

# Academic and professional services in partnership literature review and overview of results

Leading the Student Experience

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## Foreword

Marketisation of higher education, contrary to expectation, has not led to a highly differentiated sector. Students see that they are paying more for their education and consequently have greater expectations of their university experience. The reality for institutions is that they are having to spend more on attracting and retaining students, whilst financial drivers tend toward cost savings, efficiency and greater cost effectiveness. Institutions are convinced of the need to provide a high quality student experience but in the most cost effective way. However, many of the things that students expect and value in relation to their time at university involve more contact time with academic staff and greater personal support.

There are many different models in the way such support can be delivered but students appear to be less inclined to accept support if it is delivered by professional staff (no matter how highly they are qualified) than by their own, disciplinary academic staff. This highlights the need for closer and more collaborative working between academic and professional staff on issues where the latter may be the more experienced but the former can provide the disciplinary discourse and context.

This timely pilot study, whilst the authors recognise its limitations, provides an overview of the current state of collaborative working within a range of higher education institutions, explores the challenges and barriers faced in developing such working and provides some case studies to illustrate how this is being implemented in different institutions. The study has also resulted in a tool that can be used as a prompt to guide the development of collaborations between academic and professional staff.

This study will act as a stimulus for higher education to break down the barriers between academic and professional staff and provide a holistic, high quality and cost effective approach to the student experience.

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## Executive summary

Higher Education (HE) in England is currently experiencing a period of rapid, continuous change and uncertainty, caused in part by the new funding regime that has significantly increased student fees. Putting 'students at the heart of the system' through sector marketisation brings with it the additional expectation that students will demand more from their HE experience (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011). With the rise in tuition fees failing to create the originally anticipated differentiation between HE providers (Patton 2011; Sedghi & Shepherd, 2011), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have to find new ways of ensuring they sustain a competitive edge in order to recruit and retain their students. Furthermore, with HEIs relying on tuition fee income for institutional sustainability, it is increasingly important that HEIs enable the effective progression and success of their students.

Notwithstanding the external factors that can occur and influence student retention, progression and success, this project focuses attention on those elements that are within the power of institutions to control or influence, such as further development and investment to align the academic, support and social dimensions of the student experience. This position is underpinned by the What Works? Student Engagement to Improve Student Retention and Success Model (Thomas, 2012) which posits that it is the successful generation of a sense of belonging in students that enables effective progression and success in HE. The model suggests this is best achieved through centralisation of the academic sphere to encompass interaction with professional services and social spheres of institutional activity. The intersection of these three spheres is considered to be the optimum site for the development of a sense of belonging in students. Evidence shows that when professional support - interactions with services and student development activities - are introduced and delivered through the academic sphere, students are more likely to engage and access them in the future (Thomas, 2012). Collaborative working by professional and academic staff at the intersection of these spheres has therefore emerged as being particularly important for student engagement, retention and success, and forms the basis of the investigations reported here.

*Leading the Student Experience: academic and professional services in partnership*, identifies some of the key factors underpinning the success of such collaborations designed to enhance 'the student experience'. This report presents a discussion of emergent themes arising from a small questionnaire survey; thirteen focus groups and interviews across ten institutions throughout England and Scotland, and a validation workshop with research participants. A variety of staff from a diverse range of institutions explored their experiences of engagement in such partnerships. The themes identified were further contextualised through analysis of four institutional exemplars that were felt to be of practical interest to the sector, whose activities ranged from improving personal tutoring arrangements to implementing rapid institution-wide change.

This project has explored a range of collaborative activities between staff from academic and professional domains envisaged as crucial to enhancing 'the student experience'. Common themes identified from our analysis indicate that such work can prove an effective method of self-improvement and enhancement through providing a holistic overview of systems and practices and therefore, enhance the experience of those systems and practices by students. For such collaborative work to be effective there must be support at the strategic level, with the contribution this makes to institutional sustainability recognised through clear mechanisms that reward and/or recognise the work of staff and students involved.

Many research participants described the changing ways in which staff from different domains are increasingly working together as unsettling. It is important therefore that staff across the institution are supported in developing their understanding of the internal and external drivers for working together to enhance the experience of students, whilst recognising that sector and organisational change is often organic, complex and sometimes 'messy'. At both the strategic and partnership level, effective collaborative developments are underpinned by the characteristics of honesty, openness and disclosure.

The project led to the production of a 'Toolkit' to promote effective partnerships across academic and professional services to enhance 'the student experience'. Drawing on the diversity of the student body and of experiences within it, the toolkit recognises a range of context specific activities and environments that students are likely to come into contact with while engaged in their studies. The 'Toolkit' should be seen as a facilitative resource that encourages institutions to consider such partnerships through a thematic self-reflection exercise. It focuses on those elements of the 'student experience' that are within an institution's power to control and/or influence and those that are likely to benefit from successful working partnerships across academic and professional services.

The project report and toolkit are likely to be particularly valuable to those working at the strategic level to lead and support collaborative practices that enhance the student experience and ensure institutional sustainability. They will also be of use to those directly involved in the delivery of effective partnerships across the academic and professional service spheres of institutional activity. The research may also be of general interest to staff involved in: the evolution of staffing groups within institutional activity; partnership working to enhance the student experience alongside those developing activities and relationships to promote student retention and success.

# I. Research focus

This section provides an introduction to the issue being investigated, a brief consideration of the changing context of higher education (HE) and the drivers for partnership across institutional staff groups. It moves on to outline the research aims, objectives and questions that underpinned the research on which the toolkit was based.

## I.1 Identifying the issue for investigation

Current rapid changes specific to higher education in England have left the sector in a state of flux. The coalition government, which came into power in 2010, has embarked on a number of radical changes that have affected how higher education is funded with the aim of creating a more market-like environment, with higher education institutions (HEIs) competing against each other for students (Brown 2011). As part of this, the government's white paper 'Students at the Heart of the System' reconceptualises university tuition as being primarily paid for by the individual student rather than the state and the student together (DBIS, 2011). This is framed as integral to putting students in the centre of higher education concerns (Bulpitt 2012; DBIS 2011) with the concomitant expectation that students will expect more from their student experience (DBIS 2011). Already there is evidence, corroborated by our own research, that universities are focusing significant effort on enhancing the student experience in order both to retain existing students as well as market themselves to prospective students (DBIS 2011; Thomas 2012). Moreover, with the anticipated market in terms of differential fees at different HEIs failing to materialise, many institutions chose to charge the maximum allowed £9,000 per year with most others also charging substantially more than the government had anticipated (Patton 2011; Sedghi & Shepherd 2011). With the overall cost of a higher education remaining similar whichever institution students choose, HEIs now have to differentiate themselves in other ways. Bulpitt (2012) identifies that one way to achieve this is by developing and investing in the academic, support and social dimensions of the student experience.

Macfarlane (2011) reminds us, however, that the student experience has, for some time, been seen as vital to recruiting and retaining students, and is therefore not purely a response to recent sector changes. Many HEIs, since moves towards widening participation began in the UK, have been engaged in efforts to ensure that their provision enables a diverse community of students to be successful. Broadfoot, in the foreword to the report: *What Works? Student engagement and success: Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change* (Thomas 2012) argues that this is a moral responsibility of HEIs: having accepted the student the institution should, where possible, enable their success through institutional transformation (Jones and Thomas 2005; Thomas and May 2011). Drawn from a programme of activity across 22 HEIs, the report by Thomas (2012) considers the aspects of the higher education experience that are important in engaging students and consequently aid their progression and success. Where this report differs from much previous work is in the positioning of the academic sphere as central to the experience and success of students, and resonates with notions of developing the whole student (Quinlan 2011). Previously, institution-wide, generic academic skills programmes have often developed outside the discipline curriculum and have been perceived as external to and separate from the academic sphere (Macfarlane 2011).

Recent evidence shows that when professional support - interactions with services and student development activities - are introduced and delivered through the academic sphere, students are more likely to engage and access them in the future (Thomas 2012). Collaborative working between professional and academic areas of activity has thus emerged as being particularly important for student engagement, retention and success. This recognition that professional and academic staff working together can have a positive impact on the student experience therefore forms the starting point of the *Leading the Student Experience: Academics and Professional Services in Partnership project*.

## I.2 Research aims and objectives

This practitioner-based study was interested in the ways in which academic and professional staff work together to enhance the student experience. Its key aims were to:

- investigate the current state of play of partnership working to support the student experience in a variety of institutions delivering higher education;
- highlight what makes the current successful models work both in terms of the challenges that arise in relation to building effective partnerships and teamwork as well as the activities and behaviours that lead to success;
- develop a toolkit to facilitate HE providers in developing or implementing such partnerships.

## I.3 Key research questions

In order to meet the aims and objectives above, the following research questions were posed:

- Who is currently developing or has already developed successful partnership models for delivering and enhancing the student experience?
- What is the experience of those who are developing or have already developed these partnership models?
  - How have these models been constructed or evolved?
  - What staffing structures and arrangements have been needed to implement these models?
  - What changes to organisational structures have been required and how have these been implemented?
  - How have students been involved in shaping these models?

- How have leadership, management and governance helped or hindered these developments?
- What is the staff experience of working within these models and how has this fed into the model?
- How can these experiences be used to support future initiatives in this area?

## 2. A review of literature

A significant proportion of the literature on partnership working in higher education centres on external partnerships between, for example, the NHS, schools and higher education institutions (HEIs). There appears to be much less literature on partnership working within the same institution. Partnership working, team working and collaboration are often used synonymously; though there are subtle differences between the terms (see McKimm et al. 2008). Due to the overlaps in these terms within the literature, the term 'partnership working' will be used synonymously with 'collaborative working' and 'team working' in this particular literature review and is defined as when professional and academic staff come together to engage in activities within a higher education institutional setting.

### 2.1 Emergence of partnerships within HEIs

Whitchurch (2013, p. 5) indicates there is growing 'evidence of increasing alliance between professional and academic staff' to support the functions of HEIs. One reason for this may be that HEIs need to engage in collaborative work between different groups of staff in order to innovate (Duke 2003). This potentially offers flexibility with different collaborations being possible depending on the needs of the activity, as well as drawing on different sets of expertise and working practices from across the institution (Whitchurch 2013). Collaborative projects may come about from external sources or pressures, for example, the 'Students at the heart of the system' White Paper (DBIS 2011) or from an internal recognition that an aspect of the institution would benefit from considering and/or changing, for example, converging student services to increase efficiency while enhancing the student experience (Bulpitt 2012). This would seem to fit in with the synergy model of partnership working as articulated by Powell and Glendinning (cited in Perkins et al. 2010) which identifies partnership working as resulting in outcomes greater than any one partner could produce on their own.

Collaborative provision involving partnerships between different groups has the potential to bring together previously fragmented aspects of an institution to enhance and offer a holistic and less contradictory student experience (Bulpitt 2012). This also allows students to see an integrated institution where different aspects of provision work to complement one another, thus creating a whole educational experience (Dorskatsch 2003; Quinlan 2011). Thomas (2012) further argues that if a student's interactions with professional and academic staff form an integral part of their studies, a more positive attitude towards both their HEI and their HE experience develops. This can foster a sense of belonging which, in turn, can impact on a student's engagement in their studies and with the institution, and on their likelihood of completing their qualification successfully (Thomas 2012).

