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| Key Theme Report |
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| Reassessing higher education qualificationsPolicy Development Convention, 5-6 December 2013 |

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| Rationale and Context |

## Rationale

When we talk to each other abouteducation we talk about what really matters: work we are proud of, incredible things we have learned and the people who supported us to achieve.

It is time to restart that conversation as a national movement and consider what higher education qualifications need to be like for every student to be enabled and inspired.

In doing this we not only begin work to reimagine what higher education could enable students to become, we also concentrate our energies on an area of day-to-day concern for many education officers: issues of teaching, learning and assessment.

## Context

Many people have dedicated a great deal of their time investigating what motivates students to enter into higher education. Though this work is no doubt interesting, for the purposes of reassessing higher education qualifications it is a distraction. It is clear that higher education benefits both individuals and society,[[1]](#footnote-1) but transformation through education happens at a deeply personal level.

Our higher education system should be capable of preparing students for meaningful employment, participation in civic society, success in an increasingly interconnected world, and much more besides. However, it should not presume which of these, if any, should be the most important for students.

Simply put, the way our higher education sector is structured should enable students to achieve their ambitions, whatever they may be.

The goal of this key theme should be to prioritise areas of work that have the largest impact on student success.

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| Consultation |

## Research papers

To support discussion and deliberation at zone conference our exploratory research was grouped into five aspects of higher education qualifications: formal learning, informal learning, outcomes, feedback and assessment, and study.

Across these aspects we examined the cross-cutting issues of inclusivity and accessibility.

These aspects were not intended to be prescriptive, nor were they intended to be each treated in isolation. They were a tool to support conversations among delegates.[[2]](#footnote-2)

## Formal learning

This paper looked at deconstructing the lecture, framing it as an authoritarian learning environment where structure limits the extent to which students question what and how they learn. It also examined the challenge of ensuring teaching is valued properly as well as how diversity in learning can be improved.

## Informal learning

Much of the work to recognise student participation in informal learning has been very focused on the student as an individual. However the evidence is that students are best enabled to stay on course and be academically successful when they have a sense of belonging in the academic sphere. All this would suggest that student success depends a great deal on feeling part of a learning community, which can extend beyond the boundaries of the formal classroom environment.

## Outcomes

This section examined citizenship, capabilities, employability, types of degrees and the extent to which higher education acts to disconnect students from their home communities. At its best, education makes people more capable: more free to make decisions, achieve outcomes that have value and affect the world around them.

## Study

This paper framed study as the interaction between students, their peers, academics, their environment and resources. Study could be said to fulfil two purposes: to create new competencies and understanding and to develop existing competencies and understanding. You can study new ideas, or consider familiar ideas in a new context. The resources available, and the environment students are in, will change the way students study. Who gets to decided what resources and spaces are available to students, and how connected is this to course design?

## Feedback and assessment

The idea of authentic assessment is that the assessment task is relatable to the context in which the learning will be used beyond the assessment, underpinned by a belief that assessment is most accurate when you are asking students to use it in context. For example, instead of a computing student being asked to describe the process of writing a computer programme, they would be asked to write a computer programme.

If successful assessment and feedback is underpinned by constant dialogue, reflection and refinement, how can we better understand how and where these conversations are happening? Who is involved in these communities and who is not?

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## Facilitated deliberation

At Higher Education Zone Conference, each of these research papers was presented as a poster display. Delegates then had the opportunity to pick an area of interest and deliberate in small groups, eventually agreeing on a number of ideas to put forward as a group.

Of 120 ideas these were negotiated down to 17 through a deliberative process.

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| Response from membership |

## Feedback from HE Zone

A large number of the ideas put forward concerned higher education qualifications being fit for diverse cohorts of students. Proposals included “Take account of variety of students,” “[qualification] systems that fit ALL the people,” and “open/flexible curriculum.”

A great deal of interest was also expressed in the impact higher education had on students’ ability to develop and be successful, for example ideas such as “Radicalising personal development,” “Research disparity of grad outcomes” came through strongly, and references to employability, skills or success emerged in the majority of group proposals.

The ideas generated through deliberation picked up on themes of learning community and the importance of students leading/being partners in/shaping their learning.

### Concerns

It was clear from facilitated conversations and ideas that came through both group proposals and the deliberative session that “employability” was a key concern for many delegates.

“Employability” has often been reframed to take in to account the role of labour markets, employer preferences, societal structures and social capital but particular concerns around “employability” and “graduate skills for employment” continue to resurface. Our proposals must address whether we address this head on or continue to express related ideas of outcomes and opportunities for achievement.

