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Executive summary

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) commissioned Alpha*Plus* to conduct a survey of higher education institutions (HEIs) in England in order to gain a sector-wide view of how institutions are improving student learning opportunities in an environment of higher education reform (including the changes to tuition fees from the start of the 2012/13 academic year). The project was supported by HEI stakeholder partners, including Universities UK (UUK), GuildHE and the National Union of Students (NUS). It is still early days for the effects of the reforms to be fully understood and this report does not claim that all the reported changes result from the latest reforms or the change of funding regime. The survey asked for selected information on key areas of the undergraduate academic experience with the aim of providing a snapshot of recent and planned changes being taken by HEIs to improve students' academic experience.

The survey was online and consisted of two separate questionnaires: one to be completed by an HEI manager on behalf of the institution, and the other to be completed by student union representative(s) for that institution. The two questionnaires were virtually identical, with only minor differences in the phrasing of some questions to take account of the differing roles of those completing the survey. The questionnaires were designed with the support of the HEI stakeholder partners and a small HEI sector expert panel. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) were also part of the project steering group and were given the opportunity to review the questionnaires as they developed.

The questionnaires were divided into several sections. For the first five sections, a selection of possible areas of development were listed that could affect the academic undergraduate experience. These areas were selected to reflect the focus of the 2011 White Paper (*Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*) on encouraging high-quality teaching, and other recent research by bodies such as HEFCE and UUK:

- (Survey Section 1) **Availability and accessibility of teaching staff**

- (Survey Section 2) **Study support**

- (Survey Section 3) **Student engagement and consultation with students**

- (Survey Section 4) **Assessment and feedback**

- (Survey Section 5) **Learning facilities and resources**

In each section, respondents were asked to indicate whether their institution had made or was planning to implement improvements in these areas. The survey collected both quantitative data (i.e. the degree of change in each area within each institution) and qualitative data (i.e. respondents could provide additional information at each stage).

The final two sections of the questionnaires focused on

- (Survey Section 6) **Communications**

- (Survey Section 7) **Reflections on the changes**

For these sections, respondents were given the opportunity to provide responses using free-text boxes.

The survey took place between 10 December 2013 and the end of January 2014. To maximise participation in the survey, the HEI stakeholder partners agreed to make initial contact with their members. In total, completed responses were received from HEI managers in **99** institutions, a response rate of **84%**. There were consistently high response rates across all type of institution (indicated by TRAC peer group, see below). The sample of institutions may therefore be considered highly representative. Completed responses were received from student representatives in **36** institutions, which represents a response rate of **35%**. Although this was less comprehensive than the survey of HEI managers, responses were received from student representatives across all types of institution.

Key Findings

The main message emerging from the two surveys is that HEIs appear to have implemented widespread changes in the past two years. Across each of the areas covered by the survey, both HEI managers and student representatives have reported widespread change across some or all of the undergraduate offering. HEI managers and student representatives agree (in both quantitative and qualitative responses) that the greatest changes in the past two years appear to be in the areas of:

- **Study support** (including focusing on skills and opportunities to enhance employability). At least eight out of ten HEI respondents indicated improvements for some or all of the undergraduate offering for five of the six areas of interest relating to study support.

- **Learning resources** (including library and IT facilities). Nine out of ten institutions report changes to library facilities and an even greater proportion report changes to teaching buildings or spaces.

- **Student engagement and consultation**. At least seven out of ten HEI managers reported improvements to student engagement and consultation across all areas of interest, and for the most part managers reported that changes were in place across most or all of the undergraduate offering.

In many cases additional changes are planned within the next 18 months, with learning resources and study support the areas where most improvement seem to be planned.

As might be expected, HEI managers and student representatives had a different perspective on occasions. Comments made by managers tended to focus on positive changes implemented in the past two years and/or (to a lesser extent) on provision that was already considered to be of an adequate standard. Student representatives on the other hand were more likely to be critical in their comments; while acknowledging where improvements had been made, they were also more likely than managers to highlight areas where more work was needed and/or where the 'improvements' had not been well received by students. **Overall, however, it is still notable that there is a great deal of commonality in the issues raised by both sets of respondents, and a good level of**

agreement that there has been a significant degree of change during the past two years.

Further key messages emerging from the exercise are summarised below under the main section headings of the surveys.

(Survey Section 1) **Availability and accessibility of teaching staff**

- Most widespread change in this area in the past two years appears to be related to increased support from individual members of academic staff, such as through more use of informal drop-ins, emails or on-line discussions (reported by 75% of HEIs) and increased access to additional support from postgraduates and other networks of non-academic staff (67%). More than one quarter are planning additional support in these areas within the next 18 months.

- Approximately half of all HEIs reported that they had increased contact hours with academic staff and/or increased small-group teaching arrangements for undergraduates; the remaining HEIs generally reported that existing provision was already at a high standard in these areas.

- Approximately four in ten institutions have made improvements to class sizes, and one in five plan further improvements within the next 18 months. In contrast to the message emerging from the HEI manager's survey, however, a significant proportion of student representatives responding to the survey felt that the increase in student numbers is having an adverse effect on class sizes and student–staff ratios.

- Many institutions appear to have implemented improvements to personal tutoring systems and peer-assisted learning or support, with more changes planned in this area. Student representatives appear to confirm the improvements in peer-assisted learning reported by HEI managers and see this as beneficial to the student experience.

(Survey Section 2) **Study support**

- Four in five institutions report extensive improvements to study support for some or all of the undergraduate offering. For example, more than 90% of institutions report improvements in these three areas:

  o Information on the expectations of the course

  o Additional support for students to develop skills valued by employers

  o Additional opportunities for work experience, placement or internships

- Almost half plan further improvements to develop skills valued by employers, and to provide additional opportunities for work experience, placement or internships.

- Student representatives tended to agree that significant improvements had taken place in the area of study support with the large majority of respondents agreeing

that there had been additional support for students to develop academic skills, employability skills, and/or additional opportunities for work experience, placements or internships.

(Survey Section 3) Student engagement and consultation with students

- At least seven in ten HEIs report improvements to student engagement and consultation across all areas of interest, citing examples such as increased student representation on boards and committees. Student representatives agree that there is evidence of increased attention being paid to the student voice by managers at the institution, although not always to the same extent as indicated by managers. Managers report that improvements are in place across most or all of the undergraduate offering, but some student representatives are concerned that the good work being done at institutional level is not always being implemented at the academic unit level.

- The survey provides a clear indication of planned further improvements by HEIs in areas such as the mechanisms by which students can shape their academic experience, and in closing the feedback loop so that students can see the results and impact of the feedback they provide (the latter being an area where student representatives report less progress than the HEI managers).

- According to managers, many institutions appear to be taking measures to make evaluation of teaching more consistent across the institution.

(Survey Section 4) Assessment and feedback

- The most widespread change here in the past two years is in the use of IT systems to manage coursework, with 86% of HEIs reporting a change in this area and 50% planning further improvements. Many are using their existing virtual learning environments (VLEs) for this purpose, but some are developing separate systems for coursework management.