Macfarlane (2011) sees another potential advantage of collaborative working as developing a greater understanding of the roles, skills and attributes of colleagues from areas of the institution that might not normally work closely together. This can help in building institutional cohesion and establish good working relationships between non-cognate areas through allowing staff to work with new people and in new ways. Through offering staff members opportunities to expand their skills and experiences the benefits to both staff and the institution are great.

In Bulpitt's case studies the successes of super-convergence, of bringing together many facets of the student experience into a partnership, align with the benefits articulated above and include being able to: deliver 'innovative services'; review and improve aspects of provision; provide more integrated support for students and 'better informed/empowered/enriched staff with a better understanding of each other's roles and of jobs as a whole' (2012, p. 29). Bulpitt (2012) further argues that these benefits are of greater importance within the new fees' structure as students perceive themselves increasingly as consumers of a higher education experience.

### 2.2 The third space

A useful concept for considering work that involves both academic and professional spheres is that of 'third space'. Whitchurch (2013) defines third space environments as being 'between professional and academic spheres of activity' (p. 3). In her earlier work, Whitchurch (2008a) particularly considers third space as being exemplified by projects needing the input and involvement of staff from across the institution from both academic areas and professional areas such as finance, student support and library services. Staff members who work within these environments are often those who have management-level experience and have previously worked in both professional and academic spheres (Whitchurch 2013). Those permanently working in such environments may be considered as 'third space professionals' who often have a mixture of aspects to their job, being involved in managerial activities as well as professional and academic ones (Whitchurch 2013). There is also evidence that institutions are explicitly recruiting individuals with the abilities to work across both academic and professional domains on these kinds of partnership projects involving different areas of the institution (Whitchurch 2008a). Although how far this idea is new and differs from the traditional duties of 'academic-related' roles that have existed in many institutions for some time is not clear.

What is most probably new about the notion of the third space is that it is a recognised, often project related, space in which a range of staff – academics, third space professionals, domain specific managers and non-management level staff - and students, meet to work together.

Ideally, as exemplified by projects in the HEA ‘Students as Partners’ change programme initiative (HEA 2012), groups who come together to work in this space do so in non-hierarchical fashion, acknowledging the skills and attributes that each individual brings to the project to ensure the project’s success. How this happens in practice is a key feature of the *Leading the Student Experience: Academics and Professional Services in Partnership* project, and informs the toolkit to help other institutions wishing to engage in similar collaborative, partnership work.

It is important to note, however, that forming such partnerships does not necessarily lead to equitable working models. There can be a danger that it can become ‘a division of labour between academic and professional staff, with a loss of control on the part of the academic staff’ (Whitchurch 2012, p. 113). Macfarlane (2011) goes further to argue that this can result in increasing divisions of labour within HEIs with academics feeling disempowered and deskilled as aspects of their academic roles are taken away from them by up-skilled specialist support staff or ‘para-academics’. In turn, such specialist support staff may feel as if they are interloping and not valued for their skills and abilities (Whitchurch 2013).

This is a salient point as recent findings from the *What works: Student retention and success* project (Thomas 2012) indicates that the academic sphere is absolutely central to promoting student belonging and retention. If professional staff are stepping into the academic sphere to take on aspects of academic roles the concerns that accompany this may be counterproductive to the broader endeavour. The coming together of the two groups within the academic sphere, which have in many institutions been perceived as in binary opposition, may lead to challenges in creating a positive third space for collaborative and partnership activities to take place.

Whitchurch (2010a) describes three phases through which individuals may go in working towards successful third space activities: contestation, reconciliation and reconstruction. In the contestation phase, participants may attempt to work within the rules and regulations of the institution but realise the difficulties of working within these existing structures. There may be an acknowledgment that the usual working practices of the institution are more of a hindrance for this particular activity, but this acknowledgement may not be made publically. This may lead to implicit resistance that prevents progression onto the reconciliation and reconstruction stages, leading to failure of partnership working at the first stage.

Reconciliation (Whitchurch 2010a) describes a phase where those involved try to work out the differences within the group. At this point, differences in working practices, rules and regulations are negotiated and then, within reconstruction, are transformed through collaboration to potentially form new ways of working. These processes are not necessarily linear, are likely to co-occur in a more organic process, and different people within the group may be at different phases to each other at any one time (Whitchurch 2010a). Although working through these phases may be painful, ultimately they can prove to be beneficial. The process of stepping away from trying to work within existing practices and instead looking at completely new ways of doing things may be more fruitful in the end (Crossley & Corbyn 2010), and resonant with the idea of a new working space: the third space.

In light of this, the role of the leadership and management of these partnerships needs to be taken into account. Changes in practice and role can be anxiety provoking, particularly if new partnerships mean negotiating new boundaries, responsibilities and ways of working. In short, such change can often be difficult to control, easily disturbed and messy (Fullan 2007). Part of the management role in partnership working is to help the participants and stakeholders overcome any defensiveness and resistance to change, including those in senior management positions, students and any other staff affected (James 1999).

Another potential source of anxiety is that activities taking place in third space environments can often be organic in nature and may move in unanticipated directions (Whitchurch 2008a; 2008b). For those who like their work to be carefully planned, this may require the development of new skills. Crossley and Corbyn (2010) indicate that successful transformation may require an abandonment of what was done previously and a redeployment of resources, including personnel, but that this ultimately leads to innovation and collaboration. However, timescales for this kind of behavioural change can be lengthy. It was also highlighted by participants in Whitchurch’s study (2008a) that as such activities did not always take place within the traditional hierarchies and networks of the institution, there were issues of accountability. This highlights the clear need for clear rules of engagement, responsibilities (to the project and others) and clear project or ownership by a senior member of staff within an HEI. Many of the above findings are backed up by research into leadership of external collaborations in higher education by Levitt et al. (2011)

### **2.3 Leadership, management and spanning boundaries**

Gill (2006, p. 68) indicates that leaders are important in ‘spanning organizational boundaries and co-ordinating activity across them’. This boundary spanning role is further highlighted in Bolden et al.’s (2012) report on leadership in higher education and with regards to liaison and facilitation of activities, and also in Levitt et al. (2011) when discussing how to ensure successful communication and drive activities forward on a day-to-day basis. Bolden et al. (2012) also emphasise the importance of informal leadership roles and responsibilities in acting ‘as a source of inspiration, guidance, support and direction’ (p. 42). Leadership within partnership working is therefore necessarily multi-dimensional with no set template as to what or who will

make a good leader. Underpinning such leadership, however, are key skills and values associated with creating and supporting inter-personal relationships, building trust and understanding complexity (Williams 2002; 2010). Ultimately, a project or initiative that crosses institutional boundaries (as partnership working does) necessarily needs leaders who value and understand the importance of breaking down relevant boundaries and shaping and redefining the perceptions of others (see Lukes 1974; James 1999). Other attributes associated with successful boundary spanners include: being creative and helping to find new and innovative solutions; having high levels of trust; being able to engage well with others and understand the positions and points of view of others (Williams 2002). These are all attributes which can help to relieve some of the challenges of partnership working and which resonate with the concept of third space professionals as articulated by Whitchurch (2013). As such, the third space professional or boundary spanner appears well placed to take part in partnership and collaborative working and to take on leadership roles in this sphere.

Yet, some third space professionals have been found to be 'people oriented but diffident about managing others' (Whitchurch 2013 p.95), preferring a more collaborative and collegiate approach to working with others, finding hierarchical management structures constraining. This can result in such individuals being reluctant to take on leadership and management roles and/or to assume that everyone holds similar views to them. In the acknowledged messiness of the change process, and with no guarantee that everyone else is a collegial worker, this lack of leadership may result in a project or initiative stalling.

In HEIs that are hierarchically driven, with many still expecting academics to take on higher level roles in organisational change projects, third space leaders may lack formal or traditional authority and, in turn, access to resources and personnel (see Alexander et al. 2001). Further, where partnerships sit outside the usual institutional structures, care needs to be taken as to how communication between the team and other stakeholders is achieved (Whitchurch 2008b). For example, there may be a number of committees which would be appropriate to keep updated on the progress of any partnership initiative, but not all committees can or should be directly involved in the operational management of the project. Clear lines need to be drawn between those groups to whom project updates should be communicated and those groups who should be formally consulted. Moreover, however far communication plans go, they rely on the active engagement of stakeholders with the message or their attendance at relevant meetings. Knowing your audience and their readiness for change is fundamental to this process (see Gannaway and Hinton 2011).

Additionally, promotion and reward structures may not have evolved to take into account such collaborative work (Macfarlane 2011; Thomas 2012). This may be particularly the case for academic staff where reward structures in the 'prestige economy' are often based around publications and research activities (Blackmore and Kandiko 2012), and may act as a disincentive for academic staff to be too involved in such work. Giving staff the time to be able to work on these projects within their working day may also be a challenge for their direct line managers as cross-institutional work may take staff away from engaging in departmental work, for example, taking academic staff away from disciplinary-related research or teaching; or professional staff away from their contractual tasks.

The issue of discourse may also be pertinent. Within higher education institutions, different groups of people engage in different discourses and the same thing may be talked about very differently, depending on who is leading the discussion (Whitchurch 2008b; Macfarlane 2011). The reaction of others to the discourse being used can potentially be positive or negative, depending on the connotations of that discourse to them. This is not simply an issue between professional and academic staff, but can also be found to be problematic between different academic 'tribes' who have been socialised into very different ways of thinking, writing and working within their disciplinary contexts (see Becher and Trowler 2001).

People engaged in the contestation phase as outlined earlier may also engage in 'double-speak' whereby they may be privately contesting the discourse while publically using it (Whitchurch 2010b). Therefore, these different discourses between academic and professional staff may lead to difficulties with efforts needed to ensure a joint understanding (Macfarlane 2011; Whitchurch 2008a; Whitchurch 2008b). The process of constructing a joint understanding, however, is a potential positive impact of partnership working as new, negotiated meanings are created, bringing together the different groups working together.

Overall, while partnership working has its challenges, there are also clear benefits. Commitment from those involved, trust, a shared sense of vision, a recognition of the attributes that the different parties bring to the table and new modes and channels of communication are indicators of successful partnerships (Perkins et al. 2010). A clear sense of direction of travel - what the partnership working is trying to achieve and what it might look like - is also important and this needs grass-roots support, including from the student body, rather than being solely directed from the top (Crossley & Corbyn 2010).

## 3. Methodological approach

This section provides further information about the methodology employed, the project's data collection methods, and the research sites and research sample involved.

### 3.1 Research approach

Situated within an interpretivist paradigm and using a non-probability sampling technique, this study acknowledged the complex relationship between people's attitudes and their behaviour. Indeed, the 'thick descriptions' (see Geertz 1973) collected have informed understanding as to why partnerships between academic and professional staff are experienced as they are, and how they might go on to influence the subsequent experiences of students in HE. This approach is useful as it 'has special value for investigating complex and sensitive issues ... providing ... rich descriptive detail' (Trochim 2006) and has allowed this study to focus on and explore the perspectives and experiences of the individuals and groups who undertake partnership working in practice.

