures are being followed and that standards are being maintained. (T7L)

...quality assurance is actually evidencing because we have to evidence what we're doing. (T3L)

One raised the need to check that the quality of provision provided value for money to students:

...there has to be measures in place to make sure that you are delivering things that are of a good quality and are worth the value, basically, to the students to be paying their money. (SS)

Four teachers linked quality assurance with an attitude of improvement. It was considered to be restrictive to think of quality as just meeting standards,

suggesting that it is more about attitude, and that the ability to bring about improvements should be built into the system:

My view is that it's more important that people are empowered to challenge and develop things, rather than work to a particular set of assurance standards. (T5)

Student benefit

When teachers spoke of the purpose of involving students, four drew attention to the fact that students are paying for their course, relating this to the student need to have their voice heard:

They're paying for a service; we're delivering a service, so they have to have a voice. (T6L)

All spoke in some way of the need to ensure students feel listened to and included; asking them for feedback was seen as a way to make them feel a valued member of the institution:

It makes them feel that they're a valuable part, their voice means something and that we do take everything on board and do what we can to improve. (T1L)

...it's really important that they're valued and listened to. (T3L)

Two teachers believed that student involvement allowed them to develop skills for future citizenship, and could form part of the individual's transformational development:

I don't have a problem with students having a voice, it's part of their learning. (T2)

I always say by the time they're leaving in the third year, you know, they can take on anybody. If they can't take on us, how can they go in and take on institutions that are not looking after vulnerable people? So it's part of their development to develop that voice, so I'm all for that. (T6L)

One teacher looked at student involvement as representatives from the point of view of CV enhancement, and development of skills useful for future employment:

... looks fantastic on their CV because it shows responsibility, leadership, employability skills ... that looks really good for you when you go out in the business world. (T1L)

College benefit

Six teachers believed that listening to the student voice and meeting their expectations would lead to improvement of provision, adding that the only way to know what needs improvement is if students speak up:

...we need to [listen to students]. We need to make improvements and we need to make things better. (T4L)

[Representatives are] speaking on behalf of the whole of your group or they should be, getting their thoughts, positives and areas where we need to improve. ... unless they voice things then nothing will change and everyone is oblivious to actually what's going on. (T1L)

However, some suggested that deriving benefit from student feedback was not always straightforward. One teacher questioned whether feedback given by students added anything to what they already knew, as the issues raised were usually those that teachers had already raised:

I think it's really valuable and in the main, the points that they bring up seem to be valuable. But from what I've seen and experienced, it seems to be that they don't necessarily bring up anything we're not bringing up ourselves. (T8)

That involving students in the quality assurance processes had a bureaucratic purpose was raised by three teachers, as they saw this as providing data for reporting and evidence that could be used to justify changes:

...if there's something that's really not working, I need it evidenced ...When I've got stuff in writing, I can change it. (T2L)

Management purpose

The understanding that management welcome student feedback, and have a responsibility to do so, was raised by five teachers. One teacher related the collection of student feedback to the need for management to show that organizational targets are being met, and also to have positive feedback that can be used for marketing purposes:

[Management] obviously see it in relation to meeting their targets ... they're into marketing what's good about the college, so ... they want positive feedback. They want students to say everything's great and to fill out forms and say everything's great. (T6L)

There were differing views on the value management put on the actual content of student feedback:

Was that really something that they thought was worthwhile, or are we just going through a process here to show that we have reacted to student feedback? And that's not really meant as a criticism of senior management, because they've got to be seen to go through it. (T5)

To be honest, compared to my last institute, [this college] is ... more interested in the student voice, not just saying they are. (T2L)

Teacher assessment of student view

Teachers said that some student representatives see that their role has a positive purpose to make a difference for the future, but did not apply this to all, or to the student body as a whole:

I think sometimes [representatives] see it as ... it's, 'Oh, I'll improve this for future students.' (SS)

I don't think [students in general] are that concerned about how the course might develop in the future, because it simply isn't on their radar at all. (T5)

The idea that a desire for the benefit of self-development was a factor motivating students to become student representatives was attributed only to trainee teachers. They were seen as consciously seeking such opportunities:

...our Student Reps, they're engaging in this process, partly ... not because they want to be listened to, but partly they want to experience what the other side of teaching is about, and they want to learn and embrace all the opportunities that they've actually got. (T7L)

Teachers agreed that many students were reluctant to participate in surveys, meetings and being representatives, Examples were given of students simply refusing to complete module evaluations:

Module evaluations are a nightmare. I mean, they just don't want to do them. (T6L)

One explanation offered for this lack of interest was that most students are working and/or have families, so student life is just one of many aspects of their lives; therefore they see college in terms of completing their studies, rather than any wider commitment:

...they are all working four days a week and they don't have the time commitment or they're not able to attend meetings usually, so makes it a bit more difficult. (T3L)

Teachers suggested that students were motivated when they had a complaint to pass on, with the converse being that they would not see any need to participate if everything was satisfactory:

I think a lot of them view it that it's been fine, move on. Or if it hasn't been fine, they'll use it as a mechanism to complain. (T8)

Not wanting to turn up to course committees because they're happy with their lot. Not having a voice because they're happy with their lot. Maybe that's a good thing, because the programme's being run right, but it seems for management that it's not a good thing. (T4L)

Teachers thought that if students had an experience of giving feedback without seeing any change, they were likely to disengage:

... there has been this inertia that people have stopped giving feedback, or complaining, because they don't believe anything will get done about it. (T8)

...they don't see the relevance. ... I don't think they see the changes that are made off the back of the module evaluations. (T2L)

Teachers spoke of persuading students to engage with the module evaluation forms, by trying to explain how the results were used and how important they are for driving improvement:

I tell them [the module evaluation] is essential, and I also tell them that we pore over them in meetings and what you say is certainly listened to, and the reason your modules run nicely now is because of your student voice over the past three, four years. (T4L)

SS saw apathy as endemic in the student body, even affecting some teachers, with a lack of respect being shown for the representative's role:

There seems to be a culture of apathy, I would say, in a lot of the students. (SS)

...it was, 'Oh, who wants to be Student Rep?' No-one puts their hand up and they go, 'Come on, someone,' so I'll be like, 'Oh, go on, you do it,' and then, 'Alright, I'll do it.' And they never turn up. (SS)

I felt a lot of it was coming from ... like, obviously, it's not entirely, but a portion of it is the staff have a level of ... some of them, anyway, have a bit of apathy as well. (SS)

It was suggested that students saw the NSS in particular as not benefitting them, either because they realised that they would have completed their degree by the time the results came through or because they had not used that data to select their place of study when they originally applied. As a result they were less likely to complete it:

'Why am I bothering? I'm leaving.' ... the NSS, they see it different, in my opinion, because this is not going to affect them, or they can't see that it's going to affect them. (T4L)

On the NSS, all said they tried to explain the impact of the survey and the benefit to the college, although one teacher was uncomfortable with trying too hard to influence the students:

But you can't be telling them too much, this is about the standing of the university or college, this makes a huge impact for employers. Without then almost being biased and then saying you've got to be good marks because ... it gets into that doesn't it? If you want people to think it's a good place you've got to give us a good survey, which is corrupt. (T3L)

It was noted that incentives to complete the survey were offered, such as graduation packages and gift vouchers, but still a lot of students did not participate:

...this college is offering you so much, it literally takes five minutes to do ... And they just don't. (SS)

5.3. Emotion

The theme of 'emotion' relates to the view that teachers have of the emotional factors that affect objectivity, and also how participating in the processes might affect students emotionally. Teachers also admitted sometimes having an emotional response to student feedback themselves.

Effect on involvement

Emotional reactions were understood as those leading to feedback that was not an objective assessment of the situation, for example thinking about a recent incident rather than taking an overview of a module:

But a lot of students do, I think, tend to ... they do vote emotionally, it's what's happened recently as opposed to what happened six weeks ago. (T1L)

Getting the timing right when asking students to complete module evaluations was seen to be difficult, as the emotional state of the student could lead to a superficial approach:

...if you just give them to them on a bad day or perhaps don't explain or they're not so engaged or motivated, they will just go tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, probably all down the middle, which actually then doesn't really give us an awful lot of information. (T7L)

Teachers believed an emotional reaction could come from the feeling of vulnerability inherent in grappling with difficult content. Asking for feedback when they are going through that difficult stage was seen to lead to students acting defensively:

... it's probably one of your most vulnerable times of your life, because you're sitting there, you're trying to do your best, and if you feel as though you're not doing your best and you're not achieving. (T8)

On some programmes, students cover areas such as counselling, or domestic abuse, meaning that some had to come to terms with issues from their past through the module content. An example was given of a student who submitted a complaint about a tutor, but on investigation it was found that the real issue was the subject content that was making them feel vulnerable, leading to an emotional rather than objective response:

...rather than having an issue with the tutor, they were having an issue with some of the content of the module. So it was making them feel quite vulnerable and it was bringing up ... some personal things from their past, so they were getting quite aggressive and quite defensive. (SS)

The grade achieved by a student is also seen to sometimes result in an emotional, rather than an honest, assessment of the situation:

They need to be listened to, but it does need to be tempered with, 'Is this a reflection on the fact that I only got 50% and I was expecting 60%?' (T5)

Teachers believed that negative emotions drove student feedback more strongly than positive emotions. They had difficulty treating student feedback as giving an objective picture because of this, although they saw negativity as a natural human tendency:

It is normally issues that they are unhappy with, and as you can see, they can be quite petty, rather than actually, we've enjoyed something. ... And perhaps it's easier to say things that we are unhappy with rather than things

we are good at or happy with. It just seems to be a natural human desire to do so. (T7L)

... like module evaluations, the ones I've been checking, they're always ticking the numbers, like I said, but when it gets to the actual giving of an opinion, you mostly just get negative ones, or ones that have raised concerns. ... they just want some way to vent. (SS)

The idea that students have an emotional reaction leading to them pushing their own agenda or blaming teachers for their own lack of effort was raised. There was a perception that this further affected their objectivity, as students think more about the outcome they want rather than the accuracy of what they are saying:

... people are self-serving quite often, and it's what's important to them, and what's important to them may not be important to the other 90% of the people in the room. (T8)

Involvement affecting student emotion

As well as students approaching a feedback situation with an emotional stance, teachers cited examples of involvement in the process having an effect on the emotional stance of the student. One case described was of a student representative being challenged in a meeting, resulting in them feeling too discouraged to take part in future:

I think there was about 20 people in the room, and they had about six or seven members of staff telling them that they couldn't say that and that was wrong. ... that had a really negative impact and they said, 'Oh, I'm not going to go to another one.' (SS)

However, another teacher found that trying too hard to persuade students to complete module evaluations evoked an emotional response:

Module evaluations are a nightmare. They just don't want to do them. ...And the trouble is they're quite ... feisty. You know, they're able to just say no. Why should we? ... They will say 'no', or 'I'm not really interested in doing them', and I don't want to get into this: 'Do it for me. No, do it to please me', you know? It's just not what a student voice is about, you know. (T6L)

Teacher emotion

Teachers admitted having an emotional response on getting student feedback saying they felt hurt by negative feedback and had a certain amount of stress trying to work out what it was about:

I'm the kind of person that probably would ... not stay up all night, but I'd probably rack my brains to think why on earth am I getting that? (T5)

I would be hurt if I thought that someone felt that strongly that they had to bring [feedback to a meeting]. (T1L)

However, they tried to rationalise the process and find a solution:

...it's good because you do learn from what other people say. (T1L)

5.4. Relationship

The theme of relationship relates to how teachers saw the student-teacher relationship and how it affected the feedback students gave.

Student-teacher relationship

Teachers commented that they considered the relationship with students to be important for the quality of learning, with teachers being willing to interact with student feedback informally:

We do have an open door policy here as well, which is quite useful that all of our students know that they can walk into our office and have a conversation. (T8)

They were aware that the student-teacher relationship was likely to influence feedback the student gave about a module:

They will have an emotional reaction to how they interact with the teacher, and that may well colour their view considerably. (T5)

While teachers discussed the importance of having a good relationship with students, they also recognized that students would still have fears in speaking out, for example, when the person is in the same meeting:

...they might want to report on issues and it might be that the people who they've got issues with are in the room and that could be difficult. (T1L)

SS expressed a view of how teachers relate to students based on the teacher reaction when passed feedback either through SS or from anonymous surveys. In this case, teachers were seen to vary in their attitude to students and their feedback, ranging from being very responsive to being dismissive:

I think some of them really highly value it and will go up and beyond to make those changes. I think ... there are some who will think that

sometimes they've got a relevant point and sometimes it's just students being students. But I have also met teachers or tutors or staff who seem to think that students are just a nuisance, you know, and they don't care about their feedback. (SS)

Working relationally

Programme leaders said that being approachable allowed them to work in a relational way, and was important to their role in obtaining feedback from students:

Generally we're very approachable anyway, but the student voice is really important because it's their degree I think and they're the people who are experiencing it. ... I like to start off my lessons with 'anyone got any concerns?' (T3L)

Working in this way meant that a problem arising was seen as an opportunity to build the staff-student relationship:

...work through it, make the relationship. (T6L)

A benefit of working relationally was students learning to collaborate with other relevant parties, for example teachers and management. They suggested that this style of working would help students to learn how to take other viewpoints into account as well as their own:

So a part of having the voice is to go through, to do, to actually voice your opinions, and even if no-one else agrees with it, they have to listen to that, they have to hear it. ... So, they have to make their case, but they have to listen to all the other factors. (T6L)

Timing of the module evaluation results meant they come in after the module finished so a teacher could not respond by changing within the time period of the module, with the result that the problem does not get sorted for those students. This was seen to hinder problem solving, and was used as an argument for a more relational way of working:

And I'd rather sort the problem out. If someone's got a problem at Week Two, I'd rather sit down with them at Week Two and sort it out. (T8)

Working relationally was seen to contribute to student happiness, meaning that students still feel 'listened to' even if requests were not met, as they respected an explanation from their programme leader:

I think if they think that you're listening to them, my experience is almost always they will be happy - and they will accept if you can't do something, because they know that they've got your ear. (T4L)

However, working in a relational way at local level, where students are encouraged to give feedback directly to their programme leader on an ongoing basis, was thought to contribute to the difficulty of getting the representatives to attend the board of study meetings:

I think that's ... well, A, I think that's because they're generally happy. B, I think that they know they've already mentioned it to me and I've listened. C, after the course committee meetings, they always feed back and I always send the Student Rep the minutes, who then feeds back. So they feel listened to. (T4L)

5.5. Complexity

The theme of complexity relates to aspects that teachers think make it difficult to gain value from student involvement. The complexity of the situation can limit the value gained from student involvement, while the complexity of the student body means that outcomes are not straightforward. As a result, teachers described the complexity of deciding on an appropriate response to feedback received.

