

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: COMMUNITY, ENGAGEMENT AND BELONGING

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Abstract. This paper explored the views of students entering higher education in the UK in 2012-13 and those entering in earlier years, to investigate their perceptions and expectations of the quality of their learning experience and the academic standards of their chosen programmes of study. This project provides illustrative examples of the issues affecting student perceptions and expectations regarding quality and standards in the first year of a funding model in England that is significantly different both to that in existence in previous years and to that operated in the other countries of the UK. Research consisted of conducting interviews and focus groups with over 150 students (primarily Years 1 and 2) at 16 institutional locations, across a range of mission groups, institutional types and UK-wide geographical location. Concept maps of students' higher education experience were collected along with transcripts of interviews. This presentation focuses on students' understanding of community, belonging and the notion of engagement as individual versus collective.
Key words: Policy research; social science; concept mapping; higher education; mixed methodology

1 Introduction

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

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

2 Student voice

Data collected from students on their expectations and perceptions of quality, standards and the student learning experience is a key part of bringing the student voice into quality assurance structures and institutional decision-making. This is relevant as the position of students in relation to higher education is dramatically changing across the countries of the UK, and indeed around the world (Klemenčič 2014). This empirically-based study provides a framework for how the student voice can feed into quality assurance decisions, and highlights what matters to students. This works complements and goes beyond literature-based reports (Gibbs 2010; Trowler 2010) and quantitative studies (Bekhradnia 2013) and captures a more holistic view of the student experience than student feedback surveys of teaching and learning (Griffin et al 2003).

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

The individual student approach of North American-style student engagement is contrasted with much of the collective and representational student engagement work in the UK, which has been defined by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) as the participation of students in quality enhancement and quality assurance processes, resulting in the improvement of their educational experience (QAA Quality Code, Chapter B5). Rather than focus specifically on how students viewed their role in quality assurance and enhancement processes, this study centred on students' perspectives of their student experience and the issues that affected the quality and standards of their experience.

3 Methodology

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

Interviews were conducted with over 150 students in sixteen settings, representing four general institutional types (research-intensive, teaching-intensive, regional-focused and special interest) across the regions of the UK. Concept map-mediated interviews and focus groups (Kandiko & Kinchin 2013) were used to elicit students' expectations and perceptions of quality, standards and the student learning experience. In the interviews and focus groups, students were first asked to make concept maps of their student experience. Concept mapping (Novak 2010) is a method of graphic organisation. Because of the capacity of concept mapping to externalise understanding, concept maps provide "a window into students' minds" (Shavelson et al. 2005: 416). Concept map use within qualitative research can facilitate the eliciting of perceived importance of concepts and the visualising of the relationships between concepts (Wheeldon & Ahlberg 2012). In the interviews, the student-generated concept map was used as a point of departure for a series of questions about how students' experiences mapped against their expectations and perceptions of higher education and issues affecting the quality of their education. This included probing students' perceptions of the major issues, and follow up questions about a number of questions related to quality and standards of teaching, learning and student engagement.

4 Analysis

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

4.1 Analysing focus group and interview data

Focus groups were analysed through an approach adapted from grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006; Corbin & Strauss 2008). After open coding eight sources, the categories were reviewed again and additional coding appeared to add more content to existing categories, rather than creating new categories. Next the categories were closely examined, combining common concepts or processes that were indicative of meta-level analytical issues. These codes were then used to construct the major themes, including that of student engagement discussed in this paper. As an additional check on the data, the focused codes and themes were discussed with a group of four undergraduate students for clarity and comprehensiveness.

4.2 Analysing concept maps

Concept maps were first used in the study as a starting point for discussion in the interviews, and as reference points throughout the interviews. The maps were initially analysed visually and holistically (Nesbit & Adesope 2006; Novak 2010), taking emergent structures into account (Kinchin et al 2000). The maps were then analysed for reflection of the 19 focused codes from the data. Additional themes from the maps that were not reflected in the codes were noted. Next the maps were analysed for structures representing broad categories. The maps were divided into those with broad discernible categories and those without. For the maps with broad categories (120 maps), the categories listed were tallied to develop a list of the twenty most commonly referenced (all with at least five indications). The analysis of the maps was compared with that of the interview and focus group data to look for any gaps. Finally, maps were selected that represented students' views regarding specific codes, themes and visualisations of the student experience. These were chosen for clarity, structure and representativeness.

5 Findings

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

5.1 Transition

The transition into higher education involved a trajectory from where students had come and into a new environment, academically, intellectually, socially and often physically as well. Many students spoke of moving into higher education as a 'transformational' experience, individually and in terms of social positioning and career prospects. Students' incoming expectations stemmed from family and friends, secondary schooling and further education and the general media and political discourse. Students' experiences of transition typically related the difference between previous college, sixth form, or employment settings and the higher education institution (see Figure 1). Returners to education, mature students entering higher education after a substantial period in employment, noted that the transition was rarely seamless. A key feature of transition for students was balancing the various demands of higher education, and what support the institution provided for them.