#### 3.1.1 Data collection methods

Data was gathered in three phases to aid triangulation of and the ability to confirm the findings which would inform the development of the self-assessment tool. These phases are detailed below and included a questionnaire survey, focus group interviews with four institutional exemplars, followed by a post-data collection validation workshop.

### 3.2 Phase one: A questionnaire survey to identify focus group institutions

The purpose of the survey was to give an overview of the models of partnership working currently being used within higher education and, ultimately, to inform the selection of institutions as exemplars of practical significance. The specifics of the survey were discussed and refined by the steering group and then piloted before sector-wide distribution. The ethical procedures for research at Newman University were fully followed.

#### 3.2.1 Participants

The research was initiated with an open invitation to the sector to participate via a survey which was circulated twice to over 300 institutions across the United Kingdom. The first sweep took place in August and the second in September 2012. The survey was distributed electronically to institutions within the HE sector, including private providers and colleges providing HE in FE. Directors of Learning Support Services were initially targeted using distribution lists such as AMOSSHE (a student services organisation), a call on the 'Student Retention and Success' JISC mail and direct mailings to directors in institutions not part of AMOSSHE. Where colleagues in these positions were unidentifiable, the email was sent to the PVC (or equivalent) responsible for student services/learning and teaching or student experience.

In recognising that institutions may not all use and understand the concept of the 'student experience' in the same way, those filling in the survey were asked to note down how 'student experience' was defined within their institution. While the survey did pre-define other related terminology and services associated with the student experience (such as learning support, welfare, disability and equity, personal and academic tutoring and careers) an 'other' section was also provided to allow for the indication of any further services that participants did not fit under the terms provided.

The survey also asked for examples of formal and/or informal activities in which individuals or teams work together across boundaries to improve or enhance the student experience. Examples of such activity were suggested, such as institutional policies, networking and cross-institutional working groups. The survey also expressed an interest in hearing about any projects or initiatives that were completed or currently planned, where academic and professional staff groups were working together across boundaries to enhance the student experience. The survey enquired about the extent to which any challenges to cross-team or intra-role working existed in relation to improving and enhancing the student experience, and asked institutions if they would be willing to participate in the research further via focus groups, which might be followed up by a further investigation as an exemplar of practice potentially of interest to the sector.

Despite attempts to generate a healthy response, such as re-sending the invitation and targeting specific institutions, the survey as a whole only elicited an 8% (n=26) response rate, although more individuals than this did provide useful answers to some of the questions. Interestingly, 23% (n= 74) of those invited to participate began to respond to the survey however, 15% (n=48) failed to complete it. This may be because the survey was possibly too long or required too much detail. It is therefore difficult to assert that the responses here are representative of activities currently occurring within the HE sector and this is discussed in more detail later in the report.

### 3.3 Phase two (a): Focus groups in self-selecting institutions identified through survey

Ten institutions were chosen from those who had indicated that they would be willing to be involved in further research. They were chosen as they represented a cross-section of different kinds of HEIs undertaking initiatives that were judged to fulfil the brief of involving partnerships between academic and professional staff.

Taking as our starting point Aldrich's (1999, p. 159) assertion that the self-conceptions of members within an organisation - how they think and feel – can be affected by what they do, our focus group interviews strove to elicit why people think the way they do (Laws, et al. 2003; Bell 2005) when working collaboratively to deliver a 'seamless' student learning experience. They also explored the challenges institutions face in developing and sustaining such partnership working. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clark 2006) was used to explore the data generated from these discussions in relation to the project's research questions.

### 3.3.1 Participants

From the survey responses ten UK HE providers from the following categories were selected to participate in the focus groups: Russell Group; Guild HE; Million+; University Alliance; 1994 Group; Private Providers and FE-based HE providers. At least one focus group in each HE provider was conducted and in some cases, due to staff availability, this was supplemented with a further focus group or individual interview. This flexible approach was used to ensure that the experiences of all staff involved in developing partnership models of working were included in the data collection processes. This is important on two counts. First, Whitchurch (2008) argues that the majority of research in this area has focused on those in management or with management-level responsibilities. Secondly, we recognise that the success of new models of working is often best understood by those involved in their implementation and operation (Zahir 2010).

Seventy-five staff members across the ten institutions were involved in 13 focus groups, one group and three individual interviews. Participants included senior managers, professional and academic staff members and a small number of students.

Table 1 showing institutional position of focus group and interview participants:

Institutional position	Number of participants
Institutional senior management (PVC/Registrar)	8
Senior academic (Head of Division/Dean of School)	14
Academic - teaching	15
Senior professional (Departmental Director or Head)	14
Professional	20
Students or representing students (Students' Union)	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>

### 3.3.2 Method of analysis

The focus groups and interviews were analysed by identifying a number of emergent themes (Braun & Clark 2006). This enabled investigation and categorisation of data in terms of themes pertinent to the research questions, including how change is being successfully managed and led. As suggested by Wellington (2000, p. 133-134) a large amount of data was generated by the focus groups. Therefore, two focus group transcriptions were used initially to identify common themes and formed the foundation of an emergent coding system via qualitative analysis software. These emergent themes informed the reformation of existing categories and the overall approach to coding the transcripts. Once determined, the themes were then considered beside the following set of research sub-questions:

- How are different stakeholder groups engaged in partnership working?
- What are their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of this approach?
- What support and understandings do different stakeholder groups need to engage in for productive partnership work which enhances the student experience?
- What ways can institutions take this forward in terms of:
  - introspective investigation?
  - recommendations for change?

### 3.4 Phase two (b): Institutional exemplars

Following the focus groups, four institutions were selected as exemplars to offer insight into partnership working in practice and to enhance understanding of the process of change through a discussion of the unique features of each project in context (Bell 2005, p. 10; Yorke and Thomas 2003, p. 66). Creation of this broader contextual understanding involved bringing together the data generated from the initial survey, thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts and discourse analysis of publicly available institutional policy documentation for each institution.

#### 3.4.1 Method of analysis

To provide a context for questionnaire survey responses and focus group discussions, discourse analysis of publicly available institutional policy documentation was conducted to provide an understanding of institution-level discourses and strategies that relate to partnership working to enhance the student experience. Discourse analysis was used to develop 'a positioned opening for discussion' (Phillips and Jørgensen in Clarke 2012, p. 174) by examining the use of particular words or phrases within policy abstractions to make sense of institutional policy and how it has been interpreted and enacted. The constant comparative method (Silverman 2010) was utilised across the four institutions, allowing for the exploration of recurrent issues and the development of a toolkit that was relevant for wider sector use.

### 3.5 Phase three: A validation workshop

Following the data analysis outlined above, focus group participants were invited to a participative workshop in March 2013 at Newcastle University to discuss the themes and conclusions drawn by the project team. The workshop opened up the interpretations of the data to scrutiny and provided an opportunity for participants to feed back on the initial version of the toolkit. Attendance was by invitation only and nominees were provided by representatives from the exemplar institutions. Eleven participants registered for the event, nine attended on the day, representing all four institutions, and they were joined by three members of the research team.

Table 2 showing institutional position of workshop participants:

Institutional position	Number of participants
Institutional senior management (PVC/Registrar)	0
Senior academic (Head of Division/Dean of School)	3
Academic - teaching	2
Senior professional (Departmental Director or Head)	1
Professional	1
Students or representing students (Students' Union)	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>

The day was split into two distinct halves with the morning focusing on the project itself, and the afternoon on the toolkit. The workshop began with a presentation of the research project to date, including outlines of the survey methodology and a brief summary of findings, with a more detailed examination of the interview data and analytical framework that developed from this. Apart from the student representatives, the majority of participants had been involved in the focus group interviews during the previous months, and were familiar with the project from this perspective. Through discussing the process used in analysing the data with the participants, they gained clarification on the process and developed a greater understanding of the development of the toolkit; particularly aspects of the toolkit such as the 'self-reflective questions'. While it may be overstating the case to suggest that this validated the data per se, the process of discussing the analysis with those who had contributed data meant these participants were able to be part of validating the toolkit as an output (see for example Horsburgh 2003).

The afternoon session of the workshop introduced the first iteration of the toolkit. Participants were asked, in pairs, comprising representatives from two different institutions, to discuss and comment upon each question from a critical perspective. This approach was chosen to ensure that the pairs were encouraged to move beyond the perspective of their own institution. The building and maintaining of this cross-institutional 'gaze' was important to the focus of the workshop, especially given that the toolkit aimed to explore new partnerships which would be of relevance throughout the HE sector.

By including commentary boxes for every question and space at the close of each section for overall comments, we encouraged the groups to address and target specific issues, while keeping more general thoughts separate (for example, suggestions for further areas of enquiry or stylistic requests). The workshop then reconvened with some highlighting of and discussion about, areas of consensus across all groups. These were noted for later incorporation as part of the toolkit development. The discussions provided many useful and insightful comments that added substantively to the development of the toolkit, both stylistically, through the inclusion of graphical devices, and in relation to content, helping to refine and redesign the SRQs and their focus.

### **3.6 Some final reflections**

It is important to note that both the time scale and funding for this project – both largely out of the project team's control – have impacted on its methodology and outputs. We acknowledge that these factors have potentially limited the project's ability to uncover fully the nature and complexity of partnership working in relation to multifaceted sectoral understandings of the 'student experience'. The exemplars, while rich in the data they offered, cannot account for the wide varieties of effective practice that is taking place across the sector. On reflection, being able to take a more personalised approach to each HEI and have discussions with them individually about the kinds of initiatives they have been engaged in, may have elicited a greater number of examples of partnership practices. This said, the low response rate to the initial survey may accurately reflect the lack of such initiatives within HEIs. Additional research in this area is needed, and we hope that this study provides a pertinent and useful starting point for others who wish to explore these issues further.

This notwithstanding, we believe that the toolkit we have developed, with the aid of our institutional exemplar teams, provides a useful and useable framework for institutional teams to prepare for, and reflect critically on, their readiness for change and their processes for partnership working in relation to improving the student experience, and beyond.

## 4. Overview of results

This section discusses analysis of the 74 responses to the questionnaire survey distributed across the sector along with the 17 focus groups and interview transcriptions. It also explores the exemplars further and discusses feedback gained from research participants at the validation workshop.

This project posed three main research questions as outlined in the methodology section of this report. Each of these questions related to a phase within the research and a particular method, and is therefore discussed below in relation to the relevant aspect of the research activity.

### 4.1 Who is currently developing or has already developed successful partnership models for delivering and enhancing the student experience?

This phase included the distribution of a questionnaire survey to 326 contacts (see section 3.2.1 for further information on invited participants) and was intended to provide both the tool for focus group selection while offering a flavour of activity across the sector. Sadly and despite attempts at generating a healthy return, the survey only elicited a full response rate of 8% (n=26) where respondents completed the survey in its entirety. Interestingly, 23% (n=74) of those invited to participate began to respond to the survey however, 15% (n=48) failed to complete it. While, it is therefore difficult to assert that the responses here are representative of activities currently occurring within the HE sector, this is the first time an attempt to capture these kinds of activities have been made and provides an interesting overview of some of the initiatives currently being undertaken.