- Around two in three HEIs also report other improvements to assessment and feedback, with a significant proportion planning further changes. For example, many institutions now have a standard maximum length of time that students should expect to wait for feedback on assessed work.

- Student representatives support the view that feedback on assessed work has improved in the past two years, but also report that feedback on assessed work still does not always meet students' expectations. Opportunities for regular reviews of individual students' progress are one area where student representatives are less likely than HEI managers to report improvements.

(Survey Section 5) Learning facilities and resources

- HEI managers report widespread improvements to learning facilities and resources within the past two years, with more than 90% of institutions reporting improvements to library facilities, IT facilities and/or teaching buildings or spaces. A similar proportion have implemented or improved 'social' or 'informal' learning spaces designed to accommodate collaborative learning and study activities such as group work. The provision of social or informal learning spaces appears to be an increasingly important issue; these were the most frequently mentioned issues in the 'learning facilities and resources' comments made by both student representatives and institution managers.

- Many managers also stated that they are adding or upgrading technology to enhance the teaching and learning experience, for example to allow for 'lecture capture'. Many HEIs are planning further improvements in the next 18 months.

(Survey Section 6) **Communications**

- The survey asked how institutions communicate major changes related to students' learning experiences. Staff–student committees or forums, the Students' Union and email were the most frequently cited methods of communicating learning-related changes to students.

- Most HEIs, however, now use several means to communicate with students, with the nature of the message often dictating the method used to communicate it. For example, text messaging was typically used only for localised announcements requiring immediate attention (such as lecture cancellations) while information on developments affecting the wider student population were more likely to be communicated via newsletters, information screens or web announcements.

- Many managers described a greater emphasis on 'closing the feedback loop' as a major change in the way the institution communicates with its students, where findings from opinion-gathering exercises, such as the National Student Survey (NSS), are reported back to students alongside details of what action is being taken to address any specific issues. However, some student representatives reported concerns about the quality of communications with students, and many were keen to see improvements in this area.

- The extent to which students are engaging with online content was reflected in the number of managers indicating that social media, web announcements and the VLE were used to communicate with students.

(Survey Section 7) **Reflections on the changes**

- The most frequently cited significant changes include the increased or improved use of e-learning, the creation of, or improvements to, social learning spaces, enhanced opportunities to develop skills for employment, and changes to the subject, programme or module on offer.

- There are indications of relatively high levels of investment in campus buildings, with a fifth of managers saying that library refurbishment or new builds have been

among the most significant improvements to the student learning experience and a similar proportion mentioning such investment in teaching spaces and buildings.

- The prevalence of comments on e-learning suggests a move towards more blended learning (a mixture of on-screen and face-to-face learning).

Analysis by TRAC peer group

To provide some insight into how the reforms are being implemented across institutions with different financial profiles, responses from HEI managers were also broken down by the peer groups used for TRAC benchmarking. In general, the numbers of responses within each TRAC peer group are too small to support any meaningful analysis of statistical significance. Where there appear to be some patterns in the responses between TRAC peer group institutions, however, we have noted this in the report. These include:

- There appears to be a trend that the more research-intensive an HEI is (as indicated by TRAC peer group as a proxy for research income), the more likely it is to report recent improvements to the number of formal teaching contact hours in small-group sessions.

- More teaching-focused institutions (as indicated by TRAC peer group) and, to an extent, larger research-intensive institutions tend to be more comfortable that their existing provision is appropriate in relation to assessment and feedback.

- There were a range of responses from the different TRAC peer groups on whether there have been changes to the student charter or partnership agreement in the past two years, with larger research-intensive universities and smaller or specialist teaching institutions (TRAC peer groups A, F and G respectively) less likely to report changes. However, at least 50% of all peer groups report that changes have taken place.

- Peer group G HEIs (specialist music/arts teaching institutions) were consistently among the least likely to report changes to: the availability and accessibility of teaching staff; study support; aspects of student engagement and consultation; learning facilities and resources. In each case peer group G HEIs were among the most likely to report that existing provision was considered appropriate; only occasionally did a minority of these HEIs report that changes had not been made due to financial or other pressures.

The above general caveat to statistical significance notwithstanding, the survey data (including the qualitative responses) does seem to indicate that there is a difference in response in some areas by the smaller specialist teaching institutions who report that existing provision was already considered appropriate, indicating that student-focused teaching approaches were already deeply embedded in these institutions.

Summary

Higher education has experienced a significant period of change during the last few years, including (since the start of the academic year 2012/13) a change to the way HEIs are funded. This survey has attempted to gain a sector-wide view of how institutions are improving undergraduate students' learning experiences against this backdrop of reform. The evidence points to widespread changes within higher education, including what could be considered a 'culture shift' among institutions towards increasingly putting the students at the centre of what the institution does and how decisions are made (broadly speaking, student representatives support the view that activities around the student voice and consultation with students have improved over the past two years). Institutions are at pains to point out, however, that this is part of a process which has been in train for some years, and it would appear unwise to attempt to attribute all the changes to the latest reforms or the change of funding regime. Nevertheless, the extent of the changes reported is striking: in all areas covered by the survey, both the HEIs and the student representatives consistently report recent tangible improvements within their institution in the past two years.

Chapter 1.   Introduction

Higher education has experienced a significant period of change in the past few years. Such changes include the 2011 government reforms, which were intended to empower students further and encourage improvements in their learning experiences. Since the start of the academic year 2012/13, there has been a change to the way higher education institutions are funded.[1] Case study and anecdotal evidence provide a snapshot of ways in which a number of institutions have developed their offer to support students and their learning experience. These show many instances of good practice and innovation.[2]

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) commissioned Alpha*Plus* to conduct a survey of higher education institutions (HEIs) in England in order to gain a sector-wide view of how institutions are improving student learning opportunities in an environment of higher education reform (including the changes to tuition fees from the start of the 2012/13 academic year). This survey was supported by three HEI stakeholder partners – Universities UK (UUK), GuildHE and the National Union of Students (NUS) – and was intended to acquire a better national view of existing and planned activities and responses to these reforms from both managers and students. It is still early days for the effects of the reforms to be fully understood and this report does not claim that all the reported changes result from the latest reforms or the change of funding regime. It is of course also recognised that students' experiences are not uniform across (or even within) institutions and can differ significantly, for a number of reasons. By its nature, a survey such as this captures a broad-brush picture. The survey asked for selected information on key areas of the undergraduate academic experience with the aim of providing a snapshot of recent and planned changes being taken by HEIs to improve students' academic experience.

The survey was online and consisted of two separate questionnaires: one to be completed by an HEI manager on behalf of the institution, and the other to be completed by a student union representative for that institution. An invitation to take part was sent to the vice-chancellor at 118 HEIs in England by UUK and GuildHE and 102 student representatives were invited to take part by NUS.[3] There were responses from 99 HEIs (84%) and 36 (35%) student representatives. A total of 33 institutions provided a response from both an HEI manager and a student representative.