Complexity of situation

Students with no experience of studying at another university and limited experience of the workplace were seen to have nothing to compare their experience with and failed to recognize what good quality would be like:

Maybe they haven't experienced enough in life to realise that some things could be improved. (T1L)

... they don't necessarily know – why would they? – what good looks like. (T5)

In terms of curriculum, teachers commented that throughout the programme, students were developing subject knowledge and awareness of how it related to their future needs. Therefore there would be times when students questioned the relevance or necessity of modules they found difficult:

They're going to gravitate towards the things that they're more comfortable with, because that's going to help them get a good mark. (T5)

In a case like this, teachers tried to explain why they were included, realising that the full understanding may not come until much later. Therefore, asking for feedback after a period of time, when students had an opportunity to reflect on the module, would produce more mature feedback:

If I go back to one particular [second year] module where notoriously we would get not very good feedback from the students, ... but if you go and ask my third years about it they would give you superb feedback for it. (T3L)

But they come and they endure, and usually when they're graduating – it's a third year module – they'll say, 'I get it now, [Jane].' (T6L)

The complexity of the situation was noted as, although teachers tried to set student issues in the wider context for them, they acknowledged that sometimes it was not possible to give information on what was going on behind the scenes, leaving students feeling that an issue was not being addressed:

So even if it does seem from the student point of view nothing's happening behind the scenes, quite a lot might be going on, and it's also being aware of the limitations of the college, the problems and the issues it's currently got, that can't be explained to students. (SS)

Complexity of student body

That teachers had responsibility to distinguish group from individual issues was raised by five teachers, as the distinction was not always clear when matters were initially presented by students. The need to listen to individual students giving feedback was emphasized, but they acknowledged that consideration should be given to the nature of the change requested and the affected group before making a decision:

...is it a whole-meal change that I need to make, or is it a one person change that I need to make to meet an individual need within certain parameters? (T2L)

The effect of dominant voices was discussed by two teachers. Those who had strong opinions, whether positive or negative, were seen to be more likely to want to make sure their views were heard:

...there are others that do have strong opinions and do think it should be discussed in public, at meetings or on module evaluations where they feel that they're going to give an opinion because they feel that someone should read it or hear about it to make a difference. (T1L)

He who shouts loudest gets the most. (T8)

Even where a group appears to be largely in agreement, teachers believed that feedback could not necessarily be taken at face value as dominant voices may be influencing others:

...it's also what about the 10% that aren't in agreement. Why aren't they in agreement, and trying to listen to both sides of that argument. It doesn't necessarily mean that the 90% are right, and sometimes perhaps the students are being guided by somebody else. They're saying something because somebody else is saying that. So how reliable sometimes can that be as well? (T7L)

One teacher spoke of issues that could arise when involving student representatives in procedures such as periodic review, as having one student there rather than another could result in quite different input. An example was given where the voice of one student appeared to have been granted a level of importance that was unwarranted, as their opinion was based on personal experience rather than a broader assessment of the issues:

Different students would have given a different lot of feedback, so it changes the dynamics and it's almost dangerous to have such a large decision based on a very finite amount of information, which really was how ... it felt it was happening. We started talking about things that were very personal to a couple of people in the room, and that then becomes the basis of, let's say, 20 students per year going through a degree. (T8)

That different students had different opinions about how things should be done was discussed by all, and was seen to have the effect that data was not always relevant to the decisions that were being made on it. This difference sometimes presented as conflicting opinions within one group, giving a situation where a teacher could not possibly meet the demands of both parties. Even in situations where a group presented unanimous feedback, it was pointed out that it could not be assumed that a group of different students would agree. This was illustrated by teachers with examples of instances when they were presented with conflicting opinions; one described how they had made changes on the basis of feedback from one cohort, only to have complaints from the next group:

We've had moans about timetabling and I said 'I'm really sorry, I went on the feedback I'd got from last year'. This year's third years, who were second years last year, wanted the timetable changed, because they felt it

would have worked a better way, so I did it that way, and you don't like it.'
... So, I'll change it back next year, and I'll see what happens. (T2LL)

Another cited source of difference in feedback was the maturity of the students, in relation to both their age and their developing maturity throughout their period of study. Teachers commented that student views in year three are likely to be different to those they held in year one, although sometimes they do not engage as they feel under time pressure:

...over time, if you compare a first year student to a second year student to a third year student, I believe that they go on that journey of maturity. (T8)

I think in the first year they don't think they have much of a voice, in the second year, they think they are the only voice that should be listened to, and in my experience, the third years don't care because they've got to write a 9,000 word essay, ... And that's all they care about. (T2L)

Process making engagement complex

Teachers thought there was not a clear understanding among students, staff and managers of what the purposes of different quality assurance processes were, and that this needed more explanation. For example, they perceived that neither staff nor students had a clear understanding of the role that representatives should play in the different meetings:

[student representatives] seem very confused in the differences between the course rep meetings, the area meetings, the [board of study] meetings and the student rep meetings, and they don't understand the differences between them, and I think there's not necessarily a clear idea even between some of the senior staff. (SS)

This could lead to issues being raised in a setting where they cannot be dealt with appropriately:

... there needs to be an appropriate space [to voice issues]. And maybe some clearer guidelines. (T2L)

In addition, it was suggested that there was a lack of clarity on what the mechanisms are for getting a response to feedback given in meetings:

Are there any mechanisms in place if this happens, that's feedback, and there's an actual action about it? I'm not so sure. I'm not so sure there's a closed loop there. (T8)

The use of board of study meetings as a tool for obtaining student feedback was criticised because of the inability of many student representatives to

contribute in that setting. The idea that students did not always have the ability to speak for the group was raised by two teachers. This was seen as a skill needed, but not always found, in a representative:

...it is about having that ability to be an advocate for the group and to look at change. (T3L)

...they're having issues with their course rep because they reckon he's not voicing their opinions. (T1L)

The only example given of student representatives being able to effectively put across an argument in a constructive way was that of the trainee teachers, all of whom are mature students; younger students were seen to be at a disadvantage because of their lack of experience:

...can't put across their argument as well as people who have had experience elsewhere and are able to say, 'It would be so much better if we did this or this was done'. (T1L)

The NSS was briefly discussed but teachers said that many students were exempt from doing it as they were on a one-year course or had started on a one-year course before progressing to the full degree. It was suggested that students did not really understand the purpose of the NSS and to whom the results were directed:

I think it's hard to get them to understand I think what it is. (T3L)

I think they still think they're feeding back to the internal. Even though it's called the National Student Survey, and it's explaining a lot of times, 'This is for the national students, you know, it's countrywide'. (SS)

SS further explained that the difference between the internal module evaluation surveys and the NSS was not fully grasped, attributing this lack of understanding partly to teachers not explaining this sufficiently to students:

It's all been a bit muddled. ... it's trying to find, is it because it's not being pushed enough by the staff, so they understand the difference between module evaluations and NSS, because I could see how that could be. (SS)

SS used student representative meetings to explain the processes, but noted that only a small proportion of representatives attended:

For the reps that turned up, I did a sort of student rep training thing, so I put on three or four sessions, ... I'd explain the difference between them, how they were so important. (SS)

I have about 80 of them who have been given to me by name, and I don't think I've ever seen more than 25 in total ...some of them do repeatedly turn up because they see the difference, and others have turned up for really the one petty complaint, and then never turned up again. (SS)

Another complexity cited in relation to the processes was the administration of the survey and processing of data; timeliness of the data was affected by a long delay between the students completing the forms and the results being fed back to teachers:

...it takes too long from when they fill in something, for any information to actually get back to me. ... And then the changes happen too late, but they might happen for the next cohort in September. But this group can't see that actually I've responded to that, and I think that for me is where I find that a bit difficult. (T7L)

Complexity of responding to surveys

While one teacher commented that, on the occasions when a high number of students took part, module evaluation results gave a good overall picture, two others were not convinced, explaining how the approach taken by students was less than rigorous, at least in part because of the survey method. For example, surveys were said to force over-simplification and encourage a tick-box approach:

...if you have a black and white question you're going to get a black and white answer. (T3L)

As a result, students' approach to completing the module evaluations was seen to be superficial:

I think they kind of go, 'Mmm,' and then they just, 'There you go, done, done, done. Off we go,' sort of thing. (SS)

Written comments in response to the more open-ended questions were seen to improve the quality of the data but many students did not provide any:

'Oh, not another form, not another one of these things you've got to tick and, you know, it's as quick as I can tick through them and have them done ...' and when they get to the other side, and it's maybe more meaningful, they never write anything. Well, one sentence, you know. '[Maggie] was brilliant.' (T6L)

The length of time needed to complete the form was seen to have a negative effect:

It's quite a lengthy process, and if it was me doing it, by the end of it I'd just be on autopilot. (T5)

On thinking about the overall attitude of students to the survey, one teacher said that they thought that students were not trying to give an overall objective picture of what was going on, raising questions about the validity of the data:

Not on a form, no. ... it's just not the format that suits their purpose. (T6L)

When it came to giving a response to student feedback in the form of data from surveys such as the module evaluations, teachers discussed their sense of responsibility to decipher the feedback before they could act on it. They described their actions on receipt of feedback as quite a complex process of trying to decipher and evaluate the feedback in order to be in a position to decide what action to take. They spoke of the difficulty of detecting why an area may have been given a negative score, so they looked for comments to support the grading:

...if there's a clear supporting statement, ... And if I can identify something I could do differently, then I would endeavour certainly to do it differently. (T5)

I don't think I've seen anything that actually has helped me to build the modules. They are quite sparse [on comments]. (T8)

They spoke of trying to work out what may have given rise to the score, and tried to contextualise it:

Trying to take out what's really at the bottom of it. (T1L)

Is it to do perhaps with marking? So does somebody maybe need some more training to do with marking? Was perhaps the standardisation not as robust? (T7L)

Teachers also spoke of using their professional or subject knowledge to make a decision on the value of the feedback and the feasibility of acting upon it:

I'll look at what it is and then I will reflect on that. If it's about my module, I will look at it and try and contextualise that into what it's about ... I will always make sure it is taken in context, and then look to see is that feasible, is that a one-off, is that something that can be changed? (T2L)

...the feedback they can give us is valuable. What we do with that feedback, when we apply our current knowledge to that, is a different

matter. So what they think they're giving to us, which could be helpful, once you look at that on the more global scale, may not be that helpful, but it's certainly always helpful to listen because every single thing, whether it's normal feedback or a complaint, they're both feedback, and if you use them constructively, they're feedback. (T8)

They spoke of looking for additional evidence from other students, sometimes consulting the student representative, in the hope that they will provide a contextual understanding, or looking for patterns across cohorts:

I'll go to the student rep, and say 'we've got this feedback, do you know what that's about?' and see where that comes from. (T2L)

...we would need a lot of evidence to be able to do that, so we would look across all our cohorts for patterns or similarities in order to take that forward. (T7L)

Discussing the feedback with students showed teachers going through quite a complex process of trying hard to listen to what was being said but also trying to get across reasons why things were done a certain way in the first place:

I am able to sort of argue that back, but I'm also listening to what they're saying. But I have reasons as to why it is that way. (T7L)

5.6. Power

The theme of 'power' relates to how teachers see the power of student voice, and how they see their own power in relation to students. It also covers the influence that management actions can have on the teachers' sense of the balance of power.

Teacher assessment of the student sense of power

When teachers spoke of how students saw themselves, four commented that students seem to have a sense of entitlement to give feedback and make demands, assuming this to be driven by consumerism:

We seem to be much more about consumerism and managing expectations, and they feel now that they've actually got this right to speak and to be listened to and make these demands on what they want on the course. (T7L)

All listed student voice as one of a number of voices that should be taken into account:

...we have regular feedback from students, we have regular feedback from staff... we have to be communicating with our external examiners ... we're also going to the University so we have to comply with everything that they're asking of us. (T3L)

However, students were seen to assume their feedback was valid in that it would not enter their minds to rank it against other opinions:

I don't think they would dwell on what the employer thinks or what the tutor thinks, really. They would just give their feedback, so they would see that as important to them. (T5)

Two teachers commented on the power associated with groups. One thought that students saw group voice as having more power:

I think the fact that they can form a group and they can bounce ideas off each other and get strength from what each other is saying, and come forward with that. So I suppose if we're looking at a group voice, they have a lot of power, you know, and that's good. (T6L)

The idea that students could use this group power inappropriately was raised by the SS, saying that students tend to think of short-term impact only, sometimes causing problems as a chain of events would be set off:

..they can be very demanding, and they can be very short-sighted, I think, sometimes as well. They will come up with an issue and then you resolve it and they don't think about what might happen. So they've raised this issue, it's now being dealt with, but they haven't thought about the consequences of what that might result in. (SS)

Teachers pointed out that some students did not use opportunities to put forward their voice and therefore had less power. For example, the voice of mature students was not always heard because they were less likely to become student representatives as studies formed just one part of their busy lives:

...they have families, or they're working or...so I don't think they necessarily see the importance of it. I think they're far more 'get in, get the job done and get out again'. (T2L)

There was also a suggestion that students from different cultures may not be comfortable giving criticism, not feeling they have power to speak up:

They hold teachers in very high regard and would never dream of saying anything negative. (T6L)

Teachers acknowledged that students' sense of power and freedom to speak out may be inhibited by fear of consequences if they upset the person marking their work:

... there's power, obviously there's power. You know, we're marking the work. All teachers are marking their work so, you know, can they really be honest if we're marking the work?... I like to think that they can trust me and they do respect that I wouldn't abuse my power but, you know, there must be always that little ... I mean, I would have that little element of doubt, you know, just how much you could be honest. (T6L)

While the involvement of student representatives in the board of studies meeting was designed to give power to student voice, the setting was given as possibly reducing the student sense of power. Four teachers considered that students who were sufficiently confident to speak in a meeting environment were in the minority; most were likely to feel daunted in such a meeting:

...the students feel a little bit intimidated. They're sitting in a room with ... probably quite a few people they don't know and I think they find it intimidating and probably quite uncomfortable. (T1L)

The topics raised by representatives in meetings were said to be mostly non-academic issues, as students were not sufficiently confident to discuss academic issues:

It's car parking, travel, student areas, student common room, stuff like that. (T5)

[In meetings] it's mainly to do with resources. ... never in my experience have they ever raised anything specifically on the quality of the programme or the delivery of the modules, never. Because I don't think they feel confident to do so in that environment. (T4L)

Management influence on the power balance

The influence of management's actions on the balance of power was raised by three teachers, showing that they felt that management sometimes gave power to students inappropriately, with the result that teachers felt powerless. This was particularly noticeable in the discussion on complaints, as teachers said that management overreacted to negative feedback from students, with reasons being related to a fear of losing the money that came with student fees:

...the fear factor at the moment is if the management don't act on degree students' complaints, we're going to lose them and all that money's gone, and that's the problem. (T4L)

Overreaction to a student complaint was seen to carry the risk of causing division between students if one of them got favourable treatment simply because they complained:

She complained that she can't get a car space and every time she's in, she has a reserved car space now. That's creating a lot of division. So student voice is good, but there needs to be a measure of what you do. But we're so scared of losing students now, everything gets moved. The goalposts are moved. (T4L)

Two participants commented on the responsibility of management to be aware of the effect their response to student voice could have on teachers. There was seen to be risk of causing division between students and teachers, as teachers sometimes felt they were being sidelined and therefore felt powerless. There was a perception that an issue was more likely to be dealt with by management if it was raised by students than by teachers, meaning that student voice was stronger than 'teacher voice':

I believe what happens is, if a student makes a complaint, it gets sorted. If a member of staff makes a complaint about the same thing, it gets ignored. (T4L)

Teachers also felt their power reduced when the programme leader's role in solving student problems was neither acknowledged nor encouraged. It was noted that students were encouraged to bring their complaints directly to management rather than going initially to their teachers and programme leader to give them a chance to work through a problem before escalating it to management:

And I do believe there is a new strategy in HE Ops to very quickly act on any simmering complaints. Deal with it ... so complaints aren't something that everybody actually sees as a positive thing ... rather than it's a developmental thing that, you know, ... you need to work on a relationship to do that. So I think sometimes it feels like it's been taken out of house. (T6L)

This issue contributed to a more general feeling that management were more likely to comment on negative feedback rather than acknowledge the positive, which did nothing to empower the teacher:

But they virtually never turn it round the other way and say, 'Oh, your feedback for such and such, that was very good.' (T5)

5.7. Summary

Teachers' main reasons for involving students in the quality assurance processes were to make them feel valued, and to aid their development towards being useful members of society. They saw many students as apathetic about their involvement or only engaging through self-interest. Teachers spoke of students not being motivated to take part if they were generally happy. Teachers thought that an anonymous survey was the least stressful way for students to give feedback. They did, however, see students as being emotionally vulnerable in a number of ways, and believed this affected the objectivity of the feedback they gave. As a result, teachers found it a complex process to decipher student survey data in order to decide on the most appropriate response. Teachers were of the view that the student-teacher relationship was of great importance to students, and the quality of that relationship affected the feedback that a student gave on a module. Teachers emphasized the need to work relationally so that issues could be discussed and resolved in a timely manner, and where working through problems serves to build the relationship. They were concerned that management over-reacted to negative feedback with the consequence that teachers felt their contribution in working with students to resolve issues was not recognized.

Chapter 6: Manager perceptions of student involvement

6.1. Introduction

This chapter details the findings from six interviews with managers, revealing their perceptions in relation to the involvement of students in the quality assurance processes and how this affects their work with student feedback. Five main themes were identified with associated subthemes (see Table 6.1). The themes relate to managers' perceptions of the purpose of involving students, how they see their role, whether they see students as customers, the power they attribute to student voice and how they believe complexities can be overcome.