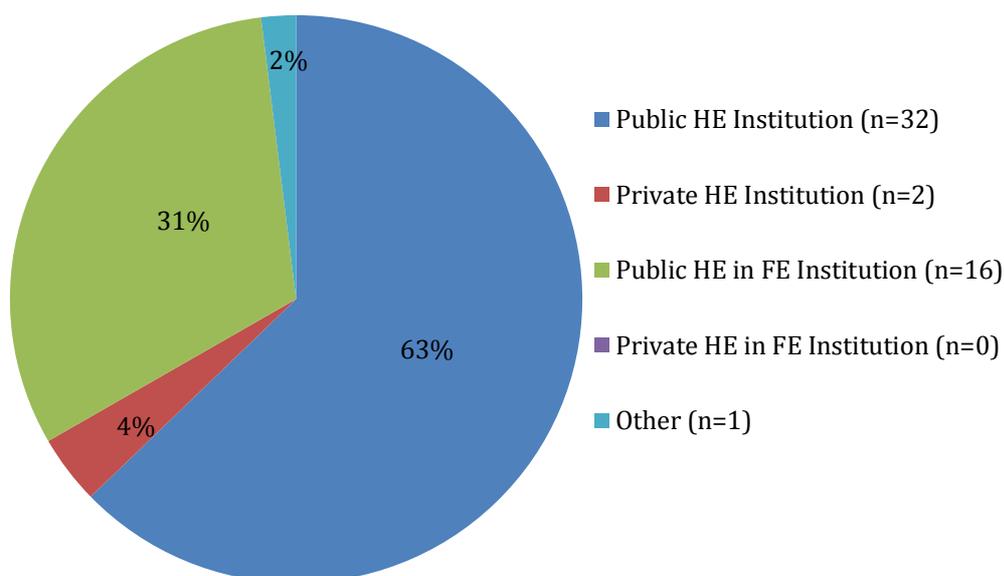
We consider the response rate could be so low for a number of reasons. Those targeted may have been too busy or did not feel that they were the appropriate person to fill in the survey. Equally likely is the possibility that more than one person was needed to complete the questions in full and required further discussion which may have proved difficult to achieve. Discussion in the project steering group also highlighted the increasing experience of 'survey fatigue', and the increased unwillingness of institutional contacts to get involved in the research. The project also did not have enough resource to provide a dedicated team member responsible for encouraging survey responses and is perhaps a lesson for future research activity. It may well be the case too that engagement in this kind of partnership work is thinly spread. Thus the responses may be a reasonable representation of those institutions that do have academic and professional staff working together in the way the survey requested information about. Despite the disappointing return, responses to the survey have been included here to offer that snapshot of activity.

#### 4.1.1 Survey results

Questions 1- 3 collected informed consent and contact details of the respondents. 23% (n=74) out of 326 potential respondents completed this part of the survey.

Question 4: Into which of the following categories does your institution fit?

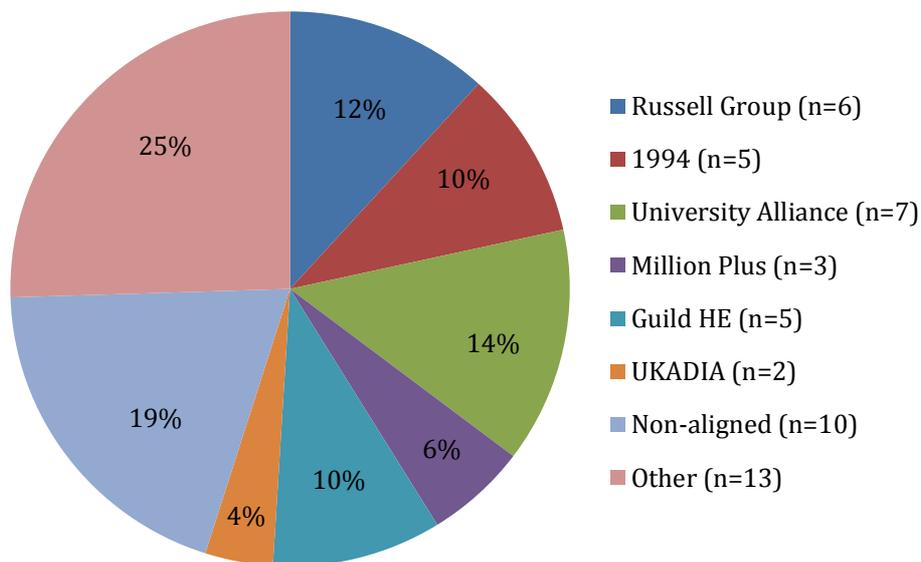
Pie chart 1 showing institutional category of respondents:



16% (n=51) out of 326 contacts completed this part of the survey. This equates to 68% of the 74 respondents starting the survey.

Question 5: If you are an institution of higher education, which of the following mission groups does your institution align itself to?

Pie chart 2 showing institutional mission group or alignment of respondents



16% (n= 51) out of 326 potential respondents completed this part of the survey. This equates to 68% of the 74 respondents starting the survey.

As detailed previously, the respondents were predominantly from public HE institutions and evenly spread across the different alignment groupings. There was no representation from Welsh and Northern Ireland institutions and a lack of private providers.

Question 6 asked whether institutions had an institutional definition of the ‘student experience’ and were invited to detail this further. From the responses detailed in Table 3 it would appear that a clear conceptualisation and definition of the student experience is not limited to any particular type of institution. The same is true of a lack of clear conceptualisation with institutions spread throughout the different groupings indicating that they do not have a clear definition.

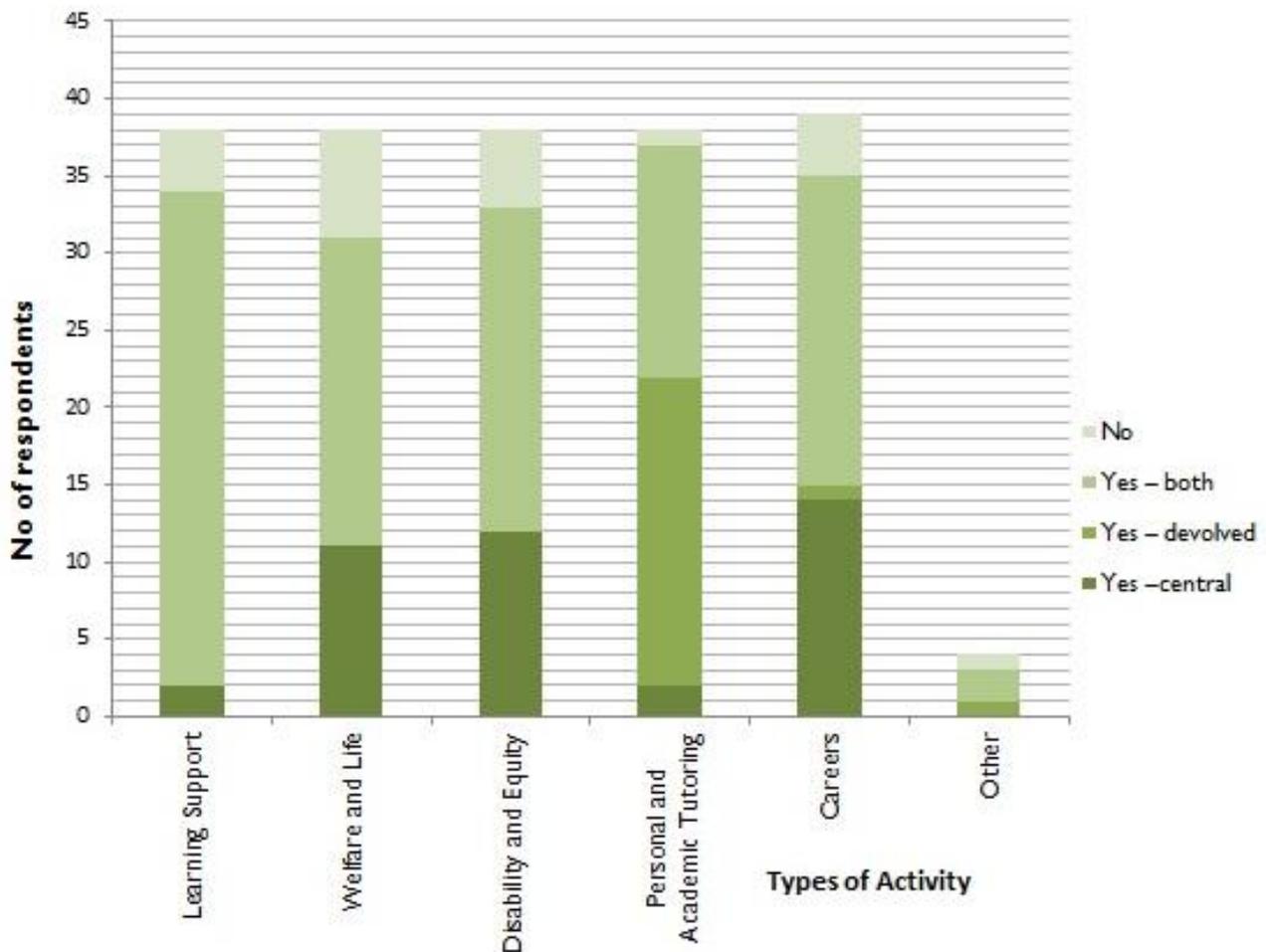
Table 3 showing existence of institutional definitions of the ‘student experience’

Institutional definition of ‘student experience’?	No	Alignment
No institutional definition	8	4 HE in FE 1 non-aligned 1 Guild HE
Clear definition within institutional strategy or charter	11	2 University Alliance 2 Russell Group 1 1994 group 1 Million+ 1 other 4 HE in FE

Working on a student experience strategy or related project	2	1 other 1 University Alliance
Student experience is encapsulated in what they do or may be referred to in institutional documentation but no clear definition or articulation of this concept	14	1 Russell group 1 University Alliance 2 1994 1 Million+ 1 GuildHE 1 UKADIA 1 non-aligned 2 other 4 HE in FE/other

Question 7: Do academic staff perform the following?