Figure 1: Information systems student, Regionally-focused institution, Scotland

5.2 Community

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

Participating in a variety of university activities was commonplace within the data, although far more so for those who studied full-time and had limited other commitments than for those with family or employment commitments outside of the course. Extracurricular activities, and the provision of extracurricular opportunities, were thus important for the majority of students, predominately – although not exclusively – because of the need for developing employability to advance in desired careers. Students with significant investment into extracurricular activities noted that balancing time spent on these activities and time to complete course work could be difficult (see Figure 2). Given that most students felt extracurricular activities were very important to their experience (either for employability or to maintain a balanced lifestyle) there was a sense of frustration about the perceived lack of accommodation for them within the programmed educational experience.

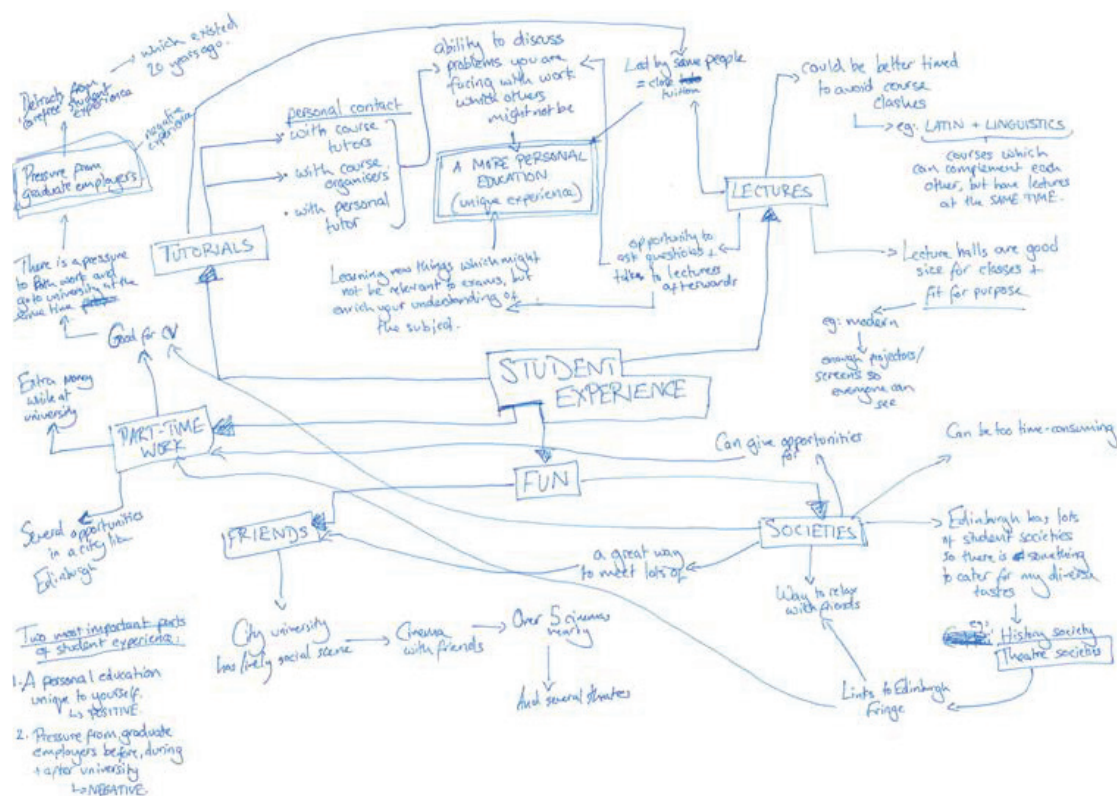


Figure 2: Classics student, Research-intensive institution, Scotland

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

5.3 Engagement

The most common way engagement was conceptualised was not in a "representational" context, but rather in the context of each individual's engagement with the institution, and the institution with them, for the enhancement of the overall learning experience. Students related to the academic community at the course-level. This

indicates the importance of local-based partnership work for engaging students and suggests institutions should avoid overreliance on representational forms of student engagement. Students' views suggest more of "a partnership of aims" with staff on their course rather than "a partnership of means", indicating more of a sense of collegiality with staff, rather than large-scale, high-level partnership work. Quite a few students viewed the institutions' approach to student engagement sceptically:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Interestingly, Students' Unions featured more in students' concept maps of their experience than in discussion of issues related to quality and standards. Students' Unions were frequently mentioned as coordinators of extra-curricular activities, offering students convenient socialising or study spaces and in terms of social activities. Representational structures were rarely mentioned by students. Such structures existed more as a quiet partner, there in case things go wrong and students needed representation to resolve serious problems. For students, most issues were resolved within the departmental context rather than being escalated beyond that (see Figure 3). There was very low engagement with Union in their 'union' function, and when such engagement was discussed it was usually by those directly involved as representatives or sabbatical officers.