The survey was therefore deliberately designed to capture not only the views of HEI managers (though the support of UUK and GuildHE) but also the views of student representatives (through the support of NUS). NUS is the national membership

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[1] 2011 White Paper: *Students at the Heart of the System* https://www.gov.uk/government/news/putting-students-at-the-heart-of-higher-education. See also HEFCE report on the impact of the reforms on students and higher education institutions http://www.hefce.ac.uk/about/intro/abouthighereducationinengland/impact/

[2] For example, see the Universities UK Report, *Where Student Fees Go*, September 2013 http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Pages/WhereStudentFeesGo.aspx

[3] Student representative invites were sent out by NUS to the list of 102 affiliated HEIs for which they held contact details. The numbers quoted in
Table 3.1 for student representatives show the percentage response rate based on the number invited to complete the survey.

organisation for students' unions in higher and further education. Students' unions are independent organisations created to represent the collective interests of the generality of students at an institution of further or higher education. They are normally led by a team of full-time student officers elected by students at their institution of study. The nature and purpose of students' unions is diverse across the sector but they normally represent students' interests at the highest decision-making bodies of their institution, facilitate academic representation of students at course, school and faculty level, and make provision for student-led extra-curricular and social activities, including community-facing and volunteering activity. Many also run commercial services and provide academic advice to students. Increasingly, students' unions are a key vehicle for students to engage in the assurance and enhancement of academic quality, through promoting the National Student Survey (NSS) and using the results to inform enhancement activity, gathering student feedback on courses and programmes, researching students' views and experiences and supporting students to participate in academic quality infrastructure. They are politically independent of their institution and have a strong tradition of advocating on students' behalf, especially for educational enhancements.

Chapter 2.   The survey

2.1 Questionnaire design

The questionnaires were designed with the support of the HEI stakeholder partners and a small HEI sector expert panel. The expert panel participants either were working in a senior management role in the HEI sector or had recently held a senior management position in the sector. The group advised on the language, focus and format of the questions and the overall length of the survey. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) were also part of the project steering group and were given the opportunity to review the questionnaires as they developed.

The questionnaires were divided into several sections[4]. For the first five sections, a selection of possible areas of development were listed that could take place within the academic undergraduate experience. These were identified based on the focus of the 2011 White Paper (*Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*) on encouraging high-quality teaching, and other recent research by bodies such as HEFCE and UUK:

- (Survey Section 1) **Availability and accessibility of teaching staff**

- (Survey Section 2) **Study support**

- (Survey Section 3) **Student engagement and consultation with students**

- (Survey Section 4) **Assessment and feedback**

- (Survey Section 5) **Learning facilities and resources**

In each section, respondents were asked to indicate whether their institution had made or was planning to make improvements in these areas. In order to minimise the demands on respondents' time, respondents were presented with a number of questions related to the section title, and were able to select a response on a Likert-type scale. They were asked to select the one option that best described the overall situation at their institution. The options available to them remained the same for each question in each of the first five sections:

- Yes, improved provision is in place across the undergraduate offering, or for most disciplines, units or groups of students

- Yes, improved provision is in place for some disciplines, units or groups of students

- No, existing provision is considered appropriate

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[4] PDF versions of the HEI manager and the student representative questionnaires can be downloaded here http://www.alphaplusconsultancy.co.uk/static/All_Qs_HEI_Managers_Survey.pdf and here http://www.alphaplusconsultancy.co.uk/static/All_Qs_Student_Reps_Survey.pdf.

- No, particular pressures have meant we have not been able to implement improvement

- Don't know/not applicable

They were also able to select a further option if applicable:

- Further improvements are underway or agreed plans are in place to improve this within the next 18 months.

In addition, respondents were also given the opportunity to expand on their responses or provide details of any other recent or planned changes at their institution by way of free-text questions at the end of each section.

The final two sections of the questionnaires focused on

- (Survey Section 6) **Communications**

- (Survey Section 7) **Reflections on the changes**

For these sections, respondents were given the opportunity to provide responses using free-text boxes.

The two surveys, designed for HEI managers and student representatives, were virtually identical, with only minor differences in the phrasing of some questions to take account of the differing roles of those completing the survey.

2.2 Data collection

The survey took place between 10 December 2013 and the end of January 2014. To help maximise participation in the survey and ensure that the relevant individuals in the HEI were approached, stakeholder partners agreed to make contact with their members. An initial letter of invitation was therefore circulated on behalf of BIS. A protocol for reminder and follow-up activity was agreed between BIS, the HEI stakeholder partners and Alpha*Plus*. Data has been managed within the Market Research Society's (MRS) Code of Conduct.

For the managers' survey, institutions were asked that the questionnaire be completed by an appropriate manager or managers, and with reference to the undergraduate offering only. For the student representatives' survey, NUS sent out formal letters of invitation to participate to their members, usually student union presidents or equivalent, at each of their affiliated institutions.

Additional support to complete the survey included a website with access to guidance documents, frequently asked questions (FAQs) and a helpline. Reminder emails were sent out by the HEI stakeholder partners. Further reminder activity, including tailored emails and telephone calls, was undertaken by Alpha*Plus* for the managers' survey.

2.3 Data analysis

Both surveys (HEI managers' and student representatives') were created using the *Qualtrics* survey platform.[5] After the survey completion date, data was exported from Qualtrics for the purpose of analysis. All responses to the consultation were analysed. Quantitative data was analysed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS,[6] and throughout this report charts and graphs have been used where possible to present an easily digestible visual representation of the data.

To provide some insight into how the reforms are being implemented across institutions with different financial profiles, responses from HEI managers have also been broken down by the peer groups used for Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) benchmarking. TRAC has been the standard methodology used by the 165 higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK for costing their main activities since 2000. TRAC peer groups (shown in Table 2.1) provide a useful grouping of institutions by size and type and so allow analysis of the responses by broad type of institution.

Table 2.1 **Peer groups for annual TRAC, TRAC fEC and TRAC (T) benchmarking 2012–13.** Source http://www.jcpsg.ac.uk/guidance/revisions/Peergroups10.pdf

Peer group	Description
Peer group A	Russell Group[7] (all have medical schools), excluding LSE, plus specialist medical schools
Peer group B	All other institutions with research income of 22% or more of total income
Peer group C	Institutions with a research income of 8%–21% of total income
Peer group D	Institutions with a research income of between 5% and 8% of total income and those with a total income > £120m
Peer group E	Teaching institutions with a turnover of between £40m and £119m
Peer group F	Smaller teaching institutions
Peer group G	Specialist music/arts teaching institutions

In general, the numbers of responses from HEI managers within each TRAC peer group are too small to support any meaningful analysis of statistical significance. Where there appear to be some patterns in the responses between TRAC peer group institutions, however, we have noted this in the report. Too few responses were received from student representatives in each TRAC peer group to support any meaningful analysis for those cohorts.