Chart 3 showing the type of activity academic staff are involved in:

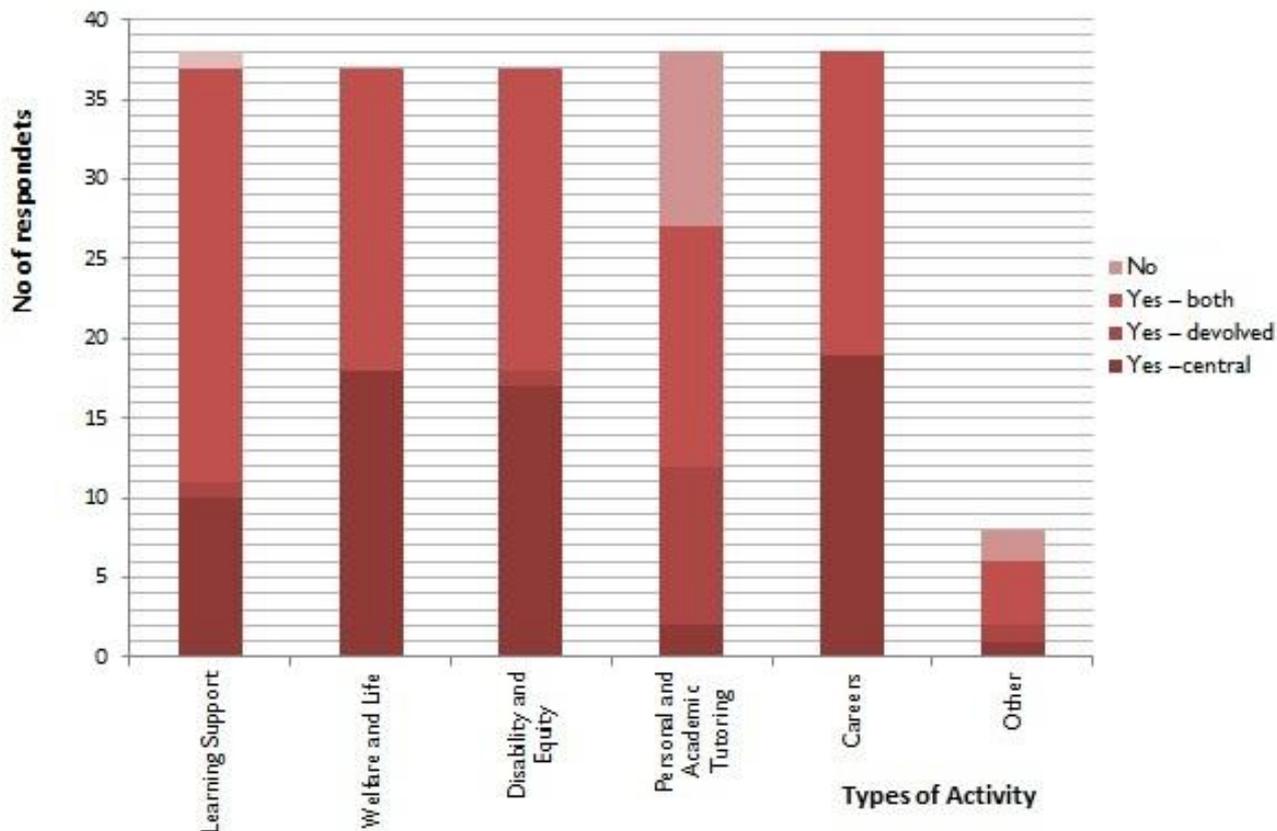


69% (n=51) of respondents answered this question.

Academic staff are involved in all these functions. In a number of institutions, these functions are delivered by academic staff in both a devolved and a centralised way. The main exception to this is personal and academic tutoring which is more evenly split between those institutions that use academic staff to perform these functions in a devolved way and those that use academic staff to perform these functions in both a devolved and centralised fashion.

Question 8: Do professional/support staff perform the following?

Chart 4 showing the type of activity professional/support staff are involved in:

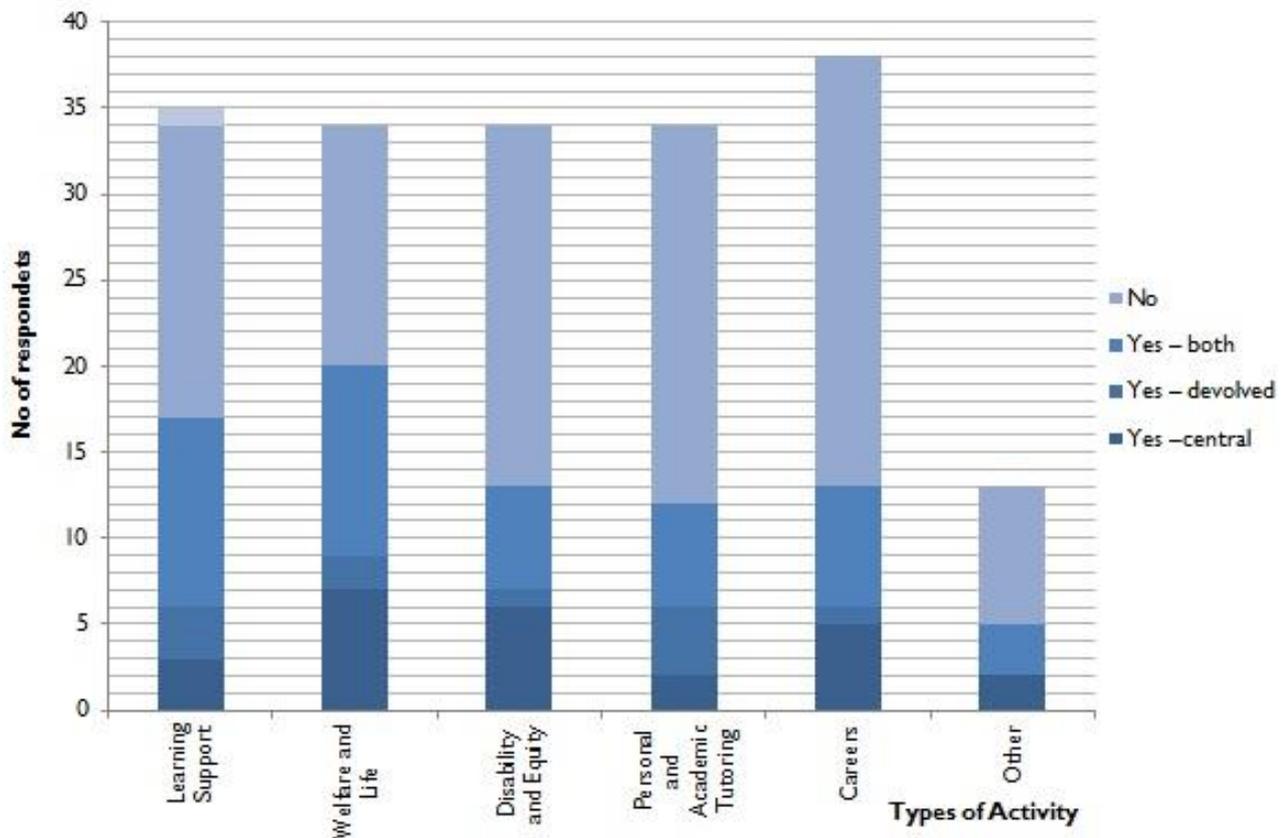


51% (n=38) of respondents answered this question.

The chart above shows a different pattern with regards to professional/support staff delivering these types of support. Professional/support staff are less involved in personal and academic tutoring than academic staff with only 2.6% of respondents saying that academic staff are not involved in personal and academic tutoring compared to 28.9% of respondents indicating that professional/support staff are not involved in this function. Learning Support delivered by professional/support staff is overwhelmingly both devolved and centralised, however the other functions show a more even split between those whose professional/support staff deliver this centrally or in a combination of both centralised and devolved locations.

Question 9: Do students perform the following?

Chart 5 showing the type of activity students are involved in.



51% (n=38) of respondents answered this question.

It can be seen that most institutions do not use students in performing these functions but of those that do, the majority do this in both a centralised and devolved way.

Questions 10 and 11 asked for specific details of activities where academics and professionals were working together and were designed to inform research question 2.e: How are different stakeholder groups engaged in partnership working?

32% (n=24) of respondents answered question 10 which asked for no more than three examples of formal and/or informal activities where individuals or teams work together across boundaries to improve or enhance the student experience at their institution. For example: via institutional policies, networking, cross-institutional working groups, etc. These were coded initially individually by the project team; and then as a project team to compare codings. Two broad areas of activity were identified, within which further specific activities were found and defined below (institutions may be double or triple counted as each example provided by each institution was coded individually).

#### 4.1.2 Areas of Activity

23% (n=17) of respondents said their institutions are involved in activity that included formal collaborative partnerships, either through formal internal committees, strategic and/or working groups or partnerships across both internal or external departments and organisations.

Committees, strategic and working groups, networks:

- a. Committees and/or strategic groups 14 institutions (19% of respondents)
- b. Working groups and networks eight institutions (11% of respondents)
- c. Partnerships one institution (1% of respondents)

31% (n=23) of respondents said their institutions are involved in activity that involved projects, initiatives and associated activity, spread across six further streams of work as detailed above.

Projects, initiatives and associated activities:

a. Peer support and/or academic tutoring	four institutions (5% of respondents)
b. Extra-curricular/work-based activities	seven institutions (9% of respondents)
c. Review or provision of specific support practices	three institutions (4% of respondents)
d. Review or provision of generic support activities	five institutions (7% of respondents)
e. Staff development and/or role allocation	two institutions (3% of respondents)
f. Curriculum development	two institutions (3% of respondents)

Next, respondents were asked about any projects or initiatives that have been completed or are planned or currently underway where academic and professional staff members are working together across boundaries to enhance the student experience. Institutions were then asked to indicate if they would be willing to take part in the focus group element of the project. From this, institutions who detailed a project or initiative that appeared to demonstrate cross-boundary working were narrowed down to cover a range of different institutions both geographically and in terms of institutional grouping. These institutions gave their agreement to participate in phase two of the project which included further focus group institutions and, potentially, selection as an exemplar.

## 4.2 Focus groups to explore the experience of working in or developing partnership models

This phase of the research project split into three parts whereby focus groups and group interviews were held across ten institutions in the UK to discuss partnerships between academic and professional staff. These were supplemented further by selecting four institutions whose activities are of practical interest and/or significance to the sector to use as exemplars (see section 5.3). Lastly, emerging themes were discussed at a workshop with focus group participants, representatives from exemplar institutions and the project team.

Following thematic analysis of the focus groups and discussion at the workshop, five key themes emerged regarding facilitation of effective partnerships:

- partnerships can offer a means of self-improvement and enhancement through providing an holistic overview of systems and practices and thus, enhance the experience of those systems and practices by the students;
- internal and external drivers for self-improvement and enhancement of activities must be fully understood, accepted and analysed by those involved;
- teamwork and collaboration is critical in effecting change;
- change is organic and can evoke feelings of uncertainty for those involved;
- effective institutional structures to reward and/or recognise the work of staff involved are vital.

### 4.2.1 Institutional drivers for partnerships

From the focus group analysis and discussion at the workshop it became clear that there are many internal and external drivers directing the development of collaborations between academic and professional staff. These echoed concerns around the effects of an increasingly marketed HE sector that positions students as 'customers' in terms of institutional services, systems, practices and environments. Participants discussed how partnership work within their institutions was driven by the need to:

- respond to National Student Survey scores;
- limit the effects of the new funding and fees regime including the financial penalties for student withdrawal/non-completion;
- translate and contextualise 'effective practice' within the sector;
- provide parity and consistency across academic departments .