Table 6.1 Themes and subthemes

Theme	
1. Purpose	Overall purpose
	Purpose of involving students
2. Roles	Role of manager in obtaining feedback
	Role of manager in reacting to feedback
	Role of teacher
3. Student as customer	Manager view
	Customer responsibility
4. Power	Power attributed to student voice
	Student sense of empowerment
5. Complexity	Complexity of non-participation
	Complexity during participation
	Overcoming the complexity

Representatives from all levels of management were interviewed: two Area Heads, the Dean of Higher Education, one Vice Principal, the Principal and one Governor. Interviewees are normally referred to as managers, however, if it is important to the context, they are referred to more specifically as Governor, Area Head or Senior Manager, with the term Senior Manager being used to identify any one of the Principal, Vice Principal and Dean.

6.2. Purpose

The theme of purpose relates to the managers' views of the overall purpose of quality assurance and then their view of the purpose of involving students in the quality assurance processes. Managers believed they needed student involvement to obtain both information and a perspective that are difficult to obtain otherwise, and this can lead to improvements.

Overall purpose

All managers spoke of using quality assurance to give confidence, or assurance, that provision was good, with three adding that it was a means of providing evidence of this, using words such as 'evidence', 'demonstrating' or 'reporting':

At a strategic level it is so that senior management (including the university) have reasonable assurance that we are doing what we said we would do. (SM3)

... to try and demonstrate to the people who come here, the people who send their employees here that what we produce in terms of our education and training meets certain minimum standards. (AH1)

The idea of meeting external standards or guidelines was commented on by three managers:

... trying to meet the inspection guidelines and improvement guidelines at the same time. (AH2)

Senior Managers discussed taking responsibility for the strategic action of setting criteria and measuring against them, then deciding if actions are needed to improve performance:

Setting out what is an appropriate, hopefully ambitious, deal for our students to get, and then measuring how well we are meeting those various targets and criteria, and putting in necessary actions and interventions to make sure that is happening. (SM2)

All managers spoke of management needing to take responsibility for ensuring that quality was good, and for deciding how to respond to quality assurance data:

... someone needs to take responsibility as you go up through the different layers, you then need to have someone higher up in the organization giving that oversight of the whole, so they can make some key judgements, look

at areas that are generally good and areas that are not generally good.
(SM1)

Purpose of involving students

Three managers related quality to meeting student expectations, and the need to know what the aims of students are in the first place:

...it's around making sure that they're getting the quality of teaching, content – the actual programme itself – that the content has the right level of quality in it to meet the aims and objectives of those students and of the programme. (G)

There's just no point in doing what we do if we're not meeting the students' expectations. (AH1)

Involving students in module evaluations was seen as a way of obtaining information about what happens in classes:

...the students are there all the time and if something is highlighted and flagged by the majority of the students then it gives us a clear sign that something might need changing. (AH1)

Further information was obtained from student representatives attending boards of study or learner voice groups and all agreed that engaging in dialogue in that setting gave an understanding of the student view:

... certainly when they're there it's good to get an interaction because then we can ask them, well just explained that a little bit more, what do you mean and that can give a little bit more info. (AH1)

The reassurance gained from getting feedback from students was raised, with managers wanting to hear the student perspective, both during their time as a student and after they complete. This can provide encouragement that what you are doing is working:

... it's nice to get the feedback from the students and employers that it is still relevant or I wish I'd done this for an overview. It's also nice from a managerial point of view to know that the students are happy on their course as they're progressing. (AH2)

It was suggested that complaints should be seen as valuable, as, when students determinedly make demands, this is likely to lead to change that is of benefit to the organization:

I don't worry about complaints, because complaints should be seen as a catalyst for change. ... if we look at a recent set of complaints, it actually

resulted in a positive outcome for the students, and in essence actually for the organization. (SM3)

However, the same manager pointed out that not all complainants were motivated by a desire to bring improvement, citing an example where a student had personal financial difficulty, lodging a vexatious complaint against staff, to make financial gain:

In essence, their complaint was financially motivated, and they went for the man or woman rather than deal with the situation they had actually created. (SM3)

A further value suggested was that students could bring ideas for solving problems. One Senior Manager acknowledged that it was useful to consult students on issues raised, as they could often see solutions that managers could not:

I will nearly always go back to students, when they raise issues, and say 'what do you think the solution should be? What do you think we should do about this?' because often they come up with the right answer. We could scratch our heads forever, but they nearly always have really good suggestions. (SM2)

With regard to the NSS, Senior Managers saw value in students engaging as it provides a way of benchmarking and measuring the quality of provision. The importance was explained in relation to the monitoring carried out by College Executive and the partner university:

... it's just a performance indicator. But strategically it's important, because College Exec measure it and understand it, and the university measure it and understand it. (SM3)

However, when Area Heads mentioned the NSS, they claimed it did not impact on their programmes significantly, because of the small number of students eligible to participate. They thought of the NSS in relation to its value to their own department, rather than its value in benchmarking externally. One also questioned the relevance of that particular survey for an institution such as this:

... it's a national survey really aimed about student life and because we're a small, mixed economy college we're not a purpose built university or an established university. We don't have the infrastructure for the students. (AH2)

6.3. Roles

The theme of roles reveals that managers have a clear view of their responsibility to obtain student feedback and respond to it. They also spoke of the role of the teacher in responding to feedback.

Role of manager in obtaining feedback

Two managers highlighted that it was the responsibility of management to define what they actually want to find out using quality assurance processes, before designing the questions to meet those requirements:

... let's forget about quality assurance, what do we really want to know?
And ask those questions. (G)

Managers acknowledged their responsibility to provide a range of feedback mechanisms to encourage participation:

And student voice in this college is really a way of trying to capture their opinions, so we have various forums and meetings, and representation from student bodies where we can get a feel of how different students from different groups and a range of subjects are feeling about a range of things. (SM1)

Managers recognized that not all students took up opportunities for involvement, and they felt a responsibility to explain the value and increase participation:

I guess the first challenge is trying to persuade students that it is worth their time to do it. ... Would all students in this college say they know their feedback is really valuable? I suspect not – I suspect some would say that and some wouldn't. ... I think we probably need to reinforce it more actually. (SM1)

The big challenge is getting them to participate in the quality regime. (SM3)

Explaining the process behind a survey was seen as another way managers could encourage student involvement:

When the students find out [who sees results etc.] then they tend to be more cooperative. Just give them a piece of paper with smiley faces on and say, 'Please tick the boxes, we need to know your thoughts on this module', then not a lot tends to happen or they just tend to whizz through it. (AH2)

It was suggested that an incentive might persuade the students to complete surveys, but no suggestions were made of the form that incentive might take:

So that's the first hurdle, to persuade people to actually come along to those conversations. Sometimes an incentive can help. (SM1)

Senior Managers saw it as part of their role to meet with students who requested an opportunity to go directly to them, rather than go through the normal quality assurance channels, with one having an open door policy:

... if a student dropped me a line and said 'can I come and talk to you?' I wouldn't say 'no'. (SM2)

There won't be a day go past where there won't be a student pops their head in the door and will say I like this or I don't like this, what are you going to do about it? (SM3)

Role of manager in reacting to feedback

Four managers considered the actions they take as a result of feedback from students. They discussed the need to first ensure they know exactly what was meant by the feedback, especially if it came from a survey. This could involve talking to students or discussing with teachers:

The surveys are fine in that they give a headline picture, but really the work around them needs to be taken down to course level, because they are only giving us an indication and they do need further drilling down. (SM1)

So speaking to [students] I understand the problem. (AH1)

The need for a considered response to an individual's feedback was highlighted, so they could be confident that actions taken as a result will affect the right people:

It may be one student raising a concern because he or she has particular needs and they're not being met, you focus in and deal with that, with the relevant staff members who can help. If it is a student speaking on behalf of a whole group, your approach in responding might be quite different. (SM2)

When you're trying to change a process in a big way, or spend money, something a bit less personal perhaps, process or policy-wise, you might want to check that you're not changing something that will affect hundreds of people on the basis of one person's opinion. (G)

All managers agreed that students need a response to feedback and saw that as a factor that made them feel valued and motivated to participate:

... the worst things you can do, the first is not asking, 'nobody asked me, I've never been asked for my opinion', but the second worst thing is to ask for an opinion and then not say anything about it, 'you asked my opinion, and then you ignored me. So I don't think I'm valued, I'm ignored. I don't

understand why you want me to engage in this process, and I'm not engaging anymore.' (G)

The importance of making a considered response to feedback and communicating it in a confident way was described:

So management need to demonstrate that the decision you got to was a considered position ... you considered and placed an evaluation framework around the feedback that you got. And you got to the point where you evaluated it and you communicated that this is what we're going to do. (G)

The consideration of the response given to students included the idea that communicating with the students and explaining decisions made resulted in their acceptance of the outcome, even if it was negative:

... if the students feel they've been listened to they don't mind if the answer is no in the end as long as you explain and justify why you've said no. (AH2)

When Senior Managers spoke of survey data it was clear they took it seriously, using it to measure against benchmarks and to identify problem areas. They commented that when they look at survey data they are looking for inconsistencies and problems that need to be addressed:

... mainly you are looking for areas that are underperforming, either compared with other areas within the college, or compared with the previous year's data, to see if there's a decline or an increase, or compared to some national average. (SM2)

I'm looking for improvement, and identification of areas for improvement. (SM3)

While Senior Managers spoke of this type of response as a normal and constructive approach, one Area Head expressed concern on how Senior Management respond to Area Heads about the results of student surveys, seeing it as problematic that the negative was more likely to be highlighted than any positive feedback:

It seems to be very negative driven at a higher level. ... So there's always the negative that gets highlighted and not the positive. (AH2)

Role of teacher

The role of teachers and programme leaders was raised by five managers, with the programme leader being expected to decide on remedial actions:

The expectation is at course level that a course leader will review the module evaluations, and come up with a module evaluation action plan, which will be approved by the Area Head and the Area Head will produce an action plan which covers the whole of that programme. (SM3)

All teachers were expected to welcome student feedback and respond appropriately to it, making changes where justified. Four managers were positive about the response of the majority of teachers, believing they used it to help them improve their practice:

I would say confidently that the majority of teachers do. There may be some teachers in the organization who don't put as much value on it, but I think they are in a small minority. I think the majority of teachers really value honest feedback, because it helps them reflect, it helps them refine what they're doing to then help the students. (SM1)

I got a very definite sense that [the teacher I spoke to] sees that avenue of feedback as integral to achieving continuous improvement in the programme that she is offering. (G)

One Senior Manager, however, had a view that differed from the others, and thought that only some teachers valued feedback:

I think some embrace it, understand it and use it and accept it for what it is, realising that even as a teacher you're not perfect. There'll be things that you don't know, there'll be things you can improve on and there's always the risk that you'll have a bad day. (SM3)

Other teachers, however, were seen as not recognizing that they have a responsibility to respond to feedback, or just being unable to cope with it:

There are some who are so arrogant that they will not respond to anyone, ... Others find it difficult to cope with the feedback that students give them, and that probably is wrapped up more in their own self-esteem, and there are those that ... just don't recognize that there is something wrong. (SM3)

This Senior Manager further explained that teachers found it difficult to accept criticism of their teaching:

A complaint when they're talking to a tutor, should be effective if the tutor responds, except in the circumstances where the complaint is about the tutor, in which case the tutor will ignore that complaint. Also, the sensitivities around people do not like students commenting on their ability to teach or not. (SM3)

6.4. Student as customer

The theme of student as customer shows the extent to which managers see students as customers and how that affects how they involve students in the quality processes. It also shows whether managers think students take their responsibility as customers seriously.

Manager view

All managers either used the word 'customer' or referred to students paying for the course. Senior Managers related their comments to how they saw the identity of students as being that of a customer of the college, and portrayed the college as a business. They used the terms 'customers' or 'paying' to show that the college had a duty to provide both good quality education and good customer service:

...ultimately the aim is to provide a level of education to students that are paying for that education, particularly in higher education. (G)

What students think and their feedback is probably the most important thing to us as a college, because they are our customers. They're actually what we're here for, so their opinion really counts. (SM1)

I think as a minimum we must respond to students when they raise things. Otherwise it's just not good customer service, with my running a business hat on. It's not how you deserve to get repeat business. (SM2)

To further embed the idea that students are customers, it was stated that students are the best judges of the quality of provision:

The best judges of quality are those who are receiving it, and that would be our students. Ultimately those are the ones who are paying the bill, and those are the people who should have a significant input into the quality aspects of their education. (SM3)

While Area Heads did not refer directly to students as customers, they said students sometimes raised the fact that they are paying for the programme, arguing that they have an entitlement, either to certain provision or to choose how to use their time:

I think the senior management here would like probably to see a bit more engagement. But I wonder of the effectiveness of that, especially with full-time students and the demands on their time from employment, from college, from the social life. Yes, sometimes it's 'look I've paid my money, I'm here to learn, I want the qualification', fine. (AH1)

Five managers mentioned that a high student satisfaction rate meant that the college is meeting student expectations, with this being related to how students feel as well as how they achieve. Therefore finding out what students want, and providing it, was important:

Students have a perception of what they want out of their HE experience, and it's important for us to know a bit more about what that expectation is, and are we measuring up to that. (SM2)

... in any service provision ... you want to make sure that they feel that they are getting what they were promised, that they are going to come out of that programme having learnt what they were told they would be taught. (G)

Student satisfaction was linked with the reputation of the college, as satisfied students would talk of the college in a favourable way:

... if you have a satisfied student, a satisfied student cohort, when they leave they will hopefully recommend [this college] and the courses that we do as a place to come, a place to study. (AH1)

Placing importance on student satisfaction would lead to changing aspects of the provision that students don't like:

If there's something generally not to the students' liking, it needs to be changed. (AH1)

It could also result in a student claiming that they did not receive what they had expected, and this would be dealt with in a commercial way by giving financial compensation:

Sometimes you can't put things right, because students have reached the end of the line and they've moved on, and the only way you can put things right is in that commercial way, and say ok, it didn't meet your expectations, and we feel we're partly to blame for that, and here's half your money back, which does happen. (SM2)

One Senior Manager found it disappointing that not everyone recognized students as customers:

Most people in education fail to recognize that a degree is either a product or a service. They view it as an educational process. They don't see students, for example, as customers, they see them as, inverted commas, 'students undergoing an academic process'. (SM3)

Customer responsibility

While managers agreed that students should be treated as customers by ensuring provision was good quality, that they should have input into what

that quality was, and that the college should aim for a high student satisfaction rate, one Senior Manager went further to say that students don't take their responsibilities as customers sufficiently seriously. This manager believed students should equip themselves not just to give feedback on the education received, but to define the requirements of that education in the first place. This would shift the responsibility for the quality of the programme away from management to the student body themselves:

... let's assume that they're consumers and they're going to buy a car, I think they'll be able to pretty well define what it is they want, what colour it is, they will tell you if they want petrol, diesel, three wheels, four wheels, big or small, they'll give you an idea how long they would like it to last and how much they would like to pay for it, so they define their customer requirements, but unfortunately in education, we define those customer requirements, in terms of what we're prepared to offer them, and they don't negotiate anything beyond that, so the responsibility is theirs, but almost they delegate that responsibility to us, as all-knowing and all-seeing academics. (SM3)

The same Senior Manager considered that the customer-student should take responsibility for measuring the quality of the programme by engaging with the quality assurance processes. Lack of student involvement was seen as a problem, as it meant that management had to make decisions on their behalf, taking on responsibility that was not appropriate:

... they need to engage with the quality aspects of their programme, because if we can't get them to engage, we have to make a judgement call in terms of how well we're performing in the delivery of that programme, and also in terms of meeting the longer term outcomes of their career prospects. And in essence, we then become responsible for shaping their career, almost by default. (SM3)

6.5. Power

The theme of power reveals the weight given to student voice by managers, what they think of the student's sense of empowerment and what affects this.