There were 11 questions in the managers' survey and 12 questions in the student representatives' survey that required a free-text response. The comments made by respondents were analysed using NVivo software. This process involved an initial read-through of all comments and the creation of an early coding frame – that is, a list of the

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[5] http://qualtrics.com/

[6] SPSS is a software package used for statistical analysis: http://www-01.ibm.com/software/uk/analytics/spss/

[7] This description of peer group A is taken from http://www.jcpsg.ac.uk/guidance/revisions/Peergroups13.pdf. However it is no longer entirely accurate. Three institutions who joined the Russell Group in 2012 (Durham, Exeter and York) are in TRAC group B.

main topics raised in the comments. Once the comments had been imported into NVivo, each was re-read and then allocated the appropriate theme(s) in the coding frame, depending on the subject matter. The coding frame was adjusted throughout the analysis process to ensure that the best possible 'fit' for the data was obtained. Coding was checked by viewing the data by theme and ensuring that all comments allocated to that theme were an appropriate match. Where necessary, adjustments were made at this stage, for example by recoding some comments or by aggregating some categories which were essentially referring to the same topic. Tables were exported from NVivo showing the number of comments coded against each topic. Percentages were added to give an indication of the relative salience of the different issues; these tables are presented in this report alongside a brief narrative describing the key findings.

2.4 Representativeness of sample

In total, completed responses were received from HEI managers in **99** institutions, a response rate of **84%**. In addition there were consistently high response rates across all type of institution (see Table 2.2). The sample of institutions may therefore be considered highly representative.

Completed responses were received from student representatives in **36** institutions, which represents a response rate of **35%**. Although this was less comprehensive than the survey of HEI managers, responses were nevertheless received from student representatives across all types of institutions.

A total of **33** institutions provided a response from both an HEI manager and a student representative.

At least **90%** of both HEI managers and student representatives answered each question in sections 1 to 5 of the survey, and the majority added further commentary in free-text boxes.

Table 2.2 shows the breakdown of responses by TRAC peer group for both HEI manager and student representatives.

Table 2.2 Breakdown of responses to the managers' and student representatives' questionnaires by TRAC peer group

	Managers' questionnaire			Student reps' questionnaire*		
	Responses (n)	No. in group invited to complete	% response rate within group	Responses (n)	No. in group invited to complete	% response rate within group
Peer group A	15	18	**83**	3	15	**20**
Peer group B	15	17	**88**	9	16	**56**
Peer group C	10	13	**77**	2	13	**15**
Peer group D	15	18	**83**	7	15	**47**
Peer group E	18	23	**78**	8	23	**35**
Peer group F	13	15	**87**	3	13	**23**
Peer group G	13	14	**93**	4	7	**57**
Total	99	118	**84**	36	102	**35**

* NUS sent out student representative invitations to the list of 102 affiliated HEIs for which they held contact details. The numbers quoted in this table for student reps show the response rate based on the number invited to complete the survey.

Analysis of the responses received are reported under each of the main survey sections:

- (Survey Section 1) **Availability and accessibility of teaching staff**

- (Survey Section 2) **Study support**

- (Survey Section 3) **Student engagement and consultation with students**

- (Survey Section 4) **Assessment and feedback**

- (Survey Section 5) **Learning facilities and resources**

- (Survey Section 6) **Communications**

- (Survey Section 7) **Reflections on the changes**

Chapter 3.   Availability and accessibility of teaching staff

In **survey section 1**, HEI managers and student representatives were each asked whether their institution had made any improvements for undergraduates in the past two years in the following areas:

- Class sizes

- The number of formal teaching contact hours in small-group sessions *i.e. tutorials, teacher-led small-group work, seminars, lab work, workshops, etc.*

- The number of scheduled contact hours with a member of academic staff on a one-to-one basis

- Access to additional support from individual members of academic staff *e.g. drop-in sessions, online discussions, Skype, direct email contact, etc.*

- Access to additional support from postgraduates, other students or networks of non-academic staff, *e.g. informal networking or discussion groups*

The response options for each question (class sizes, formal contact hours, etc.) were:

- Yes, improved provision is in place across the undergraduate offering, or for most disciplines, units or groups of student

- Yes, improved provision is in place for some disciplines, units or groups of student

- No, existing provision is considered appropriate

- No, particular pressures have meant we have not been able to implement improvement

- Don't know/not applicable

In addition, respondents were given the opportunity to expand on their responses in a free-text box at the end of the section, and to indicate whether (further) improvements were planned to improve each aspect of the student experience within the next 18 months.

3.1 Summary of responses from HEI managers

Figure 3.1 summarises the response of HEI managers to the availability and accessibility of teaching staff questions.
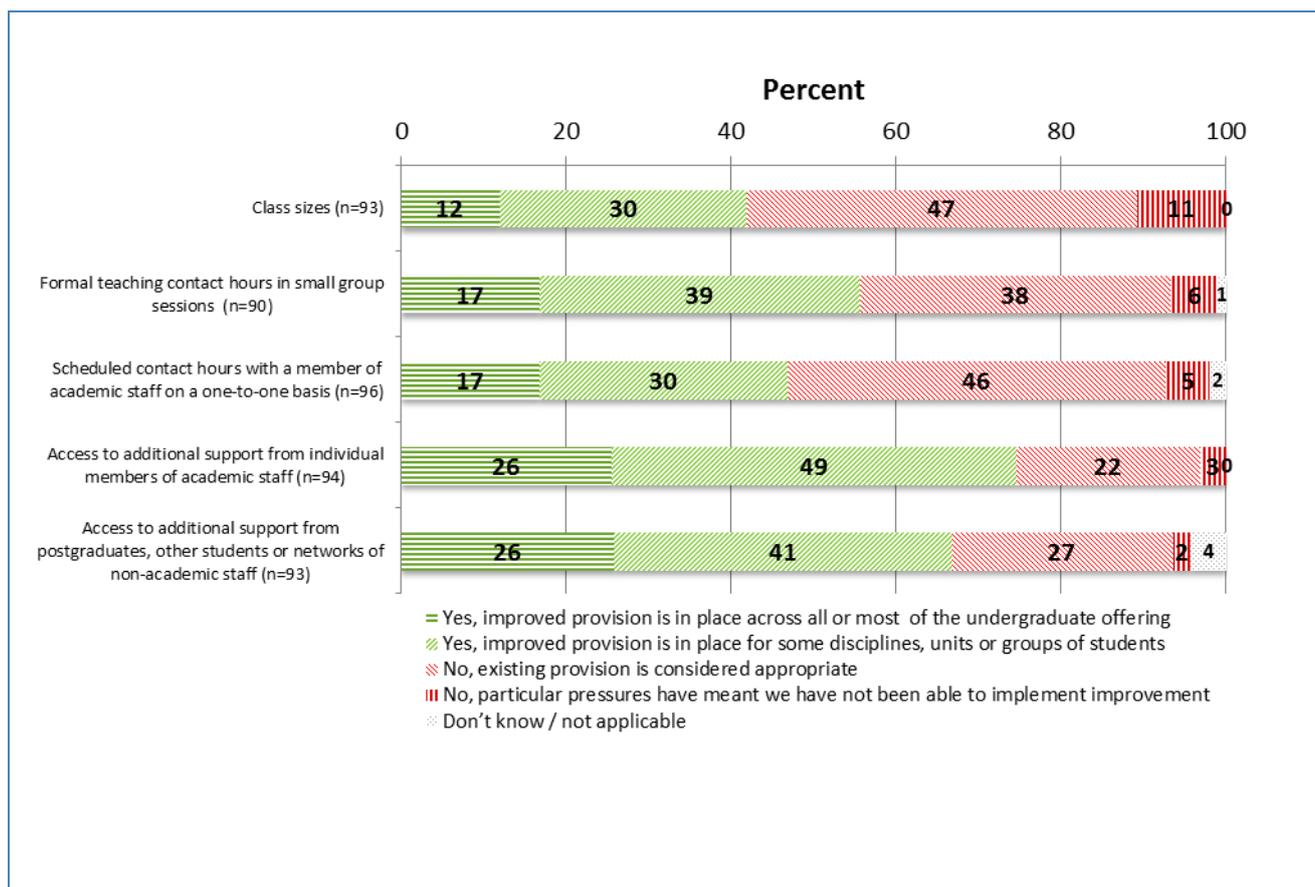
Figure 3.1 Responses from the **managers' survey** relating to improvements to **availability and accessibility of teaching staff**