There was also discussion of the need to 'close the loop' and identify inconsistencies and gaps within institutional practices as described by a focus group participant:

... we became more aware as a [working] group as to where there were gaps in other areas ... our own practice, in a sense, led us to see that there were gaps in good practice [across the institution]  
(Learning Support Advisor)

For many, such drivers were experienced simultaneously while for others these came in the main from one direction. Activities born from these drivers included work within student support, outreach, advancing the online/e-learning agenda and effecting institution-wide change to embed thresholds of practice and enhancement envisaged to improve the student experience.

### 4.2.2 Drivers and benefits of staff involvement

Participants noted there were several benefits of their own involvement in partnerships. For some, involvement was driven through the reality of being employed with that remit within their role. For others involvement related to having a personal interest in an area of activity or as a means of professional development, even though initially quite sceptical:

I felt it might be beneficial as part of long-term career planning ... so I went along while being sceptical ... there was obviously a lot of good research that had been done ... so I felt that I would just give it a go and I happened to be teaching a module where it would be very appropriate to have it ...

(Senior Lecturer)

Another benefit of partnership working for staff was that it offered a chance to bring together different groups to create something better than each group could do on their own through a 'pooling of practice' (Divisional Administrator) that provides a greater understanding of the roles, skills and attributes of colleagues from areas of the institution that might not normally work closely together as described by a Director of Learning and Teaching below:

... [by] getting academic staff ... engaging with the service department that's leading the change ... they develop a greater understanding of the broader institutional context in which they're working.

(Director of Learning and Teaching)

A further benefit of working collaboratively across different staff groups might be seen as reducing the anxieties often associated with any change process, offering the 'subjective sensation of having control over the change forces' (James 1999, p 151:152) as described below:

If you can lessen somebody's workload by a slight change in processes ... improv[ing] the student experience with that same change of process, ... to find a common good for both academic and service staff and students, essentially it's a 'win-win'...

(School Lead for Student Experience)

#### 4.2.3 Perceived benefits for enhancing the student experience

What came through all of the focus groups was how partnership working across academic and professional spheres of institutional activity has the potential to offer the student a whole educational experience, rather than seeing different parts as separate entities with little or no cohesive link with each other (see also Dorskatsch 2003). Indeed, participants discussed how their experiences gave a holistic overview of systems, services and practices to enable development of these in an equitable and consistent way to enhance and potentially personalise a student's experience of higher education.

... it's looking at the student as a whole person and generally you don't do that, you just look at these little narrow bits and then speculate on the impact of the other bits on the bit you're looking at.

(Pro-Vice Chancellor)

#### 4.2.4 Challenges in partnerships working

Ensuring that effective communication mechanisms exist, such as committees, working and/or special interest groups and other formal and informal channels of communication, was a key theme in effectively working in partnership. Indeed, evidence from the 'What Works' programme suggests that facilitating communication between colleagues from disparate areas of the university is vital in enabling them to implement change and take a more student-centred approach (Thomas 2012). The effect of bringing colleagues together from different perspectives to disseminate effective ideas and approaches more widely across the institution was discussed by a divisional administrator:

... I'd never in my 17 years at the university been round the table with people from so many different areas who all had at the centre of their initiative for being there, supporting students ... it was a great opportunity to communicate because we don't ... it's a very valuable opportunity to discuss and share with like-minded people in a way that we haven't before.

Participants also felt that it was important that institutions were able to foster, yet contain, creativity and innovation. Partnerships between academic and professional staff engender a reflection on, and potential change to, institutional approaches in terms of systems, services and practices. Change as previously discussed is often difficult to control, easily disturbed, messy and organic in nature. While this can be challenging, it can also offer flexibility and responsiveness; both of key importance in managing or ultimately solving complex issues and problems. Participants were positive about enabling such flexibility while appreciating some of the parallel difficulties that this brings:

'... [this project]... kind of exemplifies that of being incredibly informal and organic which some people find a bit uncomfortable ... I tend to kind of just see what we can achieve ... but then it gives you some challenges like meeting the budget and that kind of thing...

(Pro-Vice Chancellor)

Such flexibility could be seen as assisting in the creation of an atmosphere for collaboration, though this was often also discussed in terms of an institutional ethos and culture that created space; temporal, physical and cognitive, to enable staff to come together to work in partnership:

... there's a barrier to working with ... external partners at a strategic level, academics, students and professional staff, who all have different timetables of working and lecturing times ... it's really hard. Students have different lecture times, working with people like councils it's sometimes impossible to get ... just to physically meet up ... all those people at the same time is a very hard thing to do.'

(Student and Graduate Diversity Officer)

There was a focus on identifying key personnel, and that this should not necessarily be affected by individuals' titles or roles. Indeed, work within institutions regarding the student experience requires engagement across all institutional boundaries to reflect the complex lives of students. Collaborative work therefore needs individuals who span these boundaries and shape the perceptions and preferences of others (c.f. Lukes 1974). This supports the conclusions of Alexander et al. (2001), among others, who have suggested that partnership leaders may lack formal authority and access to resources and personnel because they sit outside the usual institutional leadership structures.

However, focus group participants did not express any antagonism (see Whitchurch 2013) or indeed question the authority of key personnel when this occurred; a respect for the areas of expertise brought to the project/initiative was noted and, in particular, the importance of including students in any discussions that involved the student experience, resonating with the message from Crossley & Corbyn (2010) regarding the importance of grass-roots support:

If we'd just been a bunch of professional staff coming up with a strategy about how academics should work with their students that could have been really problematic ... who are these people, what kind of credibility do they have ... it's helped to have students involved ... because if it's student voices raised reasonably articulate and clear ... it's not really possible to ignore that.

(Head of Student Services)

Institutional commitment to activities that enhance the student experience, demonstrated through adequate resourcing, and reward and recognition of staff, was highlighted as important by participants, particularly if institutions wished to avoid such activities becoming tick-box exercises. Indeed, evidence from 'What Works?' suggests staff need recognition, support and development, alongside effective reward schemes to encourage and enable them to engage students; nurturing their sense of belonging (Thomas 2012, p.66) to the institution and thus help enhance their experiences.

I'm frustrated now because actually what it means is when I come up against the structures of ... career progression ... I'm butting up against walls.

(Senior Academic Support Tutor)

Thus, as recognised by Macfarlane (2011) and Thomas (2012), it appears that promotion and reward structures may not be in line with such changes to practice and this has serious implications for academic and other staff involvement.

### 4.3 Exemplars of practical interest

This section of phase two involved analysis of publicly available institutional documentation, most commonly the institutional strategy associated with the student experience, to unpack how particular words or phrases within institutional policy have been interpreted and enacted upon, and then considered alongside the analysis of focus group transcriptions and survey data. Therefore, the following presentation of each exemplar is derived from the original brief description of the initiative being represented, the focus group interviews about the initiative conducted by those taking part and any relevant institutional documentation.

Diverse in their institutional missions, the four exemplars are not presented as models of 'good practice' per se but chosen to illustrate current partnership approaches of working across the academic and professional support services to enhance the student experience. The aim of presenting these here is to engage institutions, project groups and a range of stakeholders in thinking about and discussing both existing practices and new directions for travel.

#### 4.3.1 Newcastle University – ReCap

##### Institutional context

Comprising three faculties, the institution describes itself as a world-class research intensive, civic university; playing a leading role in the economic, social and cultural development of the North East of England while providing a high quality student experience.

### Details of academic and professional staff in partnership: ReCap

ReCap is a lecture capture and event recording service underpinned by evidence of effective practice in Australia; this underwent subsequent regional piloting and finally contextualisation to the needs of Newcastle University. Originating as a small-scale investigation into how such an initiative could be implemented, it was driven by student demand for more access to digital lecture resources and has now been rolled out institution-wide. It allows audio and visual material, including the presenter's voice, presentation slides and visualised documents, to be recorded and published online in an automated, easy-to-use process. ReCap enables students to review lectures and is seen as being of particular use in aiding understanding complex topics, revising for exams, supporting students with dyslexia, and speakers of English as a second language. The dissemination of lectures post-delivery also enables lecturers to reinforce particular points and provide a vehicle for reflection on their teaching practice (Newcastle University 2013).

Staff from both centralised and devolved Information Systems and Services (ISS) departments worked in partnership with staff from academic units, Quality in Learning and Reaching (QulLT) and e-Learning to develop and deliver ReCap.

### Distinctive features of interest to the sector

ReCap is an example of how the strategic goal of the university to deliver a digital campus can be achieved through supportive leadership alongside academic and professional staff working in partnership:

- at the academic unit level, ReCap is now an established part of academic delivery where approximately 65% (n =15) of academic areas have opted into recordings. Individual teaching staff have responsibility to decide whether to 'opt-out' of the digitisation of their resources rather than deciding to 'opt-in';
- ReCap fundamentally responded to concerns regarding student expectations of the availability of digital resources, and now aims to provide a consistent learning experience across a variety of environments and subjects;
- phased implementation was needed to manage: the financial investment required; the time necessary to promote academic buy in and ownership; and operational issues and challenges presented by the development of ReCap;
- this project demonstrates the importance of involving three elements: technical support, pedagogic support, and academic ownership in order for this initiative to succeed (edited version of a report from Newcastle University, undated).

### Institutional discourse surrounding the student experience

The student experience at Newcastle is rooted within notions of an 'education for life' which incorporates the provision of knowledge and understanding that is both relevant to the student's life and the world around them, and their development as lifelong learners. The institution additionally states that there is a parity of esteem for learning and teaching and research, where both are seen as being equally important and interconnected. The institutional strategy 'Vision 2012' (Newcastle University 2012) appears to situate the 'student experience' within the academic sphere of institutional activity in two ways. First, through aligning the three large-scale 'Societal Challenge Themes' of Ageing, Social Renewal and Sustainability, to the three faculties and their subsequent strategies: these include a core commitment to achieve and sustain research excellence while delivering a high quality student experience on all programmes. Secondly, via the institutional Learning, Teaching and Student Experience Strategy (LTSES) led by the pro vice-chancellor (Learning and Teaching), and supported by the deans of Undergraduate and Postgraduate Studies, Academic Registrar and the head of the Quality in Learning & Teaching service (QulLT). The LTSES is monitored by the University Learning, Teaching and Student Experience Committee (ULTSEC).

Within the LTSES, the 'student experience' is further described as being both part, and an extension of, the learning experiences of students. This encompasses a sense of: involvement in university life within local and global communities; wellbeing and support with attractive social, residential, cultural, sporting and work experiences. The LTSES discusses the challenges associated with students' changing expectations of higher education, and the need to demonstrate value for money alongside recognising the increasing trend towards diversification in patterns of delivery including the need to develop a fit-for-purpose digital campus. It notes the importance of investing in the professional development of staff, in the variety of ways learning, teaching and assessment is supported, and to improve the delivery of a wide-ranging student services and infrastructure in enriching a student's experience of higher education.

### Issues and challenges related to the Initiative

These issues and challenges were identified through the focus groups and interviews held with those involved in the initiative.