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## Feedback from the Policy Portal

So far there have been a limited number of responses to the theme on the Policy Portal.

One contribution centred on design of the curriculum and assessment. The contributor described a system in which students could pick a module from any department within the institution as part of their programme.

They also described changes to module structure, “[changing] the structure of modules moving from a parallel structure to a single structure in which students would study one module after another…This could be a good thing as it would encourage intense learning on one module but would eliminate complementary information from one module to another.”

Finally the contributor suggested a system in which students could choose the method of assessment.

Another contributor summarised: “I guess this is fundamentally about what the purpose of university is and why different students come to university in the first place….

If you believe that the purpose of university is to expand knowledge and understanding then you are less likely to believe that achievements other than a students’ academic work should be formally recognised by a university. Conversely if you believe the purpose of university is to help the economy, or promote social mobility, then you are more likely to accept other qualifications or achievements being formally recognised by a university.”

A higher education expert present at zone conference observed:

“[The] tension between functionalism and more complex views of the role of the University was evident in the workshop. A number of groups discussed employability but took diverse approaches to it. Some saw it through the lens of skills for a proposed career.

However the table I was on came to the view that HE is about providing transformative space. Several had personal stories entering HE to follow a particular career; who took part in events focused on that pathway but then paused and set off on a different journey. They discovered HE is above all a transformative space: a space in which individuals can discover themselves, their real drivers – and also can discover community. ‘We’ rather than ‘me’.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

## Survey Results

In a poll of 932 students[[4]](#footnote-4) we asked two questions relating to higher education qualifications.

*To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:*

*‘I believe my current course will help me achieve my ambitions.’*

Almost 90 per cent of students agreed with this statement.

Students who had never visited their students’ union were least likely to agree with this statement, though agreement was still strong (60 per cent).

*To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:*

*‘My course isn’t just a course, it’s a learning community.’*

73 per cent of students agreed with this statement. Agreement was strongest amongst international students and postgraduate students, with 50 per cent of both strongly agreeing.

Only 32 per cent of students who had never visited their students’ unions strongly agreed with this statement.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

## Points for Policy Development

Based on the ideas proposed through HE Zone, it is suggested that we develop policy around the following interconnected areas:

* Learning communities that aid retention, and support student development and success
* Students leading and creating
* Inclusivity and flexibility in education

The challenge is to set out short and medium term goals for higher education qualifications that support students collectively to have a transformative learning experience inside and outside the classroom.

In developing these policy areas we should be clear on the practical implications for the work of NUS, and students’ unions, as well as our rationale and beliefs.

**Learning communities supporting student development and success**

Teaching, assessment and feedback practices that contribute to the formation and sustaining of a learning community.

Effective transition into and through learning communities in higher education.

How informal learning opportunities are created and how they support the development of an accessible, inclusive learning community in which students can develop their confidence, knowledge, networks and skills.

Students’ unions developing their understanding of how they can activate their learning community and support student retention, progression and success.

**Students leading and creating**

Students developing the skills and knowledge to shape their education environment through representation and as a partner.

Students mentoring and supporting other students as learners; student-owned learning and knowledge spaces.

A more ‘open’ curriculum that enables students to create their own pathways through learning.

Student-led ideas of ‘success’ in higher education – employability, activism, citizenship.

**Inclusivity and flexibility**

A higher education provider’s ‘offer’ will enable or constrain different types of students and their success. Policy we propose and actions we take should address how students’ unions can positively champion flexible and inclusive opportunities and communities.

## Areas not included

These proposals do not cover a number of areas that HE Zone Conference indicated were of interest to the membership.

For instance, they do not explicitly cover the esteem of teaching, teaching standards or remedial actions to be taken where ‘poor’ teaching exists.

However, NUS has existing policy on teaching excellence and on quality assurance and enhancement. There are also existing programmes of work that support students’ unions in carrying out activities in these areas.

These include the Student-led teaching awards and bespoke consultancy around the quality assurance process.

These proposals also do not at present address issues around research, particularly in terms of how research activity in departments is balanced with teaching or how we imagine postgraduate research qualifications or postgraduate researchers.

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254101/bis-13-1268-benefits-of-higher-education-participation-the-quadrants.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Text versions of the papers are available at http://policy.nusconnect.org.uk/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A number of “higher education experts” recommended by students’ union officers were kind enough to attend HE zone conference to contribute to the discussion. All experts, and students’ union staff, stepped out of the session at the point when ideas where to be resolved and prioritised. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 44% Male / 54% Female

73% UK students / 11% EU / 16% Outside EU

15% FE / 41% First year UG / 18% 2nd year+ UG / 19% PG [↑](#footnote-ref-4)