Power attributed to student voice

Three managers commented on the importance of not treating student feedback in isolation, or giving it sole power, but rather having a range of sources of information so that findings can be triangulated to obtain a full picture:

As long as everybody is aware of the requirements, I think it should be a multi-faceted approach with everybody participating from the managers that have got oversight, the team that are doing the delivery and the students that are receiving it. It's very hard to do it to reflect on something from just one point of view. (AH2)

... validating that by triangulating it against other sources of information (G)

One manager explained that, if best value is to be obtained from feedback, someone has to decide who will be asked for what feedback, explaining that different people can give different types of feedback, so the requirements must be clear:

So you need to ask yourself, 'why do I need this feedback?' and then decide who are the best people or groups of people, that will have more weighting, or gravitas or skill or personal experience, or whatever – it depends what you need them to bring to the table. (G)

Student sense of empowerment

When discussing how students saw the status of their own feedback, managers said students exhibited a sense of entitlement and felt within their rights to give feedback, displaying a sense of empowerment:

... I would say that certainly those HE students were keen to be heard, and were confident enough to be heard. (G)

Managers commented that this sense of empowerment could lead to students approaching Senior Managers directly. It was suggested that this may be because they have tried other routes and were not happy with the response, or because they just wanted to make sure their voice is heard.

Senior Managers showed that they were careful not to turn anyone away:

I think sometimes students just value the opportunity – they kind of want to go to the highest point, so if they can see the Principal they just feel they have had their message heard. (SM1)

... when they make complaints, when things aren't going so well and they have felt the necessity to raise concerns that they have either copied me onto or have written directly to me, because they are concerned that they might not necessarily get the response that they want, or they've not had the response they want when they've gone through the process to others. (SM2)

Managers also said that students assumed their own feedback to be credible and valid, and equal in power to that of anyone else:

I would imagine ... that those students would categorically argue that their feedback is as valid as anybody else's. (G)

... one of the problems is with feedback is when it's given the giver automatically assumes that it's correct. (AH2)

One manager pointed out that by taking student complaints seriously, an organization is actually giving power to the students. This can be a good thing, but an abuse of that power can have negative consequences for the people concerned:

But along with power comes responsibility, and I have had students exercise power inappropriately against individuals, and that causes a lot of problems. (SM3)

It was acknowledged by one Senior Manager that individual students could maximise their power by bypassing the normal quality assurance processes and going directly to a member of College Executive:

... that does have a big impact when it goes at college exec level. When they voice their views at that level, things do happen. (SM3)

Managers recognized that there were times when students felt a lack of power, for example showing a fear that if they complain it will have a detrimental effect on them:

That if they raise complaints in particular that they might be marked down on their next piece of work, even though we try to provide every reassurance possible that we'll keep an eye on that and it won't happen, but there is a perception, if I complain, someone has my future in their hands. (SM2)

The managers therefore emphasized the need for feedback methods to allow students to give information easily and anonymously, seeing this as the solution to the problem of student fears:

I think some of those concerns go away when it's anonymous and they genuinely believe it's anonymous. I think in quite small groups they will still have concerns that they might be identified in giving feedback. And they're responding to a set of questions that we put in front of them, and so we're inviting constructive, probably, but criticism nonetheless. (SM2)

6.6. Complexity

The theme of complexity relates to what complexities managers saw in the involvement of students in the quality processes. All acknowledged some

difficulties in obtaining good quality student feedback, but the main belief was that much of the complexity can be overcome by having surveys with a high response rate and looking at the majority view.

Complexity of non-participation

The fact that some students did not get involved added complexity to the process. Area Heads suggested that students were less likely to engage if they thought that nothing would be done:

If they're constantly asked about the quality of the library then they've constantly put bad and over four years there's no change or no perceived change because it is about managing expectations as well. If they can't perceive an outcome then it is going to naturally devalue it, it would for me so I don't see why it wouldn't for them. (AH2)

A second suggestion was that if students are generally satisfied, they did not see the point of engaging:

...if they are satisfied with the course and if it's meeting their requirements, their expectations, they sometimes don't see the need for a student voice. (AH1)

These managers were of the opinion that the threshold for students feeling the need to report feedback was lower for negative feedback compared to positive, so students were more likely to feel the need to communicate problems rather than successes, therefore good goes unreported:

A lot of the time students come to a board of study, they come with negative or complaints, things they want corrected. (AH2)

One Senior Manager also recognized that students were more motivated to give feedback if they had a complaint rather than a compliment:

We do have some lovely compliments in the college, but they're always less than complaints, because if somebody's got a concern, they want to have a discussion about it, whereas with compliments, people just often don't think to do it. (SM1)

Area Heads raised a complexity in trying to involve students as representatives, suggesting that many students, being local and employed, saw the degree as a means to an end and only one part of their life, so student life was not their priority, making it less likely that they would bother to participate:

I wouldn't say it's a reluctance to have a student voice, but almost a sense of why do I need to do this from the students. The students are here generally for one thing and that is to get their qualification and move forward with their career or join employment. (AH1)

One Area Head suggested that, even if a student had agreed to be listed as a representative, it did not guarantee their participation, as they may have been pressured into the position:

It's either the student that's not there at the time, that's nominated by their fellow students or it's the more vocal student that everybody thinks 'they can go because they won't be scared to talk up'. ... You either get somebody that wants to be there and wants to chip in or you'll get somebody that doesn't want to be there and therefore doesn't turn up because they didn't volunteer in the first place. They were nominated in absence. (AH2)

Complexity during participation

Another complexity was seen in that, when students do give feedback in meetings, they prioritised general issues rather than academic matters, with no suggestions being made as to why this was:

... concerns for students are like for the rest of us, it's often things like the food, the parking, all those kind of things. (SM1)

...that's the stuff they're interested in, not the content of their degree – that's what I find frustrating. Why will they not engage with their degree? Are these other things so important that it distracts them so much, or is the quality of the teaching, learning and assessment so good that they've actually got nothing else to worry about? (SM3)

Although a survey was generally accepted as a useful tool, two managers saw some complexity added by the module evaluation process, the timing of the survey did not allow them to act meaningfully on the findings:

...it's a bit late after the module has finished to find out that they didn't enjoy the module. (AH2)

It was also suggested that responding to student feedback could be complex because of a lack of objectivity on the part of some students. Two aspects were raised: firstly, that anyone giving feedback is putting forward their opinion, perhaps influenced by either their own purposes or by group influences, and secondly, that the feedback given is not always an objective measurement of the situation:

Everybody has their own agenda when they're offering an opinion. They may or may not be objective. They may or may not be skilled. They may or may not have the experience on which they are giving an opinion. (G)

... sometimes a group who are representing one area perhaps can become less objective, can be a little subjective because they have all talked about it amongst themselves and got a bit of a view. (SM1)

Another aspect that caused complexity for managers responding to student feedback was the poor grasp that students had of the broader context in which they are situated, and how this affects their feedback. This was raised by all managers recognizing the limited understanding students have of the pressures and influences operating on and in the college, resulting in them making unrealistic requests. This was seen as inevitable, meaning that managers would need to explain the context and give reasons for decisions:

People can offer opinion that is valid opinion, but perhaps they don't appreciate the wider context. (G)

... students have a fairly narrow view of the organization, it's the bit that they're studying in, the level they're studying at, and they don't always see where things fit in and they don't necessarily know what challenges we face as an organization, so, it's not about saying 'well, you don't get it, you're not right' but it is about explaining that there are certain restrictions on what we can do. (SM2)

Managers also related this to the students' understanding of their subject area and its relevance to industry:

Trying to explain that it is important when it comes to contracts, just trying to explain the relevance of it, but they couldn't at one point see how the ... law was anything to do with their industry, but of course it is. (AH1)

Overcoming the complexity

When considering ways to find out what students think, Senior Managers all thought surveys were an effective way to overcome much of the complexity and to get a general view of the quality of provision. The findings were seen to be reliable if the survey was anonymous and the response rate was high:

I would say that's the way we get as cohesive a picture as possible, that is hopefully more of a general view. We get quite large numbers filling in surveys, so that gives us a fairly good spread of views. (SM1)

... the more people you can get to engage, the more value you're going to get out of it, basically if you send out a survey for example to 1000 people and 10 people reply, you're probably going to be making decisions that don't correlate to the rest of the population. (G)

Inviting students to participate in surveys in a routine manner was considered to be the best way to get an unbiased assessment of the situation:

We shouldn't ever assume that just because students aren't telling us, that they're happy or unhappy, ... which is why we put things in front of students that don't rely on them instigating comment so we can get that information. ... I do think you tend to get a more rounded view of how things are going from a broader, group-based, anonymous feedback, rather than just relying on those that are courageous enough or disgruntled enough to come and knock on a door or send a letter or send an email. (SM2)

With regard to differences in feedback, it was recognized that sometimes feedback from students would not be identical, even within one group.

However, when dealing with survey results, this was not really seen as a problem, as managers found value in looking at the majority view:

I suppose it would be true to say that if we feel that a high number of learners are finding something positive and it is only a small number who are not, we would make the assumption that generally that thing is doing what it should do. (SM1)

I personally put more weight on group opinions because when it comes to individuals it could be a misconception, a misunderstanding, could be a personality clash with the person that's delivering it. (AH2)

6.7. Summary

Managers spoke of quality assurance as a tool that helped them monitor provision and provide evidence for both internal and external use. None questioned the need to involve students in the process. They believed that dealing with students as customers was a way of improving quality, although the idea of student-as-customer was interpreted differently by different managers. Senior Managers were willing to see students who approached them directly with feedback, believing that this would lead to early resolution of problems. Managers realized that some students did not seem to want to engage and that many seemed predisposed to give negative feedback. However, they believed that the most effective way to gain a realistic view of the quality of a programme was to have a high volume of responses in an anonymous survey and look at the majority view. Managers expected teachers to use student feedback to improve their practice, but different opinions were given on how teachers reacted to such feedback.

Chapter 7: Discussion

7.1. Introduction

This study focused on student involvement in the quality assurance processes in HE in FE, aiming to gain a holistic understanding of the pertinent issues through answering the following research questions:

- What are the perceptions of students of their involvement in the quality assurance processes?
- What are the perceptions of teachers of student involvement in the quality assurance processes?
- What are the perceptions of managers of student involvement in the quality assurance processes?

This chapter discusses the findings from each of these three research questions and then synthesizes key points to show how further conclusions can be drawn from comparing the perceptions of the three groups: students, teachers and managers. The strengths and limitations of the research are discussed, suggestions are made for further research in this area, and recommendations for professional practice are made.

7.2. Research question 1

What are the perceptions of students of their involvement in the quality assurance processes?

Purpose of student involvement

Students were emphatic that their involvement in quality assurance made a constructive contribution to the programmes and the college in general, and believed the contribution they made to quality assurance was to provide management with information that would help them improve the provision. They wanted to believe that management valued it for that reason, rather than merely using it for bureaucratic or marketing purposes. Students had a clear expectation that their feedback should be taken seriously and that management would communicate with them about it; if they saw this happening, they were motivated to engage.

Student representatives were motivated by a belief they could speak up better than others and had a better idea of what could be improved. Previous research (King and Widdowson, 2012; Parry et al., 2012) has shown that HE in FE has a high proportion of mature and part-time students, and this study has shown that issues associated with such students, for example family and work responsibilities and lack of free time, were cited as factors that resulted in representatives being easily discouraged or distracted from their duties. Although they defended the value of their role, this led to their groups showing misunderstanding and dissatisfaction with their representative. The misunderstandings were exacerbated by differences of opinion among representatives themselves as to their role in meetings; while some believed they should pass on everything the group said, others thought they had a responsibility to filter and prioritise. This tendency for representatives to make their own decisions about how to carry out their role contributed to the role being undermined in the eyes of fellow students and teachers.

Students' underlying conviction that the purpose of their involvement in the quality assurance processes was to bring improvement has led to a concentration on negative issues rather than positive. When asked for feedback through surveys or in meetings, discussion showed that students were not necessarily trying to give an objective representation of their experience. Instead they took a deficit approach, considering that they were expected to point out problem areas, and not seeing value in their participation if the provision was already good.

Student as customer

Students spoke of themselves as customers needing value for money, but did not show a full customer identity. In agreement with the consumerist case, they believed that satisfied students would be a sign of high quality provision, and that management would want to know what student expectations are, with a view to meeting them. However, while students expected student voice to be powerful, they did not expect absolute power; they accepted that others would have power in areas relevant to their expertise, and that management would ultimately make the decisions. This

was considered acceptable if they could see student voice being taken seriously by being discussed, published, and changes being made as a result.

Complexity of surveys

Students saw their participation in the quality assurance processes as complex. While academics have previously argued that student satisfaction survey data is not as straightforward as white papers such as 'Success as a Knowledge Economy' (BIS, 2016) would suggest, no previous study has revealed the underlying conviction of students on this matter. Students in this study showed confusion with the processes, admitting that this affected their engagement. They acknowledged that the complexity of the student body and of an individual's thoughts both affected how they engaged and led to further complexity for those who had to respond. They recognized that making sense of student feedback is not straightforward, and expected someone to take responsibility for interpreting it and using it to good effect.

Students realised they sometimes had an emotional response when giving feedback; just being asked to complete a questionnaire about their experience made some students panic as they realised their thoughts are too complex to be confined to tick boxes and brief comments. They admitted that this sometimes led to them completing it superficially or not at all. This effect was magnified if they felt they were being pushed to complete it or were rushed through the process, as they thought value was being attributed to the procedure rather than the content. Having been told that a survey was for their benefit, they felt it should be optional; being pushed to do it convinced them it was for someone else's benefit, evoking a negative reaction.

Students revealed that anonymity of feedback caused emotional stress. They spoke of feeling concerned that once they submitted an anonymous piece of feedback about a teacher, they lost control of it, and feared it would be used in a way they had never intended, allowing the possibility that management might overreact, with consequences for the teacher's job.

Relationships

Students acknowledged that good quality relationships with their teachers resulted in satisfaction with the programme. They had the impression that management did not recognize how much teachers knew about the needs of students. Students valued personal interaction, and saw opportunities to take part in dialogue about their programme and experience as making an effective contribution, giving opportunity to work through issues while also developing their relationship with the teachers, programme leaders or managers involved in the discussions. This positive response to the relational approach to feedback gathering contrasted with the angst shown towards the survey approach. On the whole, students were shown to relate more easily to a method that respected them as individuals with complex thoughts and needs rather than a method such as a survey where they are one of a number of anonymous respondents.

7.3. Research question 2

What are the perceptions of teachers of student involvement in the quality assurance processes?

Purpose of student involvement

Teachers said that involving students would help to maintain and improve standards, and provide evidence to fulfil bureaucratic purposes. However, they did not see this as the main purpose of student involvement. Instead, they involved students to make them feel valued and to provide part of their development, through participation in discussion and negotiation with other stakeholders. They acknowledged that many students seemed apathetic about opportunities to contribute, not seeming to understand the purpose of their engagement, and only participating for short term benefit for themselves or their group. They showed disappointment that more students did not take on the role for their own benefit. Teachers recognized that students in general were more likely to want to give feedback if they were dissatisfied, but offered no explanation other than there being a natural human tendency to be negative. Programme leaders wanted representatives who act as

objective spokespersons for a group, but noted that it was difficult to get students to engage in this way. Programme leaders whose representatives did engage, spoke of using regular contact to ensure everything ran smoothly, but noted that those representatives rarely attended board of study meetings, giving management the impression that they were not engaged. Programme leaders attributed the non-attendance to being an unintended consequence that resulted from representatives feeling that problems were dealt with at programme level.

Student as customer

Primarily teachers saw students not as customers, but as internal stakeholders and developing citizens. Teachers did refer to the fact that students are paying for the course and would therefore have certain expectations. Those expectations, however, may be immature or short-sighted due to their lack of experience, with the result that student satisfaction could not be taken as a straightforward measure of quality. Student voice was considered by teachers to be valuable and have power provided it was considered as one of many voices and its limitations were sufficiently recognized by all involved. They also recognized that there are reasons why students may feel a lack of power at times and that it affects what they say and do. As internal stakeholders, they wanted students to feel that they are a valued part of the institution and could contribute to matters that affect them, as agrees with the political-realist case (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). As developing citizens, they wanted students to learn through their involvement, in agreement with the democratic and consequentialist case (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013).