The challenge identified by focus group participants was how to navigate the messy nature of sector and organisational change. This explicitly came through discussion of the origins of ReCap, in that it came from a need to make improvements and/or enhancements to the student experience in response to meeting student expectations, but crucially outputs of the strategic plan. While there was an appreciation from the ReCap Education Steering Group that they knew something needed to be done, both the Senior Lecturer and Assistant Director of ISS expressed while there were successful large-scale implementations of institutional lecture capture in Australia, they did not necessarily know exactly what this would look like or how it would be achieved in the Newcastle context. This displays the uncertainty felt by those involved and also the need to recognise the organic nature of developing new initiatives to meet evolving needs within uncertain times. Participants stated that the ReCap Education Steering Group was fundamental to its development as it brought a multi-disciplinary team together and acted as a forum for honest discussion about the uncertainties of the initiative as it was rolled out institution wide:

[The Steering] ... group has been able to point out the way and say we don't know what we're doing but this is what we think we should do ... we'd say we don't know what we're doing and [but] we had to get it right.  
(Senior Lecturer)

Participants noted that having the space to take risks that were underpinned by evidence from other arenas, encouraged the development of ReCap. The Assistant Director of ISS identifies the risk in that they 'didn't have a definitive solution that had been developed and tested [and thus] couldn't be sure whether it would actually work [at Newcastle] or deliver the benefits that we actually wanted it to'. This reflected the institution's willingness to embrace uncertainty and risk to support and meet the expectations of students and the strategic plan.

The second most pressing issue for those involved dealt with the operation of collaborations across services and academic units, not least to ensure that systems and resources could deliver on the envisaged digital campus. This required effective communication across all staff, academic 'buy-in' and ownership of ReCap through recognising the value to the students, getting the system operational, making it easy to use, getting the right people together to work on the project, while at the same time, institutionally recognising and rewarding both the staff involved and the initiative itself as a whole.

Striking a balance between transparent and honest communication with senior management about the uncertainties associated with how ReCap was developing and getting feedback into that process was seen as key to generating 'buy-in' and ownership at all levels. For senior management, how the Education Steering Group could demonstrate that developing ReCap in the way put forward by them following the initial project was a challenge:

... there's always the pressure of taking a project that was a pilot [and adapting and expanding it across the whole institution]... one of the difficulties there from a senior management point of view is that ... they can feel that they're being led into a situation ... and that's not what they originally signed up for. So it's that tension of how you get to the point where you persuade them that actually this is a good thing and it needs a lot of investment to provide for the students.

(Assistant Director of ISS)

When generating engagement from academic staff, the challenge was ensuring ReCap would be easy to use, of benefit to students and would meet the needs of teaching staff. This was achieved by extensive on-going consultation with academic staff regarding their perspectives on such a system. To demonstrate that the initiative was concerned with making ReCap fit-for-purpose, the project team demonstrated the pedagogical foundations for developing ReCap and also repeatedly surveyed staff who were already using it to provide feedback. The opinions of staff, not using it at the time, were also canvassed to investigate why they were not using it, what would convince them to and any views they had on the system as a whole. The senior lecturer involved believed that this approach helped the system to evolve and generated engagement when positioned against student feedback and pressure to push it forward. The variety of perspectives from the range of staff involved also assisted in investigating the feasibility of different equipment suggested for implementation in the context of the Newcastle environment. As well as working with those who had already invested in developing ReCap, the University has further financed subsequent recruitment or secondments that are specifically assigned to supporting the development of ReCap. These posts are involved in developing the digital literacy of teaching staff alongside developing the technological infrastructure to be able to deliver the project.

#### 4.3.2 Manchester Metropolitan University – Enhancing the Quality of Assessment and Learning (EQAL)

##### Institutional context

Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) describes itself as the largest campus-based undergraduate university in the UK with eight faculties across six campus sites in the North West of England. The institution describe themselves as a university for world-class professionals with an emphasis on vocational education and employability.

##### Details of academic and professional staff in partnership: Enhancing the Quality of Assessment and Learning

The Enhancing the Quality of Assessment and Learning (EQAL) programme is an overarching change project at MMU driven by the institution's need to understand specific markets and be sufficiently flexible and responsive to changes in their respective needs. EQAL is seen as a transformative improvement in the quality of academic delivery at MMU benefiting both staff and students and involved strategic planning based on key performance measures, with the realisation of meeting these measures including devolution of control to faculties to enable a greater focus on students as customers (MMU 2012a). One key element of the initiative was enhancing the overall quality of the student learning experience through development of an undergraduate modular structure that included a consistent approach to assessment planning and organisation, as well as developing student-facing systems and processes. This encompassed a range of academic, administrative and infrastructural changes all aimed at improving the student experience and making academic support processes more efficient. Staff working in partnership to develop and deliver EQAL came from across academic divisions, student support and professional services.

##### Distinctive features of interest to the sector

EQAL can be viewed as a manifestation of the institutional desire to approach the student experience in an holistic way, through increasing recognition of the student as 'customer' (MMU 2012a). It illustrates the often complex nature of change

even when formal structures and programmes exist, and how partnership activities need to build in flexibility to accommodate unforeseen events.

- EQAL supported the implementation of minimum 'Threshold Standards' of quality in the student learning experience. These operate across transition and induction, learning, teaching and assessment, supporting student progress and the evaluation of student opinion;
- in appreciation of the diversity of local practices in meeting these standards, programmes are asked to demonstrate the methods they use to meet (and often, exceed) them;
- during the initial stages of EQAL, MMU had a dedicated website with a regularly updated blog to communicate the aims, underpinning principals for change and challenges associated with EQAL to staff and the wider institutional community.

#### Institutional discourse surrounding the student experience

The current Corporate Strategy 2012-2017 at MMU (2012b) places students and their success as central to the institution's aim of creating an excellent learning environment. The university sees itself as an accessible collaborative partner, working in partnership to drive positive social and economic change within the local, city and regional contexts.

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Student Experience) who led the institution-wide EQAL project has strategic responsibility for the student experience. This is supported by an institutional Student Experience Committee (SEC) that is responsible for consideration of all issues relating to the monitoring and enhancement of the student experience, wherever delivered, including the monitoring of the operation of strategies, policies, systems, procedures and codes of practice. Issues arising here are then cascaded down to faculty level SECs for enacting, implementing and monitoring procedural matters (MMU 2012c). The institutional SEC has cross-institutional membership from associate deans for Student Experience, heads of appropriate service divisions and Students' Union representatives. It receives the minutes of Faculty Student Experience Committees and reports back to the Academic Board.

Strategic discourse at MMU locates the student experience within the academic sphere, focusing on: academic rigour; innovative and enterprising curriculum and an awareness of professionalism, sustainability and social responsibility (MMU 2012b, p. 8). It is monitored through the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement, or CASQE, which develops and implements policy for quality assurance purposes and co-ordinates with other central services such as the Centre for Learning and Teaching, Strategic Planning & Management Information, and the Research and Knowledge Exchange Office.

The development of staff who deliver activities in support of the student experience is driven through the Centre for Learning and Teaching which works to provide 'a consistent, high quality student experience through formal and informal continuing professional development opportunities for all staff' (MMU 2012d).

#### Issues and challenges related to the initiative

For participants at MMU, a major factor in their experience was the appreciation of how the complex nature of change requires the need for honest communication between stakeholders. To enable responsiveness to the uncertainty associated with change, the discussions focused on the need to see the student experience holistically and consequently organise institutional processes that reflect this. It was seen as important to ensure the right personnel were working together to effect change and how a noticeable shift in the cultural atmosphere of the institution would enable change on such a large scale.

Many comments from focus group participants centred on how, when faced with a period of change, projects or initiatives should embrace a level of uncertainty and accept that there are things that are out of their control. This requires an open acceptance that possible solutions may need to be adapted based on feedback or experience of the changed processes/systems. The Assistant Head of Learning and Research Technologies noted that their suggestions for how to develop the initiative were 'probably 90% right' with the decision-making process inevitably being 'an intuitive process' that required some flexibility where admittedly 'the whole thing can be a bit of a mess' despite a clear vision from institutional leadership. Reflecting on how these challenges were successfully negotiated, it was agreed, required honest and open communication with stakeholders about the uncertainties involved while also appreciating the constraints of the environment:

[Communicating with staff is] a bit like that film ... where they say: people upstairs have sent us 'this'. [Now] we've got to make something shaped like 'that', out of something shaped like 'this' ...

(Senior Learning and Teaching Fellow)

Reflecting on the experiences and challenges of communication during EQAL, the importance of reiterating the goals, benefits and interconnectedness of the various strands of activity was key; although, during the project this was perhaps not always done as successfully as it might have been:

... what we could have done more [of] was actually say to people 'bear with us through this pain: these are the benefits which you'll see' .... not just: 'we think it's a good thing' but ... 'we'll actually be able to do some of the things that we've never been able to do [before]' ... [in hindsight] we could have been much more explicit with colleagues ...

(Assistant Head of Learning and Research Technologies)

A further issue was the need to have a balance between solutions that were located within academic units and those that involved centralised processes to ensure the student experience in its entirety was considered. Participants noted this shift in practice was enabled by a change in culture within the university as identified by the Assistant Head of Learning and Research Technologies:

... the culture change ... it felt a bit like the first time the institution had sat up and a decision had been made about how something was going to be done; and it was actually serious ...

This suggests that creating the right institutional culture is crucial to enabling transformation of systems, attitudes and processes. The right culture, however, relies on identifying the right personnel to engage in the work of change and requires colleagues that can understand the needs of a diverse range of stakeholders in their own departmental contexts and also see how these 'join up in the middle' (Assistant Head of Learning and Research Technologies). This reiterates the importance of gaining an holistic overview of academic and support systems and processes so that during change and development these systems and processes move forwards together.

### 4.3.3 University of Edinburgh – Project for Enhancing Student Support (PESS)

#### Institutional context

Comprising three colleges with 22 schools, the University of Edinburgh (UoE) describes itself as an international university that delivers an outstanding student experience while making a significant contribution to the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of Scotland.

#### Details of academic and professional staff in partnership: Project for Enhancing Student Support

Responding to internal and external student feedback the Project for Enhancing Student Support (PESS) began as an investigation into how UoE would pro-actively respond to instances of dissatisfaction with elements of the student experience. The main aim of PESS is to ensure that students have access to a framework of guidance and support founded on current effective practices to meet contemporary needs and expectations and of a quality and consistency appropriate to a university of high global standing (UoE 2013).

The project has developed a new Personal Tutor System and Student Peer Support System reinforced with recently reinvigorated Academic and Pastoral Support Standards and Guiding Principles, and supported by the production of IT tools and briefing materials to help staff and students.

PESS also oversees a collaborative partnership known as the 'Student Experience Project' that aims to '...deliver a better understanding of the student experience; to pilot and implement developments to services and activities; and to enrich the experience of all students of the University' (UoE 2013).

The staff working in partnership to develop and deliver PESS are drawn from the academic community and professional service areas of Academic and Information services.