According to HEI managers, the most widespread change in this area in the past two years appears to be the increased support from individual members of academic staff, such as in the form of more informal drop-ins or on-line discussions. Three-quarters of the institutions surveyed (75% of 94) report that they have provided increased support from individual members of academic staff, and two-thirds (67% of 93) report that they have increased access to additional support from postgraduates and other networks of non-academic staff. These are also the areas where HEIs are more likely to be planning further improvements (see Figure 3.2), with more than one quarter planning additional support from academic and/or non-academic staff within the next 18 months.

The area which was least likely to be reported by HEIs as having improved in the past two years was class size, but even here 42% (of 93) of HEIs report that they have made improvements to class sizes for some or most disciplines or groups of students. Almost one half of the institutions considered that existing provision was appropriate. One in five HEIs (22% of 93) indicated that further improvements in relation to class sizes are underway or planned within the next 18 months (see **Figure 3.2**). Around one in ten (11% of 93) HEIs report that particular pressures have meant they have not been able to improve class sizes.
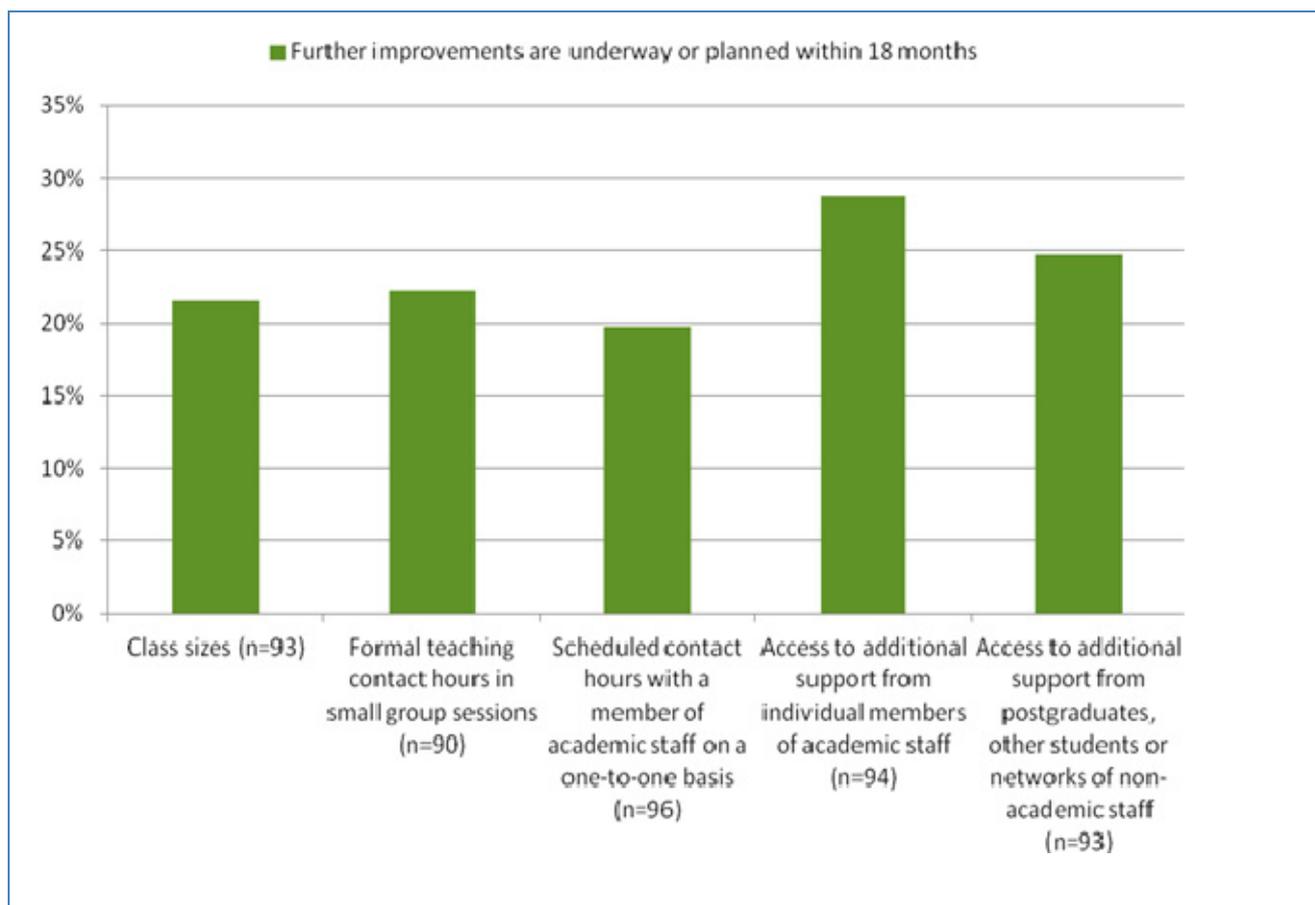
Figure 3.2 Responses from the **managers' survey** to questions relating to planned further improvements in relation to the **availability and accessibility of teaching staff**

Student representatives' responses broadly mirror the HEI managers' indications of planned improvements, with the notable exception that more student representatives (31% of 36 student representatives as opposed to 20% of 93 HEI managers) report planned improvements in scheduled contact hours with a member of academic staff on a one-to-one basis.