Complexity of surveys

Teachers described gathering and responding to student survey feedback as quite a complex process. The complexity of the student body meant that teachers felt they could not take feedback from one student or one group of students as representative of others. They felt they had to interpret student feedback while keeping in mind that students had a limited view of both the educational context and the business context of the college. Further

complexities were seen to arise from students' lack of clarity and understanding about the processes, and their reluctance to participate. Being aware of these issues meant that teachers went through a complex process of trying to decipher student feedback in order to decide on the most appropriate response. In speaking of student surveys, teachers showed more engagement with the module evaluation surveys than NSS, finding NSS less immediately relevant to their practice.

A tension was created as teachers tried to respond to survey feedback. Teachers wanted their students to be happy, and wanted the credibility that comes with good survey results, but were aware of the complexity of working with students, leading them to simultaneously want to see high satisfaction rates while also mistrusting the simplified feedback that comes in the form of questionnaire data. As a result, teachers trying to meet the expectation of management that they respond to negative survey results by changing their practice found a tension as they tried to reconcile what the data were saying with what they knew through their professional knowledge and experience.

The anonymity of a survey was seen by teachers as a factor that minimises any emotional trauma on the part of the student, although they did believe that the objectivity of feedback given could be influenced by emotion. Teachers saw students as being emotionally vulnerable in a number of ways, such as trying to cope with the learning experience and the difficulty inherent in getting to grips with new knowledge and skills, or dealing with subject matter that may challenge their established way of thinking or raise issues from their past. They also noted that students were likely to have an emotional response to attempts to persuade them to participate in the processes. Teachers admitted that they themselves sometimes had an emotional response to receiving feedback from students.

Relationships

Teachers believed that the student-teacher relationship was of great importance to students, and the quality of that relationship affected the feedback that a student gave on a module. Teachers emphasized the need

to work relationally so that issues could be discussed and resolved in a timely manner, where working through problems serves to build the relationship, with the result that students will accept a resolution even if it does not seem to be in their favour. The member of support staff formed a view of the student-teacher relationship through their work to take feedback from students and bringing it to teachers; in this case some teachers appeared to give little value to the feedback. It is worth noting that no teacher discussed receiving feedback through the member of support staff, so no direct comparison of views can be made.

Programme leaders reported dissatisfaction with the practice of senior managers who reacted to students who approached them directly with complaints. They expressed a concern that they were being sidelined, with their contribution in working with students to resolve issues not being recognized. Rather than managers reacting in this way, programme leaders wanted problems to be directed to themselves so that they could work through them with students, seeing this as having the dual benefit of dealing with the issue and developing the relationship.

7.4. Research question 3

What are the perceptions of managers of student involvement in the quality assurance processes?

Purpose of student involvement

Managers believed that involving students in the quality assurance processes provides them with evidence that they can use to meet the needs of both internal management and external monitoring. The student representative role was viewed positively, but managers revealed that how it worked out in practice did not match their expectations. They looked to representatives to give an objective representation of their group's experience, but noted that this did not always happen, as representatives either did not fully engage with the role, or they concentrated on negative aspects of operational and practical issues, to the neglect of discussing academic issues. Some managers had no explanation for this apparent unwillingness to engage in

discussion about their programme, but others recognized this as an understandable result of their lack of academic knowledge and experience. Managers recognized that dissatisfied students were more likely to give feedback than those who were generally happy, but considered that to be a reaction common to most people, and they tried to use even seemingly negative feedback to stimulate change and improvement.

Student as customer

Managers believed that dealing with students as customers was the best way to improve the quality of their provision. This led them to see it as valuable to know what student expectations are and try to meet them, as is consistent with the consumerist case (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). For managers, a high student satisfaction rating is not only desirable, but is also a demonstration of high quality provision. This is consistent with the consumerist view of the Government, which holds that student satisfaction measures are a valid means of driving up quality (BIS, 2011; Mark, 2013).

Different managers had different interpretations of 'student as customer'. Area heads said that students saw themselves as customers, relating it to the sense of entitlement they exhibit. Senior Managers referred to students as customers, believing they had a responsibility to provide good customer service and ensure students were satisfied with their experience. One senior manager, however, added that student-customers had a responsibility to define their customer requirements and demand that the college provides them with the learning and general experience that meets those requirements. Seeing that students did not take up this responsibility, especially in terms of defining their academic requirements, was a source of disappointment to this manager, as it meant that the responsibility defaulted back to the college.

Although they held a view of student as customer, managers believed that student voice was one source of information among many that they used to make decisions about quality. They thought students exhibited a sense of empowerment, expecting their voice to be heard, and were occasionally seen

to abuse the power they had. Managers acknowledged that there were some situations where students felt less power and had fears relating to giving feedback. It was suggested by one Area Head that Senior Managers magnified the power of student voice by reacting to those students who approached them directly rather than through the normal channels.

Complexity of surveys

Managers saw surveys as a useful way of obtaining information about what was actually going on and helping them measure if they were meeting student expectations. While managers spoke of the value they gained from consulting students to find solutions to problems raised, they were also aware that there were complexities inherent in trying to get valid and reliable student feedback, and cited reasons why students may not always want to participate and how they may not always give an objective opinion when they do. However, they believed that students on the whole completed them objectively, as anonymity would remove any fears they may have that would prevent them saying what they truly felt. In addition, they believed that giving surveys routinely would mean that it was not just those who were particularly disgruntled who completed them, in agreement with Cunningham (2015). Therefore, the most effective way to overcome any complexities related to surveys was to have a high volume of responses in an anonymous survey and then look at the majority view to gain a measure of the quality of the provision.

Relationships

Managers spoke of teachers as one aspect of student experience that was reported on. They spoke of a hierarchy and an expected procedure with different staff carrying different responsibilities as part of the processes. Senior Managers were expected to scrutinize survey results to find areas for improvement and ensure appropriate action is taken by Area Heads, following up with a response to students. Programme Leaders were expected to make and monitor action plans on the basis of survey results, and teachers were expected to accept and use negative feedback to improve their practice. However, Senior Managers showed a willingness to react

directly to student complaints, rather than referring them through the hierarchy. One manager in particular welcomed direct approaches from students, believing that this would ensure emerging problems are dealt with early. Managers, on the whole, believed that teachers used student feedback to help them improve their practice. An alternative view, however, was put forward by one Senior Manager, who spoke of teachers resisting or dismissing student feedback, giving the impression that they had no consideration for the student experience.

7.5. Synthesis of views

The findings show that there are differences in the underlying beliefs held by managers, teachers and students about the purpose of student involvement in the quality assurance processes. Managers spoke of dealing with students as customers, believing this approach leads to quality improvement. Teachers, however, emphasized the desire to make students feel valued and included, and to provide opportunities for their development. These differences resulted in dissimilar views on student satisfaction ratings, with managers having more confidence than teachers on the link between satisfaction ratings and quality. While the expressed views of teachers and managers showed these different approaches to student satisfaction measures, it did however become clear that most were, in practical terms, trying to fulfil more than one purpose at the same time. This therefore resulted in tensions created by trying to gain high satisfaction scores, while realising that it is not simply a straightforward case of finding out what students' expectations are and then meeting them; it is instead part of a complex process of balancing student expectations with other factors such as academic, professional and employer requirements.

Neither teachers nor managers had a clear understanding of students' thoughts regarding the purpose of their involvement. They showed no awareness of the student belief that improvement was the key focus of their involvement, or how this could lead to students taking a deficit approach. This lack of understanding of what lay behind the apparent tendency of

students towards negativity led to frustration as teachers and managers could not work out how to influence students to take a more balanced view.

It was clear that neither teachers nor managers were fully aware of the extent to which their language and behaviour were actually shaping student understanding of how they were expected to engage with the quality assurance processes. Previous studies acknowledged that students come to college bringing certain predispositions, personalities and life experiences that affect their expectations and how they might participate in the quality assurance processes (Bennett and Kane, 2014; Bunce et al., 2016). However, this study shows how student expectations were shaped by how managers and teachers spoke to them about the purpose of the processes, and then how their experience of these processes had a further, sometimes contradictory, effect.

The language we use to describe something has an effect on how we understand it (MacCormac, 1985), and equally the language used to speak to students about the quality assurance process shapes how they view it and how they participate. When managers and teachers spoke of how they persuaded students that their contribution to the quality processes was needed, they all spoke of telling students how they need feedback for the purpose of knowing what students want, to find out if they are happy, and to drive improvement, with managers adding that this is because they are customers and deserve good customer service.

While both managers and teachers accepted that there were a number of other reasons for student involvement, such as the data being used for external requirements, this was not an argument considered as persuasive for students, so these were not normally discussed. As students were told that managers and teachers wanted their feedback for improvement purposes, they believed they were expected to find fault, as discussed above, and those who could not find fault therefore saw no reason to participate in surveys or attend meetings. Further, being told that the institution needed to know what students wanted created the expectation that

they were being empowered to make changes, and requests made would be welcomed and fulfilled. As a result, when requests were queried or rejected, students were confused, feeling that the power promised to them had been snatched away. Emphasizing particular, customer-related aspects in this way has resulted in student understanding of their involvement in the quality processes being shaped around these aspects, and has created expectations that cannot be met.

The transformational nature of education was recognized by students, teachers and managers, as they spoke of how students developed through facing the challenges of learning, with the result that they changed their outlook over the duration of their studies. The incompatibility of this view with the customer view of students (Barnett, 2013) explains some of the tensions that this study has uncovered as managers and teachers try to implement processes that are based on a consumerist philosophy.

The use of customer language by all parties has resulted in assumptions being made that there is a common understanding of what is meant by student-as-customer and the purpose of their involvement in the quality assurance processes. This, however, is not the case, as there were a number of different interpretations both between and within groups. Using a common language while holding different underlying beliefs has resulted in tensions and misunderstandings, as each party makes assumptions about the motivation behind the behaviour of the others.

Managers saw the use of surveys as more straightforward than did either teachers or students. Differing views on the use of surveys are also taken up in the literature, with some supporting the Government's view that student satisfaction surveys are an effective method for measuring quality, including teaching quality (BIS 2011, 2016; Kulik, 2001; Mark, 2013), with others claiming that this view is too simplistic (Barnett, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017; Dean and Gibbs, 2015; Elwick and Cannizzaro, 2017). However, previous studies have not given students, and in particular HE in FE students, an opportunity to give their in-depth perceptions of the use of surveys in the way this study

has. Managers and teachers assumed a common knowledge among students on what the surveys were, how the data was processed and what it was used for, but students showed rather that they were confused by the processes, giving them a reason for non-participation. There were misunderstandings about the NSS, as students did not see the need to complete it, understanding it as a bureaucratic process that would not benefit them directly. Managers tried hard to get students to complete the NSS, as they knew the provision would be judged on the basis of the results, but teachers did not fully engage with it for two main reasons: not all of their students were eligible to complete it, and those who were eligible did not respond positively to persuasion to participate.

One key finding of this study was that the anonymity of a survey could cause emotional stress in students, while managers and teachers believed that anonymity prevented emotional stress. It is also notable that managers and teachers did not realize the extent to which students were stressed by being asked to reduce their thoughts into tick-boxes on surveys. Given the complex relationship with surveys displayed by students, with some not participating and some being swayed by emotion or negativity, the value of student satisfaction surveys to measure quality of provision and drive decision-making is called into question. Students themselves queried whether the results correctly represented student opinion.

With regard to the roles played by managers and teachers in taking feedback from students, some tensions and misunderstandings became evident. In the light of the value attributed to the student-teacher and student-programme leader relationships by both students and teachers, and the benefit gained from working together at module and programme level to improve quality, it was noticeable that managers spoke little of this aspect. Students noted that, while they believed that teachers held a lot of information about their needs, it appeared that they were not given the power to do anything with that information.

Managers had a mostly positive view of the value teachers gave to student feedback, although one manager spoke of teachers reacting negatively or dismissively, which is an apparent contradiction of teachers' own accounts of their response to feedback. However, the occasions referred to are those when they had invited students to give feedback to them directly, and would then have relayed that to the teacher, so it is likely that the teachers' reaction is related to the sense of being side-lined as previously discussed. Another occasion when teachers sometimes appeared to the member of support staff to attribute less value to student feedback was when it came in the form of questionnaire data. With a sense that student survey data was not always a true representation of the quality of a programme, but with no solid explanation for why this may be so, teachers struggled to know how to respond to such data, with this struggle sometimes being interpreted as a sign that they were disregarding feedback.

That the efforts of management to solve problems by dealing directly with student-customer complaints should create a tension with teachers is likely to be an unintended consequence, but managers seemed unaware of this. This study has shown that the intention of managers taking this approach was to quickly solve emerging problems, not realizing the extent to which this approach harms the relationship that is valued by students in this study, whereas allowing teachers and students to work through problems together would build the relationship. In particular this is likely to be seen as an issue in an HE in FE setting, where small groups and a teaching style that involves more individual interaction between students and teachers (Turner et al., 2009) mean that good relationships are a vital part of the teaching process.

7.6. Strengths and limitations of the research

For qualitative research to be of good quality, it must be credible, providing the reader with sufficient detail to convince them that it is grounded in reality, but stimulating them to think about the phenomenon in a new way (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). This study has opened up the discussion about students in HE in FE and their involvement in the quality assurance processes, and

will aid the development of a more coherent way of dealing with pertinent issues. To further evaluate the quality of the research, Yardley's (2000) four criteria are applied: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance.

Sensitivity to context

As an insider researcher, I already had sensitivity to both the external context of HE, and the internal context of the institution, with shared experience aiding me in understanding the descriptions of experience given to me by the participants (Mercer, 2007). However, familiarity of context could have made me take certain things for granted (Trowler, 2011). Knowing my role in the organization, participants may have said things for effect, rather than giving me a true representation of the situation (Yardley, 2000), therefore it was important that they were sufficiently at ease to part with their own thoughts. It could be seen that many of the interviewees brought a key point that they wanted to contribute; this could have skewed the findings, but taking the interviews as a whole enabled these issues to be examined in context with each other, to give a balanced picture.

Commitment and rigour

Commitment and rigour were shown through a systematic approach, carrying out the research over a six-month period and immersing myself in the data to gain understanding. Participants were selected to show a range of characteristics, in an effort to cover all likely viewpoints. It is a limitation of the study that the body of part-time students was not represented, as this could have exposed new insights. A further limitation is that, although the focus groups included students who admitted to being reluctant to participate in the general quality assurance processes, the students who were totally disengaged from these processes were, perhaps understandably, unwilling to participate in this research, so the only reporting of their views came from their fellow students.

Transparency and coherence

Coherency was shown by the 'fit' between the research question, the findings and the methods used; allowing the participants to engage in conversation about the phenomenon was the best way to gain an understanding of their perceptions (Patton, 2002). Given that the research revealed that both students and teachers showed an uneasy relationship with surveys, I feel confident that the interviews and focus groups used have produced data which is more valid than any that could have been obtained through a questionnaire. Transparency was demonstrated by detailing the methods used, preparing detailed interview schedules and describing the analysis. In reporting the findings, however, I had to balance the need for transparency with the need to protect confidentiality, requiring me to make decisions on details revealed about individuals and the organization while ensuring that the quality of research was not compromised (Tangen, 2014).

Impact and importance

This research has brought out the voice of the students in relation to involvement in the quality assurance processes. Additionally, hearing from managers, teachers and students in the same institution has provided a holistic view of practice and interaction, allowing insights to be gained into the effect that each party's actions and reactions have on the other. This has provided usable knowledge that will inform a solution to the local problem. It is a limitation of this research that it only covered one institution, as including a number of colleges would have given more confidence in the generalizability of results. However, the primary purpose of the case study approach is to bring new ways of understanding to local problems, rather than assuming generalizability (Yin, 2014). Nevertheless, one case study can often help in understanding other cases. It is likely that there are other HE in FE institutions where the setting is sufficiently similar to suggest that the results of this case study would shed some light on their situation, but it is the responsibility of the reader to decide if that is the case (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

7.7. Recommendations

As a result of this study, there are implications for HE in FE institutions, policy-makers and QAA, therefore a number of recommendations are listed below.