#### Distinctive features of interest to the sector

Through building a framework of guiding principles in academic and pastoral support for both staff and students, PESS has developed a Personal Tutor System and Student Peer Support System that enhance and extend existing student support services. IT Tools, briefing, training and resources were developed to support the new roles designed to promote a holistic and personalised student experience. The initiative:

- is a proactive system which supported students all the way through their studies;
- supported the development of successful students as well as students who at different times in their studies might have issues that they require assistance with;
- provides a support network for senior tutors to enable sharing of practice and allow them to discuss common issues and challenges that inform the PESS project as a whole;
- published a clear dissemination schedule on the web detailing feedback mechanisms, training events and the evidence base for change (see <https://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/PESS/Home>).

#### Institutional discourse surrounding the student experience

The three main strategic goals at UoE concern themselves with 'excellence in education', 'research' and 'innovation'. These are to be realised through attracting and retaining exceptional people, and providing a consistent experience across physical, information technology and library infrastructures while prioritising and aligning resources for institutional sustainability (UoE 2012, p. 15-19). Within the goal of 'excellence in education' a key theme is the creation of an outstanding student experience, and it is envisaged that this will be achieved by taking a cohesive, inclusive and individualised approach to enhancing the experience of students, encompassing all subjects, modes of learning, student services, and parts of the estate (UoE 2012, p. 15). Thus, the theme of an outstanding student experience is threaded through the strategies of the academic schools and support units. One example of this is the Student and Academic Services group strategy 2010-12 (UoE 2010) which discusses how it can contribute to the review of student support and strengthen collaborative work across the schools and service departments.

The Learning Teaching and Enhancement Strategy (LTES) is the main vehicle by which the outstanding student experience is delivered within the academic sphere. This is monitored by the Institutional Learning and Teaching Committee and has the remit of strengthening and enhancing the quality of students' experiences of university study; sustaining an environment in which excellence in learning and teaching can thrive and encouraging everyone involved in teaching and supporting learning to play their part in enhancing as well as ensuring quality (University of Edinburgh 2011, p. 1). The work of the Learning and Teaching Committee is led by the Vice Principal Learning and Teaching and supported by membership from across the 22 schools and support areas.

#### Issues and challenges related to the Initiative

One key aspect that emerged from the focus groups was the scale of change to the institution and the recognition that this needed to be done gradually. There was an acknowledgement that there needed to be a systematic approach to the change but also that this should not be too constrained as changes to culture, not just systems, were intended. The messy, organic and incremental aspects of the change were highlighted and, therefore, the importance of taking time to build relationships and networks was evident in the focus group discussion and ‘...key to finding out what’s good practice in the college[s]’ (Academic Policy Officer).

There was some consideration of how much should have been done in advance of launching the project with a feeling that some aspects were done in an ad-hoc kind of way:

It’s rather peculiar that the top level steering group for the project was established quite early on. The next thing we identified was senior tutors and deans. At that point didn’t exist so they didn’t kind of grow down in the right direction. It was kind of jigsaw-y because of the speed ... I think if you’d done it logically, you’d have done it from the top down and established the whole thing before launching.

(Professor & Dean of Students)

This suggests that while some people can be happy with a more organic approach (see the other case studies), some project members, particularly in relation to such large, whole-institutional change projects, might prefer a more logical change process. This clearly needs to be considered when implementing such initiatives. It was acknowledged that it may take some time for the full impact of this initiative to be seen but this should not be seen negatively rather as an acknowledgement that cultural change can be a slow process.

The challenge of rewarding staff is one that emerged from the discussion. This was particularly noted when weighing up the contributions of those staff who have worked mostly in student support compared with those staff who were more research-focused; the importance the institution places on the different activities was a key factor here. There was a sense that unless participating in this kind of initiative is seen as properly rewarded and incorporated within the promotions structure, staff might not be prepared to participate, even if they do agree with the ethos and outcomes. And without staff engagement, such a project may not be sustainable in the long term.

The next challenge in this particular initiative was identified as trying to bring together the interactivity of communications as ‘...everybody’s got loads of ideas and they’re all sort of focusing on the strand that they’ve got responsibility for [but] ... interaction has to be coherent’ (Professor and Assistant Principal Teaching & Learning).

This again, highlights the importance of relationships and collaboration within this kind of process.

#### 4.3.4 Newman University – Senior Academic Support Tutors

##### Institutional context

Based in the west of Birmingham, Newman University is a small institution which has recently achieved full university status. It has two academic schools and describes itself as providing a high quality, accessible, academic and professional formative education that is informed by the Catholic ethos of respect for others, social justice and equity.

##### Details of academic and professional staff in partnership: Senior Academic Support Tutors

The Senior Academic Support Tutor (SAST) scheme aims to maximise the potential of students through combining academic advising and professional support within single, joint and combined honours degree programmes at Newman University. It is drawn from a need to build an accessible initiative that is embedded within the academic sphere to facilitate an interaction with professional services. The role of the SAST involves meeting with students on a group or one-to-one basis to give advice on academic processes and personal or pastoral issues while offering generic study skills advice (for example, developing time management plans, referencing and essay structure advice).

Staff working in partnership to develop and deliver SAST come from the subject areas of English, Psychology, History, Art and Design, Early Years Education and Care, Education and Professional studies alongside those from the Learning Development Unit and Student Services.

### Distinctive features of interest to the sector

SAST recruits academic members of staff to offer a service which combines elements of professional and academic advisory and support roles to enhance the experiences of students. The roles and remit of the SAST team have grown as the project has matured and become embedded in the institution, exemplifying the positive effects of organic change, where space for innovation and creativity is fostered, and where the strengths and expertise of the staff involved are utilised:

- SAST are involved in, and advise on, student progression issues at Mitigating Circumstances, Programme Assessment Boards (PAB), Academic Board, Student Services Committee, Academic Standards Committee, Institutional Support Group, and Institutional Welfare Group. Additionally, they attend school and programme meetings;
- SAST are available on week days and, by prior appointment, in the evenings and weekends. They are contactable via a central email address and telephone number;
- SAST assist in facilitation of the two-week, pre-entry HEADstart course in September whose aim is to foster an early sense of belonging in students.

### Institutional discourse surrounding the student experience

The current strategic plan at Newman University (2010) details one of the institutions' key goals as providing a 'formative student experience'. This is founded on the formative aspects of human development; foundations which at Newman seek to promote the personal and social development of its students, enabling them to contribute positively as cognizant, engaged and responsible citizens in society and who are committed to lifelong learning. Informed by the Catholic ethos, with its rich intellectual tradition and social mission, the goal of fostering a formative student experience for Newman embodies the institutional motto of enlightenment and the search for truth.

Newman aims to offer their heterogeneous student body a personalised and holistic experience that displays respect for them as individuals, and facilitates the realisation of their full potential. They aim to achieve this through an enriching, broadening and humanistic curriculum and by the accumulation of qualifications and experience that contribute to employability.

The holistic nature of learning at Newman derives from creating a supportive but academically challenging community which aims to be locally oriented and internationally focused. Activities associated with developing the formative student experience at Newman are now led by the recently appointed pro vice-chancellor (Formative Education). The responsibilities assigned to this role include monitoring delivery of the current Learning and Teaching and Assessment Strategy (LTAS) alongside developing and leading on strategy that maximises student retention, delivers on access agreement retention outcomes, and enhances the student learning and teaching experience. The work envisaged within this new role is supported by the deans of School, directors of Student Support, Library Services and Academic Quality with members of the Learning and Teaching Committee. The experience of a formative educational experience is depicted in the current LTAS as a 'learning endeavour' that locates students as part of a transformative learning community supported through learner-centred, evidence-based and research-informed approaches to learning (Newman 2011, p 1).

### Issues and challenges

The main emergent themes drawn out from the discussions regarding SAST were the messy nature of sector and organisational change, the often organic nature of change and potential associated feelings of uncertainty coupled with the importance of institutional reward and/or recognition for the staff involved. Of particular interest were reflections on how SAST had developed into something quite organic.

One of the challenges identified by the focus group was the need to change systems rather than doing 'on-the-surface' regulatory changes but that SAST gave those involved the opportunity to look deeper into the structures and regulations to enhance them for the benefit of the students. However, this aspect of the SAST work occurred organically from the original idea which the head of Student Services admits at the start was only a 'basic, brief outline'. There was a recognition that the more in-depth focus to the role that grew as the service became established resulted from the input of those recruited to the posts and their ideas about how it should evolve. One SAST commented:

I think it's been, probably quite accidentally ... having people who are willing ... and interested in taking that on board and developing it ... it's all been a bit ad hoc, which is sort of worrying a bit I suppose in a sense ... I think with all organic things it could easily go the other way.

As indicated here, there can be a risk attached to strategic initiatives that are organic in nature. Indeed, the Director of Student Services commented that though SAST has become an excellent service, there were periods of uncertainty during its development. . There are some negative aspects about the outcomes, for example the role has moved away from some of its initial responsibilities, and in some cases these may have been what attracted staff to the role in the first place. A sense of needing to be responsive, flexible and organic while not losing sight of what drew people to participating in the system initially was highlighted.

One issue identified was the grass-roots nature of this particular project and how this has impacted on the rewards and progression available for the staff involved. Participants commented that due to the way the system developed, different members of the team were on different contracts - which led to a lack of parity within the team. A lack of interest from other members of staff in taking on a role within the team when vacancies arose was also highlighted; this seemed at odds with the

perception that the system is highly regarded within the institution. The participants felt that this might have to do with how SAST fitted into the pay and promotional structures as it was not clear how being part of the initiative enhanced promotion opportunities. Linked to this was the challenge of maintaining boundaries for those SAST members who were also academics within a subject area where sometimes the responsibilities for the two roles may clash. The understanding and support of line managers in both roles was seen as helpful but could not be relied upon by all staff in all subject areas.

Key issues relevant to this project seemed predominantly to stem from the organic nature of the initiative. Because of this, how the SAST role relates to pay and promotion had not been thought through and changes to roles have taken them away from their original form. However, the flexibility and responsiveness that this organic approach allowed were also seen as strengths of the initiative, as were the abilities of the team to shape the contribution of SAST to the institution and the student experience.

## 5. List of disclosed participating institutions

Arts University College at Bournemouth  
Barking & Dagenham College  
Bishop Grosseteste University College  
Blackburn College  
BPP University College  
Bridgwater College  
Cambridge Regional College  
Cardiff Metropolitan University  
Cardiff University  
College of West Anglia  
Grimsby Institute  
Guildhall School of Music & Drama  
Halesowen College  
Hugh Baird College  
Leeds College of Art  
London Metropolitan University  
London School of Economics  
Manchester Metropolitan University  
New College Stamford  
Newcastle University  
Newman University  
Plumpton College  
Plymouth College of Art  
Royal College of Art  
Runshaw College  
Salford University  
SOAS  
Solihull College  
Southampton Solent University  
The Academy of Contemporary Music  
The Open University  
University of Stirling  
University of Abertay  
University of Bath  
University of Chester  
University of East Anglia  
University of Edinburgh  
University of Glamorgan  
University of Hertfordshire  
University of Hull  
University of Lincoln  
University of Salford  
University of Wales, Newport  
University of Wolverhampton  
University of York  
Vision West Nottinghamshire College  
Warwickshire College  
West Herts College  
York St John University

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