3.2 Summary of responses from HEI managers by TRAC peer group

Analysis of the responses by TRAC peer groups in relation to availability and accessibility of teaching staff was also carried out. As noted in the introduction, the numbers of responses from each TRAC peer group are generally too small to support any analysis of statistical significance, but there appear to be some patterns in the responses which are worthy of comment.

There appears to be a trend that the more research-intensive an HEI is (as indicated by TRAC peer group as a proxy for research income), the more likely it is to report recent improvements to the number of formal teaching contact hours in small-group sessions, as shown in **Figure 3.3**.
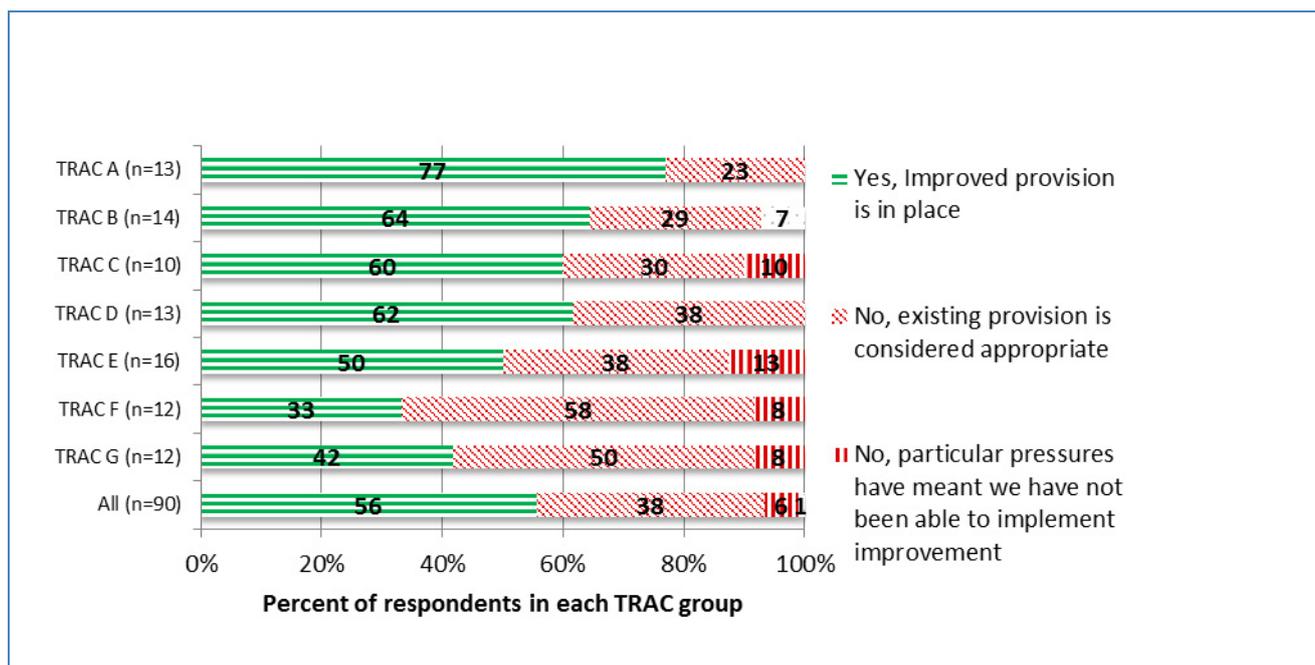
Figure 3.3 Responses from the **managers' survey** on improvements to the number of **formal teaching contact hours in small-group sessions**, broken down by TRAC peer group

Looking at individual peer groups, peer group G HEIs (specialist music/arts teaching institutions) were consistently among the least likely to report changes to the availability and accessibility of teaching staff and among the most likely to report that existing provision was appropriate, as shown in Table 3.1.

Peer groups A, F and G (larger research-intensive and smaller and specialist more teaching-focused institutions respectively) were most likely to report that existing provision is considered appropriate for scheduled contact hours with a member of academic staff on a **one-to-one** basis. Peer groups B, C, D and E (representing the majority of UK HEIs) were more likely to report changes in this area.

There was little discernible pattern among peer groups for the number of scheduled contact hours with a member of academic staff, access to additional support from individual members of academic staff, access to additional support from networks of non-academic staff.

Table 3.1 Responses from peer group G institutions compared with the mean across other TRAC peer groups

Topic	TRAC Peer group G		Mean across other peer groups	
	Yes, Improved provision is in place %	No, existing provision is considered appropriate %	Yes, Improved provision is in place %	No, existing provision is considered appropriate %
Class sizes	27	64	44	45
The number of formal teaching contact hours in small-group sessions	42	50	58	36
The number of scheduled contact hours with a member of academic staff on a one-to-one basis	33	67	49	43
Access to additional support from individual members of academic staff	58	42	77	19
Access to additional support from postgraduates, other students or networks of non-academic staff	18	55	73	23

3.3 Qualitative responses from HEI managers

In total, 58 HEI managers made comments on the availability and accessibility of academic staff. Table 3.2 summarises the topics raised and the number of respondents mentioning each topic. The percentages quoted are based on the total number who made a comment (58) e.g. 40% of those who commented on this section mentioned changes to the personal tutoring system.

In this section, the most frequently mentioned change was in relation to the personal tutoring system (mentioned by two-fifths of those who responded to this question). A key theme on this topic was ensuring consistency across the undergraduate offering through the establishment of minimum expectations on the amount and type of contact that the personal tutoring system should involve and, in some cases, through the improvement of guidance and training available to those members of academic staff with personal tutoring responsibilities. Three respondents explained that they had introduced small group tutorials alongside one-to-one arrangements as this was felt to be beneficial, particularly for first-year students, for whom one-to-one meetings can at first seem intimidating.

Around a fifth of those who commented on this topic described how their institution has introduced or improved the arrangements for peer-assisted learning or support. These arrangements usually involved first-year undergraduates being allocated to undergraduates already on their course for the purposes of seeking support on both academic and non-academic matters. Just two institutions said that they used postgraduate students as peer mentors for undergraduates, and at one institution this

practice had been abandoned in favour of undergraduate peers as the first-year students did not respond well to postgraduate mentors.

Table 3.2 Summary of topics raised on the availability and accessibility of teaching staff by managers

Topic	n	%*
Changes to personal tutoring system	23	40
Peer-assisted learning or support introduced or improved	11	19
Changes to contact hours	10	17
Increase in or already lots of small-group teaching	9	16
Current provision in this area is appropriate and constantly monitored	8	14
Staffing changes	8	14
Improved mechanisms for accessing one-to-one support from academic staff	6	10
Enhanced use of e-learning/virtual learning environment (VLE)	5	9
Reviews of teaching and learning currently in progress	5	9
Improvements to teaching and learning spaces	4	7
Increases in student numbers and how these are dealt with	4	7
Restructured the academic year	3	5
Challenges to making improvements	2	3
Changes to modules, programmes or subjects offered	2	3
Encouraged formation of or increase in societies based on academic disciplines	2	3

* Base for percentages is 58, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

The ten comments categorised as 'changes to contact hours' were primarily reports of increases in one-to-one contact time with academic staff. However, a small number of institutions had increased formal teaching hours, and two managers explained that a minimum standard number of contact hours (of any type) had been introduced across the undergraduate offering.