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

5.4 *Belonging*

The feeling of community and opportunities for students to engage with the institution helped to give students a sense of belonging, however, students at all types of institutions struggled to balance personal commitments with those from their course. Educational returners frequently discussed family and caring roles whilst younger 'traditional'-route students more often discussed part-time work and differing academic commitments (such as course reading and assignments). The choice of which institution to attend often related to the commitments that students needed to balance in taking up study, with those who had no dependents or work commitments having greater flexibility when selecting an institution at which to study. For students on courses with placements, organising their time and meeting personal and study commitments was a constant challenge. Mature students regularly mentioned challenges of balancing their family commitments with being a student.

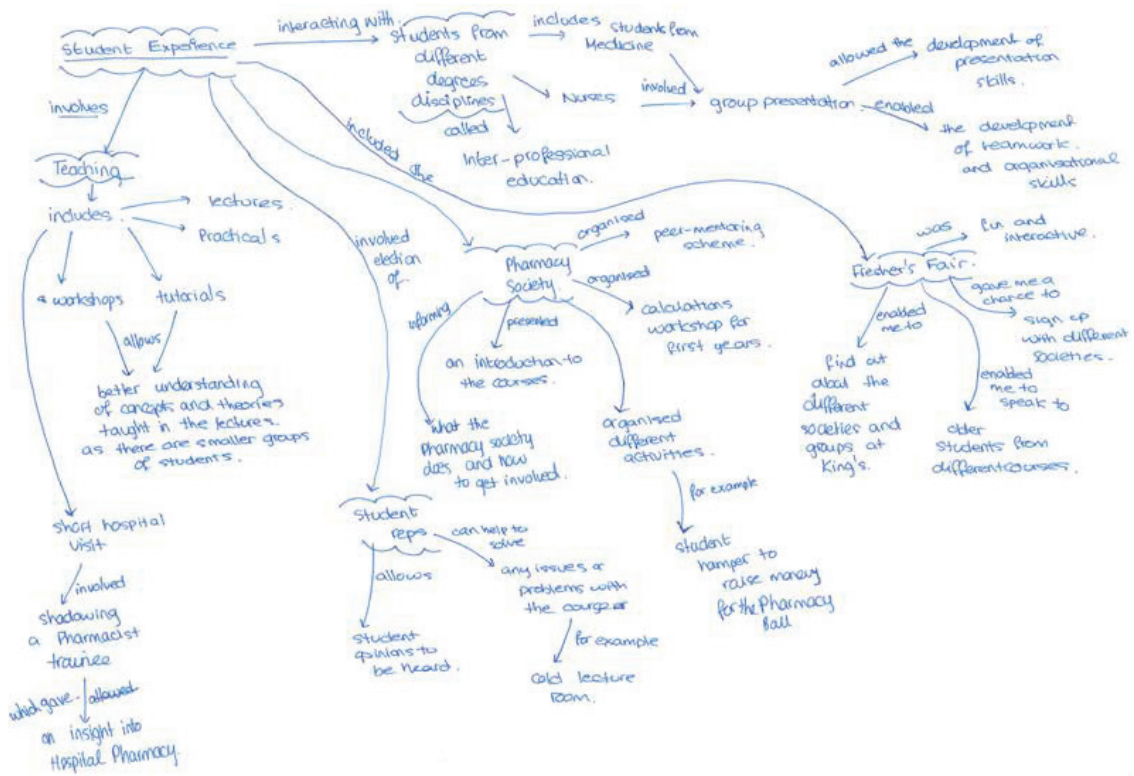


Figure 3: Pharmacy student, Research-intensive institution, England

Even for students without extensive family or employment commitments, balancing activities in which they participated could prove troublesome. Part-time work could impinge upon the time students could allocate to studies, requiring particular attention during high intensity periods of study (see Figure 3). Whilst part-time work alone did not problematically take time away from study, it contributed an additional activity that must be balanced alongside commitments to study, extracurricular and employability engagements and social lives.