Recommendations for HE in FE Institutions

Ethos

Managers and teachers should recognize the motivation that leads students to choose to study HE in FE. The students are, in general, those who want to engage with learning in a small group setting, and who want to be respected as individuals, rather than one of a number. Managers should show confidence in the distinctive HE in FE context and communicate that to external bodies. The quality assurance processes and methods need to be reviewed to ensure they are clearly justifiable according to the values of the institution, so that students are comfortable working with both managers and teachers on this aspect.

Model

Managers should recognize that an emphasis on students as customers has unintended consequences that make it difficult to achieve the good quality educational experience that students want and that teachers and managers want to provide. The underlying philosophy behind different models, and how that relates to practical implementation needs to be discussed openly. Managers should work with teachers and students to investigate and adopt an alternative model for students, for example 'student as co-producer', that fits with the ethos of HE in FE more coherently than the student as customer model, recognizing the need for joint responsibility and allowing for relational working.

Purposes

All need to be clear as to the different purposes (including internal and external requirements) for involving students in the quality assurance processes. Dialogue should be opened up about the complexities of the

situation, so that the different parties recognize that others' actions may be based on different assumptions.

Teachers

Managers should recognize the part teachers, and especially programme leaders, play in working through issues with students, and all should work together to develop an understanding of their respective roles. Managers should ensure implementation of the quality assurance processes strengthens, rather than weakens, the student-teacher relationship. All should be involved to ensure they are fully aware how the methods of feedback can be employed in a way that is consistent with the ethos.

Communication

All should be aware that what is communicated to both staff and students, and the way in which it is communicated, will influence their understanding of what is happening and what is expected of them, and could sometimes have unintended consequences.

Emotion

All should recognize the part played by student emotion, realising that this will sometimes influence participation and feedback, and making efforts to ensure the methods used do not intensify this.

Methods

Managers should ensure that methods used to involve students in quality assurance processes are fit for purpose and produce valid data. One method should not be used for multiple purposes, for example, immediate improvement, summative evaluation and future planning. Students should be made fully aware of the reason why they are being asked to participate, and who the intended audience is for any output from their participation.

Recommendations for Policy-makers

Policy-makers should recognize that the HE sector is not one homogenous whole, but is made up of a number of diverse sub-sectors. HE in FE should

be recognized as a sub-sector that has a particular appeal and contribution to make, having a distinctive ethos. Future policy should encourage HE in FE institutions to celebrate and develop this ethos, rather than expect them to meet the same expectations as large, mainstream universities. Policy-makers should also recognize that student satisfaction data is not a straightforward measure of quality and is of little value in making comparisons across sub-sectors.

Recommendations for QAA

QAA should review their guidance given to HE providers on quality assurance processes to ensure that HE in FE providers are not left with the impression that they need to implement systems that are designed with large, mainstream universities in mind. They should recognize that these systems can harm the student-teacher relationship that is so important in HE in FE. They should work with HE in FE providers to establish systems that help them work in a way that is compatible with their distinctive ethos. QAA should also recognize the complexity inherent in collecting and using student satisfaction data.

7.8. Further research

This research has uncovered a number of complexities in how an HE in FE college approaches student involvement in the quality assurance processes. Further research is needed to try to move forward understanding of how some of these complexities can be avoided. A study could be carried out to evaluate implementation of a model that could be an alternative to the consumer model, to find out how students and teachers engage with it, and establish how it can be used in a way that meets external quality assurance requirements as well as internal.

A study is needed on how teachers can develop their use of dialogue-based feedback sessions with their students. Reactions of both teachers and students could be monitored to see if such sessions can be a constructive experience for all.

Further study also needs to be carried out with students on their reaction to surveys, including the influences that affect how they interpret specific questions. Also, a longitudinal study could investigate how student evaluation of their modules varies over their time on the programme and beyond.

7.9. Conclusion

This study has given a voice to those working and studying in HE in FE, who have not previously had opportunity to explain their perceptions of the quality assurance processes used to involve students. It has allowed students to speak for themselves and has allowed their perceptions to be compared with the teachers and managers who work with them. While students, teachers and management within HE in FE seem to have a consensus on the type of teaching and learning that is consistent with the ethos of such an institution, they have not yet reached a consensus on how students should be involved in the quality assurance processes. Currently there is recognition that, in HE in FE, the relationship with teachers is valued by students, but it has not previously been recognized that there is a disconnect between how this plays out in the teaching and learning process, and how it plays out in the quality assurance processes. There has been little previous recognition of the complexity for teachers as they try to meet targets of high satisfaction rates, while simultaneously mistrusting the simplified feedback derived from questionnaire data. Students themselves do not have confidence in data derived from satisfaction surveys, and wish for a more relational way of working. This lack of overall coherence gives rise to a number of complexities and misunderstandings. Those working in HE in FE institutions are trying to use customer language and meet customer needs but in so doing they are losing some of the richness of the educational experience that they are well placed to deliver.

This research has shown that students are being shaped by what they believe is expected of them, but understanding what is expected is not easy

for them. Managers and teachers are unaware of the extent to which the language they use is shaping students' expectations, and even creating expectations that cannot be met. Much of student lack of engagement and apparent negativity can be explained by their focus on improvement. How students approach the quality assurance processes affects the results, but the act of involvement in the processes affects the students too. The emotional effect on students of being asked to complete an anonymous survey was uncovered in this research and has not previously been recognized. Further difficulties have been exposed, such as differences in assumptions of the purpose of involving students among students, teachers and managers, and the tensions of trying to follow a student-as-customer model while believing in transformational education. Bad decisions are made when teachers and managers try to be consistent with what they think is expected, even though it does not chime with what their professional experience tells them.

The view that dealing with students as customers is the best way to ensure a high quality learning experience has, for some time, enjoyed widespread and uncritical acceptance at the heart of much education policy making. This research has shown that this view has led to unintended consequences as a result of efforts to involve students in the quality assurance processes in HE in FE, as it has not allowed acknowledgement of the features of the HE in FE setting that attracts students to it in the first place. The fault is that the implementation of this view imposes a false simplicity on, what has been shown to be by this study, a much more complex situation.

An acknowledgement of the complexities caused in this situation, however, is not sufficient for finding a way out of it; because the acceptance of the ideology was non-critical, there is no basis for argument for an alternative approach. Only when the underlying ideologies that lead to different approaches are exposed and critically reviewed will it be possible to make an informed decision on how to ensure the outcome of student involvement is a high quality teaching and learning experience.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: The QAA Expectation and Indicators

The Expectation

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about student engagement, which higher education providers are required to meet: Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.

The indicators of sound practice

Indicator 1

Higher education providers, in partnership with their student body, define and promote the range of opportunities for any student to engage in educational enhancement and quality assurance.

Indicator 2

Higher education providers create and maintain an environment within which students and staff engage in discussions that aim to bring about demonstrable enhancement of the educational experience.

Indicator 3

Arrangements exist for the effective representation of the collective student voice at all organisational levels, and these arrangements provide opportunities for all students to be heard.

Indicator 4

Higher education providers ensure that student representatives and staff have access to training and ongoing support to equip them to fulfil their roles in educational enhancement and quality assurance effectively.

Indicator 5

Students and staff engage in evidence-based discussions based on the mutual sharing of information.

Indicator 6

Staff and students to disseminate and jointly recognize the enhancements made to the student educational experience, and the efforts of students in achieving these successes.

Indicator 7

The effectiveness of student engagement is monitored and reviewed at least annually, using pre-defined key performance indicators, and policies and processes enhanced where required.

Appendix 2: Schedule of quality assurance survey activity

Module Evaluations

Timing	Activity	
January/February (End of semester 1)	Students complete module evaluations online	Driven by programme leader asking students to complete them, often during a teaching session or tutorial
March	Semester 1 module evaluation results reviewed	Board of study
June (End of semester 2)	Students complete module evaluations online	Driven by programme leader asking students to complete them, often asking them to do it during a teaching session or tutorial
Summer	Module leaders produce action plans for modules	Compiled by programme leader, who uses to inform annual review
September	Semester 2 module evaluation results reviewed	Board of study
October/November	Module evaluation results reviewed	HE committee
October/November	Module evaluation data reviewed as part of the annual report that goes to the validating university	Programme level reports, feeding into departmental reports, feeding into institutional report
February	Feedback on annual report given	Dean of Partnerships at validating university
April	University feedback reviewed	HE Committee

National Student Survey

January-April	Students are encouraged to complete NSS	Driven by student engagement officer and programme. Incentives given (e.g. prize draw). Regular update on percentage completion sent to programme leaders
October	NSS results are reviewed	All levels of Management meetings internally Quality meeting at the validating university
November	NSS data reviewed, and overall student satisfaction from NSS reviewed against benchmark data from other institutions. Reported as part of the annual report that goes to the validating university	Programme level reports, feeding into departmental reports, feeding into institutional report
February	Feedback on Annual Review given	Dean of Partnerships at validating university
April	University feedback reviewed	HE committee

Appendix 3: Information and consent forms

3A: Interview consent form

INTERVIEWS – Information Sheet *EdD Research 2016*

I am carrying out this interview as part of a research degree which I am doing in the UCL Institute of Education. It forms part of a study of an aspect of quality assurance in higher education that is delivered in a further education setting. The interview will be a discussion related to ‘student voice’ and the involvement of students in the quality assurance processes.

I appreciate you taking time to allow me to interview you. Your experiences and perceptions are important and will help me get a picture of the area of study. Please be assured that your responses will be kept confidential; I am following ethical guidelines produced by the British Educational Research Association (BERA). In the final report, you will be referred to by your job title and the college will not be identified. Any names used will be pseudonyms. Should you have any queries about the ethical procedures, I can put you in touch with my university supervisor who has approved the research. You are free to withdraw at any time.

After the interview, if you wish to check or revise anything you said, or have any other queries, please let me know.

Elizabeth Scott

Email: elizabeth.scott@***.ac.uk

Tel: ***

CONSENT FORM

I have agreed to be interviewed and realise that this interview will be recorded, transcribed, and used in this research.

I have the right to choose not to answer a question.

I have the right to withdraw at any time, during or after the interview, and ask for the partial or complete interview to be removed from the research.

I have the right to see and verify the transcript.

Signature

Name

Date

Interviewer

Date

3B: Focus group consent form

FOCUS GROUPS – Information Sheet

EdD Research 2016

I am carrying out this focus group as part of a research degree which I am doing in the UCL Institute of Education. It forms part of a study of an aspect of quality assurance in higher education that is delivered in a further education setting. The focus group will be a discussion related to 'student voice' and the involvement of students in the quality assurance processes.

I appreciate you taking time to be involved. Your experiences and opinions are important and will help me get a picture of the area of study. Please be assured that your responses will be kept confidential; I am following ethical guidelines produced by the British Educational Research Association (BERA). In the final report, you will be referred to as one of a group of students and the college will not be identified. Any names used will be pseudonyms. Should you have any queries about the ethical procedures, I can put you in touch with my university supervisor who has approved the research. You are free to withdraw at any time.

After the focus group, if you wish to check or revise anything you said, or have any other queries, please let me know.

Elizabeth Scott

Email: elizabeth.scott@***.ac.uk

Tel: ***

CONSENT FORM

I have agreed to be part of this focus group and realise that this will be recorded, transcribed, and used in this research.

I have the right to choose not to answer a question.

I have the right to withdraw at any time, during or after the focus group, and ask for my partial or complete contribution to be removed from the research.

I have the right to see and verify the transcript.

Signature

Name

Date

Interviewer

Date

Appendix 4: Interview and Focus Group Schedules

4A: Interview schedule: teachers

Topic	Question	Listen and probe for
Introduction	Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. You have read the information sheet so you already have an idea what I am doing this for. I just want to clarify that I am not here in my normal job role, but I am in the role of a researcher. What you say to me in this interview will only be used for the purpose of the research and won't be passed on to anyone else in this organization.	Check for any misunderstandings and discuss if necessary.
Background	Can you tell me something about your role here? How long have you been here? Have you worked in any other colleges?	
Quality Assurance	Are you familiar with the term 'Quality Assurance'? What do you think it is?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they understand the term? • Do I need to give them examples to ensure we are talking about the same thing?
	<p>Why do we have Quality Assurance processes here?</p> <p>What are the 'products or services' that need to be checked?</p> <p>Who should be involved in</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What value do they see? • Do they mention external influences?

	checking or judging the quality of e.g. Assessments, Marking, Course content, Course organization, Resources, Teachers and teaching, Wider facilities	Keep this brief. Key point –do they see that a range of stakeholders each have different roles? Do they mention stakeholders such as Teachers, Course leaders, Managers, Students, Employers, External Examiners, Partner university
Student Voice	Are you familiar with the term 'Student Voice'? What is meant by it?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do they understand the term? Do I need to give them examples to ensure we are talking about the same thing?
	Do you think students should be listened to? As a group or individually? What status should their involvement/feedback have? (compared to teachers/managers/ employers/external examiners etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do they see value in it? What challenges do they see? Do they think some should be listened to more than others? Do they mention customer-related reasons? (What is influencing their thoughts?)
Response to Student Voice in QA	How do you encourage students to be involved in QA processes? What do you say to them – about module evals? About NSS? About being a rep?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do they tell students that it makes a difference? (Does this agree with

	<p>How do you react to student feedback given through:</p> <p>(a) Module evaluations (how do you cope with negative feedback? Or comments you feel are unjustified?)</p> <p>(b) NSS</p> <p>(c) Student reps at course meetings/HEBoS?</p>	<p>what they said previously?)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prompt for responses about the areas (a) them and their teaching, (b) the course and resources, (c) wider college issues. • Probe to see if there are factors that affect how seriously they take the feedback or if other factors are taken into account. • Do they mention anonymity? • Do they mention external audience? • What sort of changes do students ask for? • Does presenting feedback in person make a difference? • (Do they react to the feedback itself or are they just concerned about management's response to it?)
Students	How do you think students see the status of their	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they differentiate between students with

	involvement/feedback? What do they say about it?	<p>different purposes?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they mention customer-related attitudes?
Managers	<p>How does management see the status of student involvement/feedback?</p> <p>Can you give any examples?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prompt for responses about the areas (a) teachers and their teaching, (b) the course and resources, (c) wider college issues. • Prompt for the response to both positive and negative feedback. • Probe for why they think management wants student feedback.
Motivator	<p>What are the main motivators that encourage you to keep up a high standard in your teaching?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they mention students and their feedback (either formal or informal)? • Do they mention college processes?

4B: Interview schedule: Area Head

Topic	Question	Listen and probe for
Introduction	Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. You have read the information sheet so you already have an idea what I am doing this for. I just want to clarify that I am not here in my normal job role, but I am in the role of a researcher. What you say to me in this interview will only be used for the purpose of the research and won't be passed on to anyone else in this organization.	Check for any misunderstandings and discuss if necessary.
Background	Can you tell me something about your role here? How long have you been here? Have you worked in any other colleges?	
Quality Assurance	Are you familiar with the term 'Quality Assurance'? What do you think it is?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they understand the term? • Do I need to give them examples to ensure we are talking about the same thing?
	<p>Why do we have Quality Assurance processes here?</p> <p>What are the 'products or services' that need to be checked?</p> <p>Who should be involved in checking or judging the quality of</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What value do they see? • Do they mention external influences? <p>Keep this brief.</p>

	e.g. Assessments, Marking, Course content, Course organization, Resources, Teachers and teaching, Wider facilities	Key point –do they see that a range of stakeholders each have different roles? Do they mention stakeholders such as Teachers, Course leaders, Managers, Students, Employers, External Examiners, Partner uni
Student Voice	Are you familiar with the term ‘Student Voice’? What is meant by it?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do they understand the term? Do I need to give them examples to ensure we are talking about the same thing?
	Do you think students should be listened to? As a group or individually? What status should their involvement/feedback have? (compared to teachers/managers/employers/external examiners etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do they see value in it? What challenges do they see? Do they think some should be listened to more than others? Do they mention customer-related reasons? (What is influencing their thoughts?)
Response to Student Voice in QA	How do you encourage students to be involved in QA processes? What do you say to them – about module evals? About NSS? About being a rep? How do you react to student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do they tell students that it makes a difference? (Does this agree with what they said previously?)