Nine of those who commented described an increase in or an already high level of small-group teaching arrangements for undergraduates. Eight respondents explained that provision in terms of access to and availability of academic staff was already considered appropriate and in most cases this was reportedly monitored via various mechanisms to ensure it meets students' expectations. Four of the eight managers who said that existing provision in terms of availability and accessibility of academic staff was appropriate were from TRAC group G institutions. This adds weight to the notion that the nature of these specialist institutions requires high levels of contact with academic staff, which leaves little scope or need to increase these forms of contact any further. The remaining four comments of this nature were spread across other TRAC groups.

One in ten of those who commented on this topic said that they had implemented measures to make it easier to access academic staff for support. Among the measures described were the introduction of electronic calendars and booking systems for appointments with members of academic staff and ensuring that staff 'office hours' were widely publicised among the relevant undergraduates.

Four respondents described how they were dealing with increases in student numbers. Two of these explained that resources had been increased and re-allocated to accommodate the increases. At one institution, however, an exercise to identify the viability of modules had led to larger class sizes in the remaining modules, and another

manager explained that departmental staff were employing innovative teaching methods to maintain the quality of the learning experience in the context of higher student numbers ('flipped lectures'[8] was one method used at this institution).

Three respondents described how the restructuring of the academic year had provided additional teaching weeks, usually by increasing the scheduled teaching in the traditionally exam-focused summer term.

Of the two managers who described the challenges they were facing in making changes in this area, one explained that the individual academic units had relative autonomy over these arrangements, so there was little that could be done on an institution-wide basis. The other respondent explained that the increase in small-group teaching and tutorials was placing huge demands on the existing teaching and learning spaces, which had been designed primarily for lecture-based teaching activities.

Six of the ten HEI managers who said contact hours had increased were from TRAC group A or B institutions. Although not confirmed in the study, it is possible that these research-intensive institutions may have been starting from a lower average base of one-to-one contact hours than some of the more teaching-focused and specialised institutions. None of the managers from TRAC group E, F or G institutions mentioned an increase in contact hours in their free-text comments.

3.4 Summary of responses by student representatives

Figure 3.4 summarises the response of student representatives to questions on the availability and accessibility of teaching staff.

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[8] 'Flipping' the lecture means providing students with a form of blended learning. Students typically learn new content online by watching video lectures, and then use the timetabled lecture period to do something more interactive, such as work through assigned problems.

Percent

Class sizes (n=36): 6, 19, 14, 56, 6

Formal teaching contact hours in small group sessions (n=35): 9, 29, 23, 37, 3

Scheduled contact hours with a member of academic staff on a one-to-one basis (n=35): 6, 37, 23, 31, 3

Access to additional support from individual members of academic staff (n=36): 6, 47, 17, 28, 3

Access to additional support from other students or networks of non-academic staff (n=35): 9, 26, 17, 40, 9

- Yes, improved provision is in place across all or most of the undergraduate offering
- Yes, improved provision is in place for some disciplines, units or groups of students
- No, existing provision is considered appropriate
- No, not aware that steps have been taken to improve this
- Don't know / not applicable

Figure 3.4 Responses from the **student representatives'** survey relating to **availability and accessibility of teaching staff**

At institutions where both an HEI manager and a student representative response were received, respondents to the student questionnaire generally report less evidence of improvements to availability and accessibility of teaching staff than HEI managers do. For example, when asked about **changes to class sizes**, 24% (of 33) of student representatives reported positively, i.e. either:

- Yes, improved provision is in place across the undergraduate offering, or for most disciplines, units or groups of students

    or

- Yes, improved provision is in place for some disciplines, units or groups of students

By contrast, 45% (of 33) of HEI managers at those institution responded similarly. This pattern was repeated across all questions relating to the availability and accessibility of teaching staff, as shown in **Figure 3.5**. The highest level of agreement between managers and student representatives came in reporting the improvements to scheduled contact hours with academic staff on a one-to-one basis.
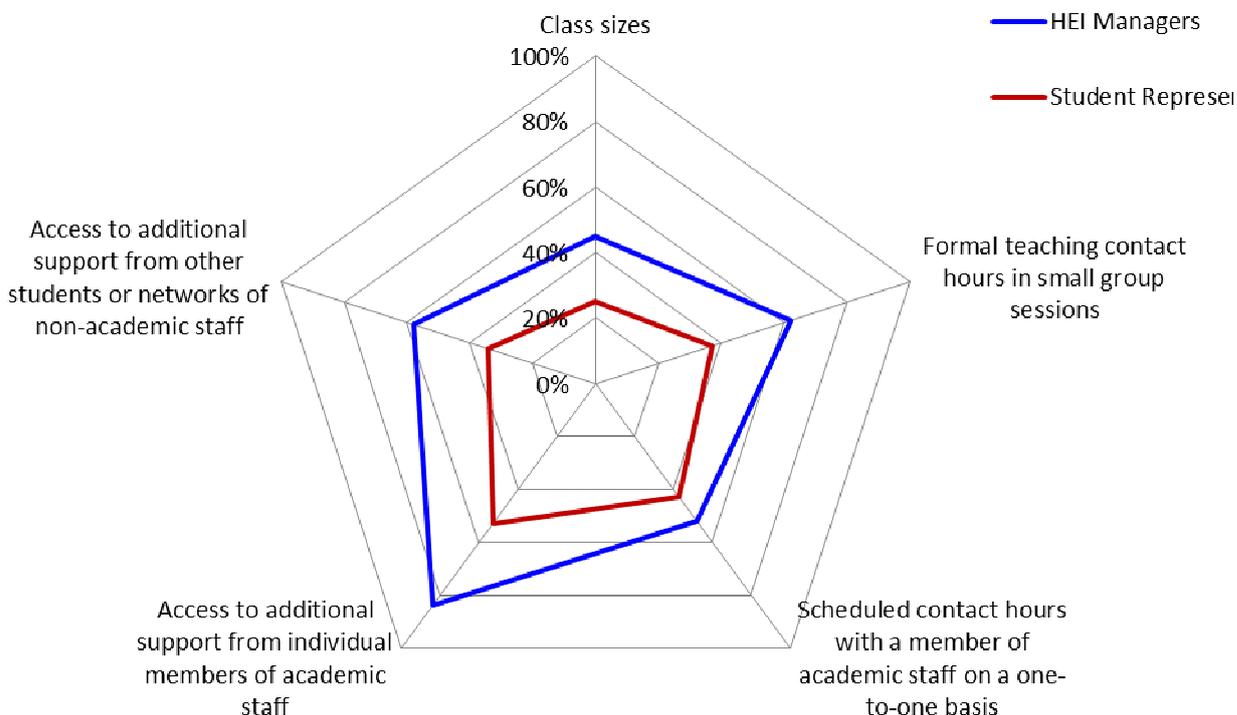
Figure 3.5 Comparison between the scale of HEI manager positive responses and student representative positive responses to questions on the **availability and accessibility of teaching staff** for those institutions from which a response was received from both an HEI manager and a student representative.