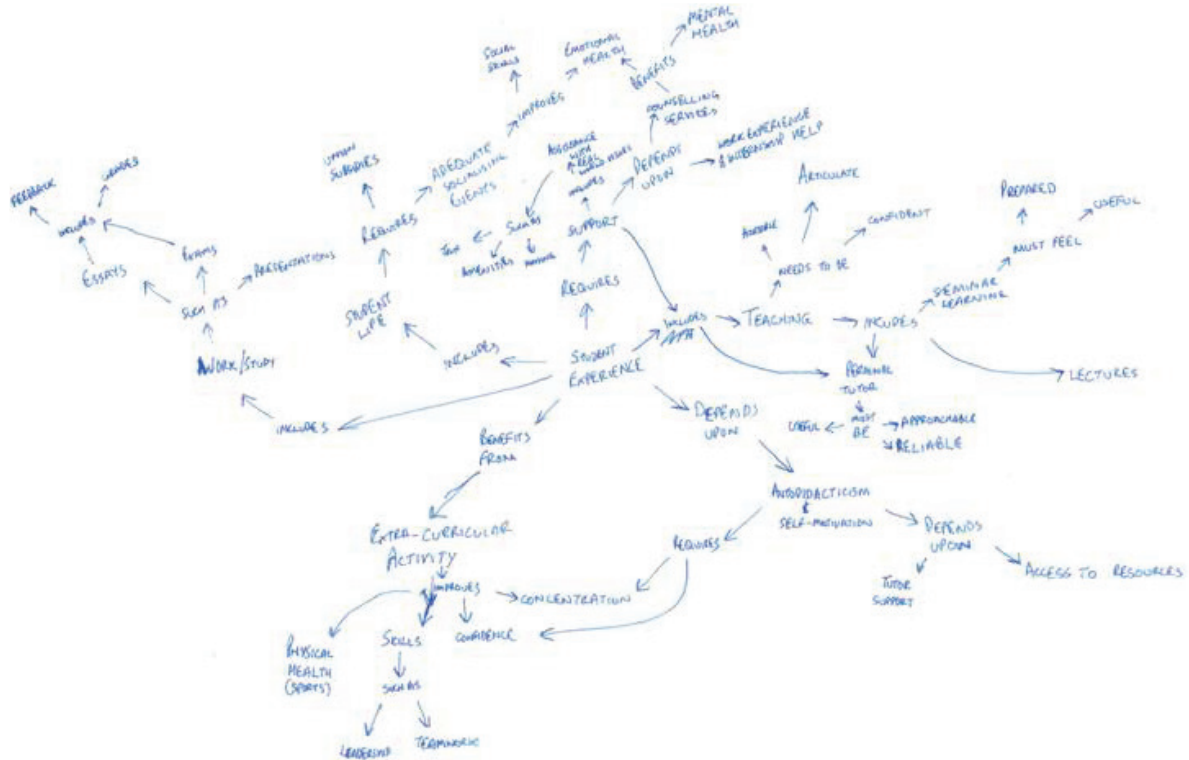


Figure 4: English Literature student, Research-intensive institution, England

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

6 Conclusions

Concept maps of students' experiences allow for the visualisation of how students conceptualise what matters in higher education. This includes the importance of transition both in an academic sense (see Figure 1) and socially (see Figure 3). As the maps show, these are interrelated elements of their experience. To support this, institutions need to foster a welcoming and supportive sense of community, between staff and students. For students this involves a sense of shared aims, shared identity and shared spaces—at the subject level and institutionally.

Support is a key element in students' experiences. This is seen in terms of resources, staff time, curricular and extra-curricular activities (see Figure 4). Since students related to the academic community at the course-level, this indicates the importance of local-based partnership work for engaging students and suggests institutions should avoid overreliance on institutional-level representational forms of student engagement. Students value a local, personal experience (see Figure 2). This supports students' transition and academic development. A local-based approach requires multiple forms of, and more localised approaches to, partnership between senior management, central services, academic departments and Students' Unions. As part of a focus on a 'localism' approach to representation, there needs to be greater evidence-based decision-making, particularly at the local level, in response to student concerns, teaching quality and course management.

Students seem to value individual-based engagement for their learning experience, highlighting individual and personal contact with staff and access to resources. This affects how students frame relationships, particularly at the course level, as seen in the role of societies (see Figures 2-4), which also bring in social elements. Interestingly, this is mirrored in wider, representational and collective engagement, which features mainly in the concept maps. For most students, representation is mentioned at the course-level, focused on local concerns. This does raise a question of how representational more collective forms of engagement are across the student body, and how well they are able to represent students' largely individual concerns. This is important to consider as the power of the student voice rises in institutions, and as a key component of quality in higher education.

7 Summary

Students have positive perceptions of higher education, but also clear expectations in mind of what institutions should provide to support and enable their learning and enhance their career prospects. Students wanted to be challenged in their learning, but also supported by the institution. Students have complex views about engagement- it clearly is very important to students but is largely personal and individual. Institutions should be cautious of over-relying on representational forms of engagement, but rather use those as a complement to developing students' sense of belonging through localised and personalised support. The visualisation of students' experiences shows how being part of a community is a key quality component.

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