	<p>feedback given through:</p> <p>(d) Module evaluations (how do you cope with negative feedback? Or comments you feel are unjustified?)</p> <p>(e) NSS</p> <p>(f) Student reps at course meetings/HEBoS?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they distinguish between feedback for them as teachers or feedback for their staff? • Prompt for responses about the areas (a) teachers and their teaching, (b) the course and resources, (c) wider college issues. • Probe to see if there are factors that affect how seriously they take the feedback or if other factors are taken into account. • Do they mention anonymity? • Do they mention external audience? • What sort of changes do students ask for? • Does presenting feedback in person make a difference? • (Do they react to the feedback itself or are they just concerned about management
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		response?)
Students	How do you think students see the status of their involvement/feedback? What do they say about it?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they differentiate between students with different purposes? • Do they mention customer-related attitudes?
Managers	How does management see the status of student involvement/feedback? Can you give any examples?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prompt for responses about the areas (a) teachers and their teaching, (b) the course and resources, (c) wider college issues. • Prompt for the response to both positive and negative feedback. • Probe for why they think management wants student feedback.
Motivator	What are the main motivators that encourage you to keep up a high standard in your teaching/courses?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they mention students and their feedback (either formal or informal)? Do they mention college processes?

4C: Interview schedule: Senior Managers and Governor

Topic	Question	Listen and probe for
Introduction	Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. You have read the information sheet so you already have an idea what I am doing this for. I just want to clarify that I am not here in my normal job role, but I am in the role of a researcher. What you say to me in this interview will only be used for the purpose of the research and won't be passed on to anyone else in this organization.	Check for any misunderstandings and discuss if necessary.
Background	Can you tell me something about your role here? How long have you been here? Have you worked in any other colleges?	
Quality Assurance	What do you think is meant by the term 'Quality Assurance' in the setting of this organization?	Do they understand the term? Do I need to give them examples to ensure we are talking about the same thing?
	Why do we have Quality Assurance processes here? What are the 'products or services' that need to be checked? Who should be involved in checking or judging the quality of e.g. Assessments, Marking, Course content, Course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What value do they see? • Do they mention external influences? <p>Keep this brief. Key point –do they see that a range of stakeholders each</p>

	organization, Resources, Teachers and teaching, Wider facilities	have different roles? Do they mention stakeholders such as Teachers, Course leaders, Managers, Students, Employers, External Examiners, Partner university
Student Voice	Are you familiar with the term 'Student Voice'? What is meant by it?	Do they understand the term? Do I need to give them examples to ensure we are talking about the same thing?
	Do you think students should be listened to? As a group or individually? What status should their involvement/feedback have? (compared to teachers/managers/employers/external examiners etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do they see value in it? Do they think some should be listened to more than others? Do they mention customer-related reasons? (What is influencing their thoughts?)
Student Voice in QA	What do you see as the contribution of student voice to the QA processes in this organization?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do they see value in it? What challenges do they see?
	Student feedback is part of the QA processes: (a) Module evaluations (b) NSS (c) Student reps at course meetings/HEBoS.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prompt for responses about the areas (a) teachers and teaching, (b) the course and resources, (c) wider college issues.

	<p>Do you see the results of any of these?</p> <p>(Taking them one at a time) What do you look for? How do you respond?</p> <p>Or</p> <p>What would you expect the relevant manager to look for? How would you expect them to respond?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probe to see if there are factors that affect how seriously they take the feedback, or other factors that are taken into account. • Do they mention external audience?
Students	<p>How do you think students see the status of their involvement/feedback?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they differentiate between students with different purposes? • (Do they mention customer-related attitudes?)
Teachers	<p>How do you think teachers see the status of student involvement/feedback?</p>	<p>(Do they see teachers as welcoming or resisting feedback?)</p>

4D: Interview schedule: Support staff

Topic	Question	Listen and probe for
Introduction	<p>Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. You have read the information sheet so you already have an idea what I am doing this for. I just want to clarify that I am not here in my normal job role, but I am in the role of a researcher.</p> <p>What you say to me in this interview will only be used for the purpose of the research and won't be passed on to anyone else in this organization.</p>	<p>Check for any misunderstandings and discuss if necessary.</p>
Background	<p>Can you tell me something about your role here? How long have you been here? Have you worked in any other colleges?</p>	
Quality Assurance	<p>What do you think is meant by the term 'Quality Assurance' in the setting of this organization?</p>	<p>Do they understand the term? Do I need to give them examples to ensure we are talking about the same thing?</p>
	<p>Why do we have Quality Assurance processes here?</p> <p>What are the 'products or services' that need to be checked?</p> <p>Who should be involved in checking or judging the quality of e.g. Assessments, Marking, Course content, Course organization, Resources, Teachers and teaching,</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What value do they see? • Do they mention external influences? <p>Keep this brief. Key point –do they see that a range of stakeholders each have different roles?</p>

	Wider facilities	Do they mention stakeholders such as Teachers, Course leaders, Managers, Students, Employers, External Examiners, Partner university
Student Voice	Are you familiar with the term 'Student Voice'? What is meant by it?	Do they understand the term? Do I need to give them examples to ensure we are talking about the same thing?
	Do you think students should be listened to? As a group or individually? What status should their involvement/feedback have? (compared to teachers/managers/employers/external examiners etc.) How do you encourage students to be involved in QA processes? What do you say to them – about module evals? About NSS? About being a rep?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they see value in it? • Do they think some should be listened to more than others? • Do they mention customer-related reasons? • (What is influencing their thoughts?) • Do they tell students that it makes a difference? • (Does this agree with what they said previously?)
Students	How do you think students see the status of their involvement/feedback?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they differentiate between students with different purposes? • (Do they mention

	<p>What do students think they are doing when they give feedback as part of the QA processes:</p> <p>(a) Module evaluations</p> <p>(b) NSS</p> <p>(c) Student rep feedback in course meetings/HEBoS?</p>	<p>customer-related attitudes?)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What sort of changes do they ask for? • What are the motivating factors? • Are they following expectations? (whose?) • Prompt for responses about the areas (a) teachers and teaching, (b) the course and resources, (c) wider college issues. • Do they mention anonymity? • Do they mention external audience?
Teachers	<p>How do you think teachers see the status of student involvement/feedback?</p> <p>Do you have a sense of how teachers react to student feedback from:</p> <p>(a) Module evaluations</p> <p>(b) NSS</p> <p>(c) Student rep feedback in course meetings/HEBoS?</p>	<p>Do they see teachers welcoming or resisting feedback?</p>
Managers	<p>How do you think managers see the status of student involvement/feedback?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prompt for responses

	<p>How does management react to student feedback from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Module evaluations (b) NSS (c) Student rep feedback in course meetings/HEBoS? 	<p>about the areas (a) teachers and teaching, (b) the course and resources, (c) wider college issues.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probe to see if there are factors that affect how seriously they take the feedback, or other factors that are taken into account. • Do they mention external audience?
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4E: Focus group schedule: Students

Topic	Question	Listen and probe for
Introduction	Thank you for agreeing to be involved in this focus group. You have read the information sheet so you already have an idea what I am doing this for. I just want to clarify that I am not here in my normal job role, but I am in the role of a researcher. What you say to me in this interview will only be used for the purpose of the research and won't be passed on to anyone else in this organization.	Check for any misunderstandings and discuss if necessary.
Background	Can you tell me something about yourselves? What subject/course? What year? Are you a student rep?	
Quality Assurance	Are you familiar with the term 'Quality Assurance'? What do you think it is?	Do they understand the term? Do I need to give them examples to ensure we are talking about the same thing?
	<p>Why do we have Quality Assurance processes here?</p> <p>What are the 'products or services' that need to be checked?</p> <p>Who should be involved in checking or judging the quality of e.g. Assessments, Marking, Course content, Course organization, Resources, Teachers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What value do they see? • Do they mention external influences? <p>Keep this brief. Key point –do they see that a range of stakeholders each have different roles?</p>

	and teaching, Wider facilities	Do they mention stakeholders such as Teachers, Course leaders, Managers, Students, Employers, External Examiners, Partner university
Student Voice	Are you familiar with the term 'Student Voice'? What is meant by it?	Do they understand the term? Do I need to give them examples to ensure we are talking about the same thing?
	Do you think students such as you should be listened to? As a group or individually? What status should your involvement/feedback have? (compared to teachers/managers/employers/external examiners etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they see value in it? • What challenges do they see? • Do they think some should be listened to more than others? • Do they mention customer-related reasons? • (What is influencing their thoughts?)
Student Voice in QA	What opportunities do you have to be involved in the QA processes in this organization?	Are they aware of the opportunities? Do they take it seriously? Have they taken up the opportunities? Why?/Why not?
Module evaluations	Have you completed module evaluations? What sort of thoughts go through your mind when you are trying to decide what to write?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the motivating factors? • Are they following expectations? (whose?) • How do they decide

		<p>what to mention/not mention?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prompt for responses about the areas (a) teachers and teaching, (b) the course and resources, (c) wider college issues. • Do they mention anonymity?
NSS	<p>Have you completed NSS? Do you see that as similar/different to module evaluations?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they mention the external audience?
Meetings (reps only)	<p>Have you attended course meetings or HEBoS? Why/why not? How do you decide what to talk about?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do they think they are contributing? • Do they see a difference in being present personally?
Results	<p>What do you expect to see happen as a result of student feedback? What does happen?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they expect it to be acted upon? Do they expect other factors to be taken into account? • Are these responses from teachers? From management? Prompt for responses about the areas (a) teachers and their teaching, (b) the course and resources, (c) wider college issues. • Prompt for the response to both

		positive and negative feedback.
Managers	Why does the college encourage student feedback?	Do they mention customer-related issues? Do they mention external influences?

Appendix 5: Sample transcript

TEACHER T1

Interviewer	Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. You've read the information sheet, so you already have an idea of what I'm doing this for. So just want to clarify that I'm not here in my normal job role. I'm a researcher as it were in this interview. So what you say in here won't be used for any other purpose and it won't be passed on to anyone else in the organization. Equally if you raise issues that need to be dealt with you would need to come to me in a different setting to do that.
Respondent	Okay. I understand.
Interviewer	So I'm a researcher. So can you tell me something about your role here? So what is your job?
Respondent	Okay. I'm a lecturer. I'm a year tutor to the first year degree students. I also am a tutor for different modules for the first year and to the second year. I'm also a lecturer for year one and year two degree and I'm also a tutor for further education level three.
Interviewer	Right, so your role is mostly with the higher education students.
Respondent	Higher education now.
Interviewer	Across a few subject areas. How long have you worked here?
Respondent	21 years, coming up to 22.
Interviewer	Roughly how long have you been working with the higher level students do you know?
Respondent	That started in about 2005, maybe 2004 and that was with the level fours when we had the [xx] programme here. So it started as far back as that for level four and then in 2008 when we started the foundation degree then I was involved in writing up the modules and the delivery. So we wrote the validation document to produce that, so from the very concept of foundation degree that's when I started and I taught quite a few modules on that, first and second years obviously in 2009.
Interviewer	So you've seen quite a few students come and go and go through different types of students.
Respondent	I have.
Interviewer	Good. Have you worked in any other colleges?
Respondent	No.
Interviewer	Are you familiar with the term quality assurance?
Respondent	Yes.
Interviewer	What do you think that means or what does it mean to you?
Respondent	Making sure that the quality of assignments or procedures are carried through and at the best possible standards are continuous and consistent so that it meets the needs of Essex University and also awarding bodies for level three as well to make sure you're meeting their criteria. So standards are kept up.
Interviewer	So what sort of things do we assure the quality of? Are we interesting in the quality of ... you mentioned assignments?
Respondent	Assignments with firstly as soon as the assignments are written that they are IV'd, the assignment brief is IV'd to make sure that it's fit for purpose, it meets all the requirements of the learning outcomes which is then sent to the external examiner for her or

	him to check through to make sure it does meet the requirements and then obviously when students work is completed and handed in then we obviously have the first and second marking again to make sure that grades reflect correctly.
Interviewer	Checking the standard of marking
Respondent	The standard of marking, absolutely.
Interviewer	What about the teaching? Is there anything to check that that?
Respondent	Absolutely, well we have peer observations but equally well when you say that do you mean like peer observations or do you mean?
Interviewer	Well yes is there anything going on to check that there's good quality teaching or what is going on in the classroom?
Respondent	Yes, so I presume peer observation is one good way although in many ways that's also a benefit to the person who is observing for themselves as well as for the person who is actually teaching. It's nice to see different ways of teaching. I mean obviously in further education we have management coming in and doing formal observations, but in HE it's more relaxed. It's more organizing who you wish to come and observe you or who is available I suppose. But I mean it is a good process and it's more relaxed because you know the people and they're not there to judge you. They're trying to help you to give you some guidance on perhaps how you could improve something or saying what fantastic strengths they have.
Interviewer	So you've mentioned some procedures that are formal processes, presumably like the internal verification of assignments and so on. So why do you think we have formal processes?
Respondent	Because if you didn't have formal processes an awful lot of things could go wrong, assignments could be produced by people that haven't met the learning outcomes that just may have the wrong dates on, may have an awful lot of information that is wrong, that then the students would reflect, the students would certainly have reason to complain that the college or university is not following procedures correctly. It just shows poor organization.
Interviewer	Yes so you've got ... you want things to be right for the students and then you've mentioned the university as another body that is interested as well, so it's not just internal.
Respondent	Absolutely, whichever it does reflect on the whole establishment in some ways and as soon as it's tarred with something the students will all be thinking it's all like that. So it's better that you have these formal processes to make sure everything is correct.
Interviewer	So are you familiar with the term student voice?
Respondent	Yes, I am.
Interviewer	So what do you think is meant by that?
Respondent	Well student's voice is really important in an organization, you actually hear their views, their opinions, whether it's positive or negative, but it's very important that you do hear what they have to say whether it's about particular subject, the content or the tutors or general things like facilities within the organization. It is important and that could be at [board of study] meetings where you have a student rep who is supposedly representing the group or it could be one to one, a tutorial with a student where a

	student has pointed out aspects of the course that they're not happy with or maybe they are happy with and they'd like you to report it back that they are very happy.
Interviewer	So you think students should be listened to.
Respondent	Definitely. Because I think, not disregarding the 18 year olds, but more and more students are becoming mature because they've decided to change track in their career and certainly a lot of the students this year are mature and they know, if they're going to voice something you need to listen to it, because they've had experience elsewhere. Whereas an 18 year old has had little experience of university life or they've come from school maybe or further education, the mature student, although you should listen to all of them, mature students usually do have very logical, constructive criticism.
Interviewer	So you see some students are giving you valuable information. So are you saying that in a sense you're differentiating between the feedback from different students?
Respondent	No, sometimes as I say some of the first year students who have not experienced life or been to another university maybe people are coming back for another degree or whatever. Maybe they haven't experienced enough in life to realise that some things could be improved and maybe can't put across their argument as well as people who have had experience elsewhere and are able to say, 'It would be so much better if we did this or this was done'. I mean I shouldn't differentiate between them, but obviously people who are more mature are going to probably have a better balance of opinions. They can see the for and against whereas a person who has come into university will only have one aspect and they've got nothing else to compare it to. But they're equally as important, don't get me wrong, they're equally as important.
Interviewer	So what do you see as the challenges of listening to students?
Respondent	Trying to take out what's really at the bottom of it, what's really important and the general issues where you can say to them, 'There are some things we can do, we can change or we can put in place, but there are other things that would take quite a while'.
Interviewer	Can you think of any examples like that?
Respondent	Okay if students complain about, say a general one, we could have like refectory couldn't we, we could have something like that, where it's not within our powers but we could say to them we will put forward your views at the next meeting and the students are listened to. But we need to report it, but it's out of our hands as to how we can deal with it. On the other hand if a student complains about a room, they feel it's not adequate for their session or whatever, then sometimes that is within our range to be able to say, 'We'll look into it' and if it's possible we'll definitely do it. That way they feel they are being listened to, it's not immediately going, 'No, no way'. It is being dealt with. So there are some things we can deal with and then obviously if students get to you and they complain about something and you listen to their complaints, you know that you can go and talk to your line manager and discuss it with them and they can work out how to deal with it. But you're listening to them because it's really important that you do get ... and especially if several

	people are saying the same thing then you know that there is a real concern and the line manager should be informed of it to see what can be done.
Interviewer	So have you experience of listening to students like that and then not being able to do anything for them and having to tell them and explain to them? Do you ever have to go back and explain why we can't do anything about this or we don't think it would be best to do anything? Do you think that's a reasonable outcome that you may sometimes go back to them and say, 'No we think it would be best'.
Respondent	Well if you can explain the reason why and it's a reasonable explanation then I think that's fair enough. You've explained why it can't be done, then that's up to them the students to either accept that or then question it further. But they'd have to go direct to the line manager whose perhaps decision it was in the first place, because it would've been out of my hands. If I've already been told this is the option, this is the only option we have and if they still disagree then they'd have to go themselves direct to the line manager. But I can't think if anything off the top of my head that that's happened. I mean I could give you an example, right. We had the students on Friday morning that wanted to be moved to Thursday because they were only coming into university for two hours for my session. So I spoke to my line manager and she said that she'd see what she could do and within a very short space of time there was a two hour block on a Thursday so the students were asked to vote on it, a secret vote whether they stayed or if they moved for two hours on a Thursday for semester one only. But for semester two they had to move back to the Friday for two hours. Did they want to stay on a Friday or move to the Thursday just until the end of semester one and the students on masse voted to stay for a Thursday and not come in on a Friday, but they've got to come in semester two on a Friday and I can see already they are already working out a way that they're going to ask can they still be moved to semester two. I can see it because they're already muttering about it. So it could be that's going to arise again, but they were listened to and the line manager accommodated them. We'll see what happens with semester two.
Interviewer	So things are ...
Respondent	They were listened to and it was just very fortunate that there was a two hour slot that could be fitted, but that's not always going to be the case.
Interviewer	So how do you encourage students to be involved, for example, to do module evaluations or to be a rep? What do you say to students about that?
Respondent	Well for student reps when we do that in induction week or the week after induction week I say the importance of it first of all you're speaking on behalf of the whole of your group or you should be, getting their thoughts, positives and areas where we need to improve. I tell them all about that. If it's in my remit to talk to them about student reps, I also say it looks fantastic on their CV because it shows responsibility, leadership, employability skills there and obviously when I start talking about the meetings they have to attend a lot of their faces drop

	because when I say, 'You would be expected to attend a board of study' and I explain what a board of study is, 'And possible course team meetings'. But I do say, 'If you can't make it you do need to type up notes and give them to your course leader so that they can read them out, but obviously it's better if you do attend and that again goes on your CV as you're attending meetings, that looks really good for when you go out in the business world'. So I do tend to do that. What was the other question you asked?
Interviewer	The module evaluations.
Respondent	Module evaluations, well I always say to them, 'That they're not there for you to knock them, it's not there as a ... it's there for you to actually, what did you enjoy most about it, what did you find least useful and obviously if you have a bug bear about something that is when you need to do it, it is anonymous, but the whole point of it is we want to find out what you think is good about it because we have to take on board your comments and then we view our own comments of strengths and weaknesses of the module and that from that hopefully we're going to tweak modules or do a scheme amendment where we can change it because we've realised the majority of students don't agree with this, say, one of the assignments, then we look at that and we can adapt it'. I said, 'We've done that, we've always listened to module evaluations but you've got to answer module evaluations not with emotion'. I always say to them, 'If someone has upset you the week before you do a module evaluation don't base your feedback on that one incident, think of the whole 14 weeks and base it on that, overall'. But a lot of students do, I think, tend to ... they do vote emotionally, it's what's happened recently as opposed to what happened six weeks ago. So they can be quite biased some of them, but not all by any means.
Interviewer	But you're trying to tell them that it does make a difference.
Respondent	It does make a huge difference, yes.
Interviewer	Do you tell them who looks at the results of the module evaluations?
Respondent	Well I say the course leaders do it because what happens is then ... well I don't tell them about the [annual report] I don't tell them the whole picture of that. But what I do say is that each module tutor has to write up the strengths and the weaknesses, what improvements were made from last years' weaknesses. I do all that so that they understand that. So as far as they're concerned that they goes to the course tutor and then it's down to course tutor but it is actually the module tutor that has a say in adapting assignments. So that we can change it if need be if enough people feel that it needs changing and the course tutor, the module tutor and the course tutor may feel that anyway that it does need tweaking.
Interviewer	So how do you react to student feedback for your own modules given in module evaluations?
Respondent	I think you'll obviously get negative comments as well as positive and I think it's all good because it makes you think about how you approach subjects. With all the different learning styles you are going to find some students that perhaps find it more difficult than others to grasp things and it could be my teaching style that

	doesn't particularly meet some people's ... I mean it's good because you do learn from what other people say. They don't give it to you in class you don't hear the comments, you don't hear them saying, 'That was rubbish, I didn't really enjoy that, I didn't understand that', although they should. So it's only from module evaluations you actually start seeing some of the ...
Interviewer	So you think you're getting some things that you wouldn't get even if you're talking to the students.
Respondent	Yes.
Interviewer	So there are different aspects covered in the module evaluation, so there's an aspect of you and your teaching, you've mentioned there. Then there are also questions about the course and the resources and then there maybe questions about wider college issues. So you've mentioned about your reaction to things about ... possibly about your teaching or about not understanding. If they're giving feedback about the course, do you identify with that?
Respondent	Some of it I do. I've seen some feedback, I can remember it, just on work based learning and it was second year work based learning. A couple of the students put, 'I don't know why we did work placement', which annoys me because I think work placement is the most valuable thing you could possibly have to take you into the workplace. Now they couldn't actually see that and that worries me to think that maybe I didn't make it clear enough. It was only a couple of students but that annoyed me because I just thought well have you not grasped the point that to have two years of work placement and business admin they are so lucky, because management don't have it, computing don't have it. They do have that chance to go and try out two different companies, see which one and they haven't recognized that. All they'd said was, 'Don't understand why we had work placements in the second year'.
Interviewer	In a case like that you wouldn't react in the sense of saying, 'Well maybe we should remove work placements'?
Respondent	Oh no not at all, not at all.
Interviewer	Quite a different reaction there.
Respondent	Absolutely, I just knew from two students saying that to the rest were going, 'Loved work placement'. You know that possible the majority obviously realise the benefits of it. So no I don't think so. I just take it all on board and what you should be doing is any negatives is trying to put them right and the positives taking them on board and thinking that's good. They do appreciate.
Interviewer	So then you're familiar with the National Student Survey.
Respondent	Yes.
Interviewer	So how do you react to the feedback that's given through that? Your programme may not always have its own response for the sort of feedback that's given through that one.
Respondent	Yes, I don't think I've had as much involvement with that one as with the college one that we do. I haven't had as much involvement with that at all and I can't even think of an example of what I've seen because so few students have got really involved in that and certainly the students that I taught last year and the year before I don't remember students actually doing it.

Interviewer	Yes.
Respondent	It's small numbers doing it isn't it because it's a specific year.
Interviewer	Anyone in their final year if they signed up for the foundation degree they would have to do it.
Respondent	I think that's where the difference is that there are only a very small number of students and they certainly weren't made aware of it in any of my sessions, so it must've been someone else was doing it. So I don't think I've ever seen the outcomes of them. I saw the percentage and we were quite low weren't we last year for students actually doing it. But then we were sent a list earlier in the year, in the academic year, of what students are able to do. There's not that many is it because so many of them are on Cert HE, so they can't.
Interviewer	Cert HE won't do it
Respondent	And you can't have ones that are repeated in a year, can't have those so actually it's very, very few.
Interviewer	So do you ... well if you were with the computing and the management students there would be some slightly bigger numbers in that for that to be published. So would you encourage the students to do that?
Respondent	Oh definitely, I'd definitely encourage any of them to do it. But I cannot off the top of my head think about the outcomes. I haven't seen the actual survey outcomes. But yes I would definitely encourage it because it's important for them to take part in something like that, yes.
Interviewer	So are you aware of who looks at the results of the National Student Survey?
Respondent	Well I know HE Operations, the team look at it. But no not an awful lot more. The university I'm presuming looks at it, but no.
Interviewer	Okay. So what about student ... whenever student reps come to a course meeting or board of studies, so they're there and they often give feedback. So how do you react to student feedback that's given in that way?
Respondent	I think it's a good idea, but I do think probably the students feel a little bit intimidated. They're sitting in a room with ... alright they've probably got their module tutors perhaps in there. There are probably quite a few people they don't know and I think they find it intimidating and probably quite uncomfortable. I don't know how you get round that, whether it is that you ask them to write up a report and submit it to the tutor, the course tutor to read. Because I do think they find it hard and I think if the notes that they've brought may not reflect quite what they had written down. They might only be touching on things because suddenly the nerves have got to them, all these people waiting. But if they'd written that and produced it and it's like almost anonymous then I think possibly more would be said. But then the students have to be very careful because they can't sort of just be negative without constructive information, if you see what I mean.
Interviewer	So if they're sitting there in person you're saying there is a certain pressure on them to be constructive.
Respondent	Definitely, yes.
Interviewer	Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

Respondent	No, it's a good thing in some ways but it might reduce the impact of perhaps the information that they're trying to convey from the other students, they might want to report on issues and it might be that the people who they've got issues with are in the room and that could be difficult. They'd have to realise that perhaps they don't mention names and just say, 'The group have issues with' or whatever. But I just wonder if that does put off students actually voicing some of the points that have been raised. I mean I'm thinking of computing year one at the moment. I mean they're having issues with their course rep because they reckon he's not voicing their opinions. So I think there's a little bit, they're talking about putting forward another nomination. But on the whole I think we've had some really good student reps who do really give valuable input and do give the team lots to think about.
Interviewer	Yes. So if you were in a HE board of studies and the student rep was giving some feedback in front of the wider audience that is there. How would you cope with it if it put either you or your module or your course in a bad light?
Respondent	I think I'd be hurt, but I mean you'd accept that everyone has an opinion and maybe it would make me really have a good think about what I've done to improve. I mean I would be hurt, but at the same time they have every right to voice a comment and then it's down to me and presumably my line manager to discuss it to see where I've been going wrong and how we can improve it.
Interviewer	And if they say something that puts you or your module or your course in a good light?
Respondent	Well then I'm over the moon. Yes, I'd be beaming with pride. But no I wouldn't ever be cross with the person for saying that. I'd hopefully try and justify if they were raising issues, hopefully at the meeting I would be able to put my point across so that it wasn't a one sided argument. But I would be hurt if I thought that someone felt that strongly that they had to bring it. But I would want them to justify and I'd want to discuss it as well.
Interviewer	So how do you think students see the purpose of their involvement? What do they say about it? What do they say about being asked to give feedback through module evaluations or through course meetings or whatever?
Respondent	I think some students probably find it really important, the ones that can see a point in it. There are going to be others that dismiss it, they don't, they just get on with their studying and don't.
Interviewer	So why do you think they dismiss that?
Respondent	Possibly because perhaps some of them don't feel it will make a difference. But there are others that do have strong opinions and do think it should be discussed in public, at meetings or on module evaluations where they feel that they're going to give an opinion because they feel that someone should read it or hear about it to make a difference and unless they voice things then nothing will change and everyone is oblivious to actually what's going on. So we should know and they should, everyone should be encouraged to participate in some way and maybe we should do more. Maybe we should be encouraging them to have

	meetings, so group tutorials, but the tutor shouldn't be there because otherwise they're going to be inhibited. There should be more where you're getting them to meet as a group to discuss issues and maybe have guidelines so that they're covering aspects that's really important so that they're not moaning about something that's less important. It should be about the course. Everything that involves us could improve.
Interviewer	So you're talking about them giving feedback as a group in a way.
Respondent	Yes.
Interviewer	Do they all see that feedback as a group is the most important thing or some of them more individual in their approach?
Respondent	Yes. Well I can understand it. I just think that if they had group meetings where then the student rep or whatever then has notes taken to report to board of study and course team meetings or to module or to course tutor, regular meetings so that you can get feeling for what's going on with the students and how they feel. I think it would improve relations and I think also it might encourage them to do their module evaluations. It makes them feel that they're a valuable part, their voice means something and that we do take everything on board and do what we can to improve.
Interviewer	Yes. So are you aware of how management from the Dean up react to student feedback? Are you aware of them looking at module evaluations for individual tutors?
Respondent	From the dean up to the principal do you mean?
Interviewer	Yes
Respondent	I wouldn't have said, I wouldn't have known at all. I mean when we discussed the module evaluations at the end of the year, isn't it, we have the breakdown of all the modules and the statistics and what have you, I'm not even sure if the dean was there.
Interviewer	So do you think they take notice if a module is getting bad feedback? Do you think taking notice of that?
Respondent	Well I can't see. I'm not sure. I don't think I've known of them noting it or any comments having been made. If they have I don't think it's reached us at lecturer level.
Interviewer	What about feedback?
Respondent	Sorry I was going to say a line manager obviously would know, but if you're saying it from dean up to principal then no I wouldn't know, sorry.
Interviewer	Okay. Do you think the things about wider college issues or management or what students are saying about anything that's outside the realm of the course itself?
Respondent	So where would they get that from? They'd get that from the Student Survey which does about the college issues around the college isn't it, resources, facilities, all of that, so yes. So they'd probably see that I presume eventually once it's all been collated and what have you. I can't think off the top of my head of any incidents where things have been changed because students ... I can't think of anything. What was the question again? I think I've lost it.
Interviewer	There are issues related to your module and your course that you can probably do something about and then there are other issues that are wider that would take some input from

	management or across college possibly, issues. So are you aware of the student feedback about that getting through to anyone who can actually do anything?
Respondent	Not really. The only think I can think of which has changed but I don't know whether that's because of students is the car parking fee because they don't have to pay an annual. They just pay, I think and I'm not sure if it's £2.50 a day or something which is a change. But I don't know whether that was the student's voice that did that or whether it was the college policy to remove the car parking people that were here. So I don't know. But I mean I know the students used to complain about that so it might be. But I can't think really of anything where the student's voice ... that management have made a difference, I can't think of.
Interviewer	But they want us to get student feedback. So why do you think they want ... management want us to get student feedback?
Respondent	Can I be cynical? Is it just so evidence that they've got student feedback, but surely they must have to provide evidence of having listened to what they've done to make ... I don't know. I can't see where. How would we know that they've listened to the student voice? I don't know.
Interviewer	Okay. So in your teaching presumably you want to keep up a high standard in your own work. What are the motivators for that? What is it that motivates you to keep up a high standard? It takes work. What motivates you?
Respondent	It takes work. Well because I love it, I just love being with students. What motivates me is that I want them to enjoy the experience, I want them to get as good a grade as they can and I always get students to predict what grades they're going to get for the first semester and then second semester so that they've got something to motivate them, but it also encourages them to ... that you want to know what I do. What do I do?
Interviewer	Well what is it that pushes you whenever you're tired?
Respondent	Students, students. I mean it is the students that motivate me that you just want to provide the best for the students. I don't know. I do like to go that extra mile. You'll never seen me sitting down in class and I'm always walking around, always talking to them, trying to motivate them and push them. What motivates me? Well the subjects I do. I do know them well, but I do research to make sure that I'm completely up to date. Is that what you're asking me?
Interviewer	Yes.
Respondent	It is, okay.
Interviewer	And over the longer term you've seen students come and go. Are you in touch with any of them?
Respondent	Loads of them, yes. In touch with lots. I've also got students who actually work in this college that were on the degree programme and now employed at the college. I'm in touch with a lot of ex-students and watched their careers flourish and so that's huge.
Interviewer	So does that feed back into what you ...
Respondent	Absolutely and I tell the students all about them and I get ex-students have come in to talk to the current ones so that they can hear what they're doing in the workplace, what they thought about the course, what they did on the course and that's lovely

	to see. So yes I do that. So yes.
Interviewer	Okay. Well I've come to the end of my questions. Is there anything you wanted to add or you thought about further.
Respondent	No that was really interesting.
Interviewer	Okay thank you.