Too few responses were received from student representatives in each TRAC peer group to support any meaningful analysis by TRAC peer group.

3.5 Qualitative responses by student representatives

In total, 16 student representatives made a comment on the availability and accessibility of teaching staff. Their views are summarised in Table 3.3.

In contrast to the message emerging from the HEI managers' survey on improvements to class sizes, a significant proportion of student representatives reported that the increase in student numbers is having an adverse effect on class sizes and student–staff ratios: just over a third of those who commented on the availability and accessibility of teaching staff mentioned this issue. A couple of these respondents said that the problem was confined to specific subject disciplines only; one person mentioned the inadequacy of existing teaching spaces to accommodate larger cohort sizes; another expressed fears that large cohort sizes will result in fewer small-group sessions, which students value highly.

Table 3.3 Summary of topics raised on the **availability and accessibility of teaching staff by student representatives**

Topic	n	%*
Larger class sizes/increase in student numbers	6	38
Peer-assisted learning/peer mentoring introduced or improved	3	19
Problems accessing one-to-one time with academic staff	2	13
Access to one-to-one time with academic staff good or improved	2	13
Personal tutoring system improved	2	13
Wide-ranging review of academic provision undertaken	2	13
Concerns over disparities in contact hours across disciplines	1	6
Institution-wide minimum contact hours implemented	1	6
Enhanced student representatives' role	1	6
Further improvements are needed in this area	1	6
Lack of support for international students	1	6
Peer mentoring no longer used	1	6
Small-group teaching already highly used	1	6
Unaware of any changes in this provision	1	6

* Base for percentages is 16, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

Student representatives appear to confirm the improvements in peer-assisted learning reported by HEI managers. Around a fifth of those who commented described improvements to, or the introduction of, peer-assisted learning or peer mentoring schemes; all saw this as beneficial to the student experience.

One-to-one time with academic staff was mentioned by four respondents (a quarter of those who commented); two noted improvements to access to such support, while the other two detailed problems students had or were likely to experience in accessing such support. Again here, the issue of larger cohort sizes was raised, with the concern that this made it more difficult to get appointments with staff.

Chapter 4.   Study support

In **survey section 2,** HEI managers and student representatives were each asked whether their institution had in the past two years made any changes to the following for undergraduates:

- Specific support to aid the transition to study at higher education level

- Information on the expectations of the course e.g. in terms of academic standards, study time, methods and expected outcomes

- Specific support to develop academic skills e.g. academic writing, IT, maths, etc.

- Suitable support for those returning to education and/or mature students

- Additional support for students to develop skills valued by employers, e.g. problem solving, giving presentations, communication

- Additional opportunities for work experience, placement or internships

The options available to them for each question were exactly the same as for the 'availability and accessibility of teaching staff' questions discussed in the previous section; as before, they had the opportunity to expand on their responses in a free-text box at the end of the section.

4.1 Summary of responses from HEI managers

Figure 4.1 summarises the response of HEI managers to questions relating to changes in study support over the past two years.

As shown in the graph, at least 82% (of 94 or 96) of respondents indicated improvements for some or all of the undergraduate offering for five of the six areas of interest relating to study support. The exception is **suitable support for those returning to education and/or mature students**, where 46% (of 94) indicated that existing provision is considered appropriate. Nevertheless almost half (48% of 94) reported a change to this area of provision, and a further 20% (of 94) indicated that further improvements in relation to support for mature students or those returning to education were underway or planned within the next 18 months. Approximately two in five HEI managers also report further improvements are planned for additional support to aid the transition to higher education, to develop skills valued by employers, and to provide additional opportunities for work experience, placement or internships (see Figure 4.2).
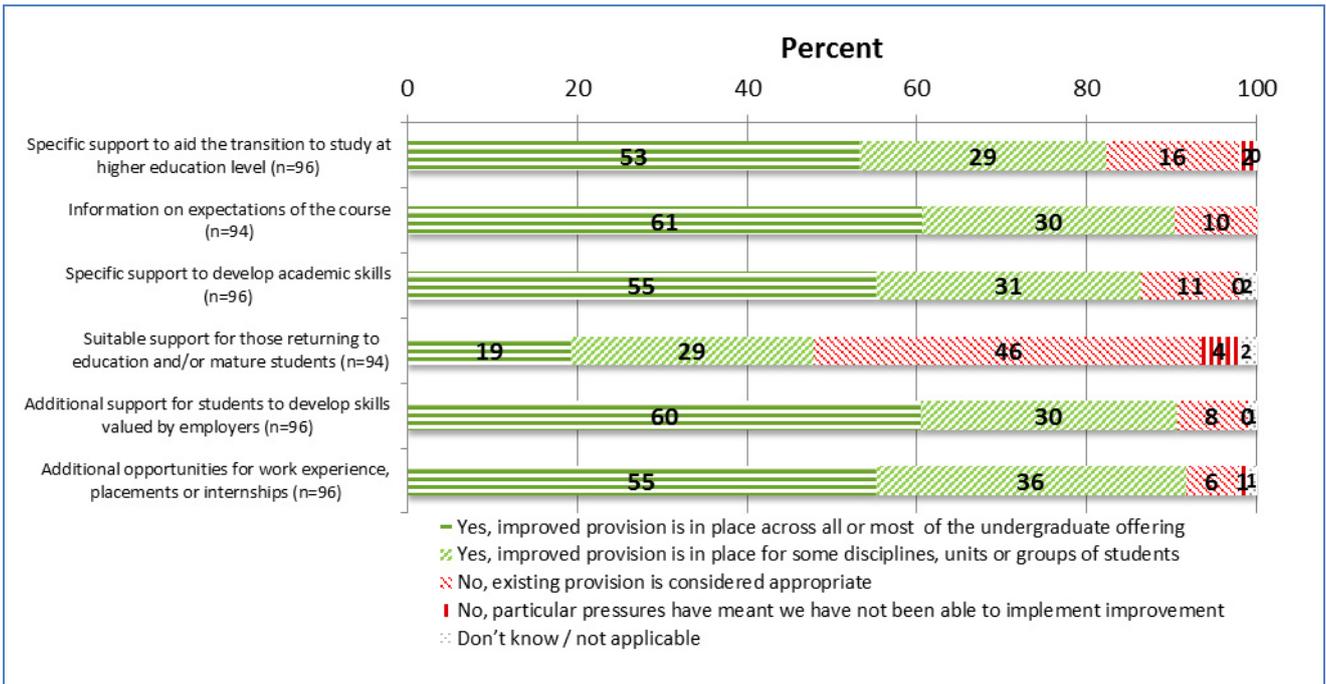
Figure 4.1 Responses from the **managers' survey** relating to improvements to **study support**
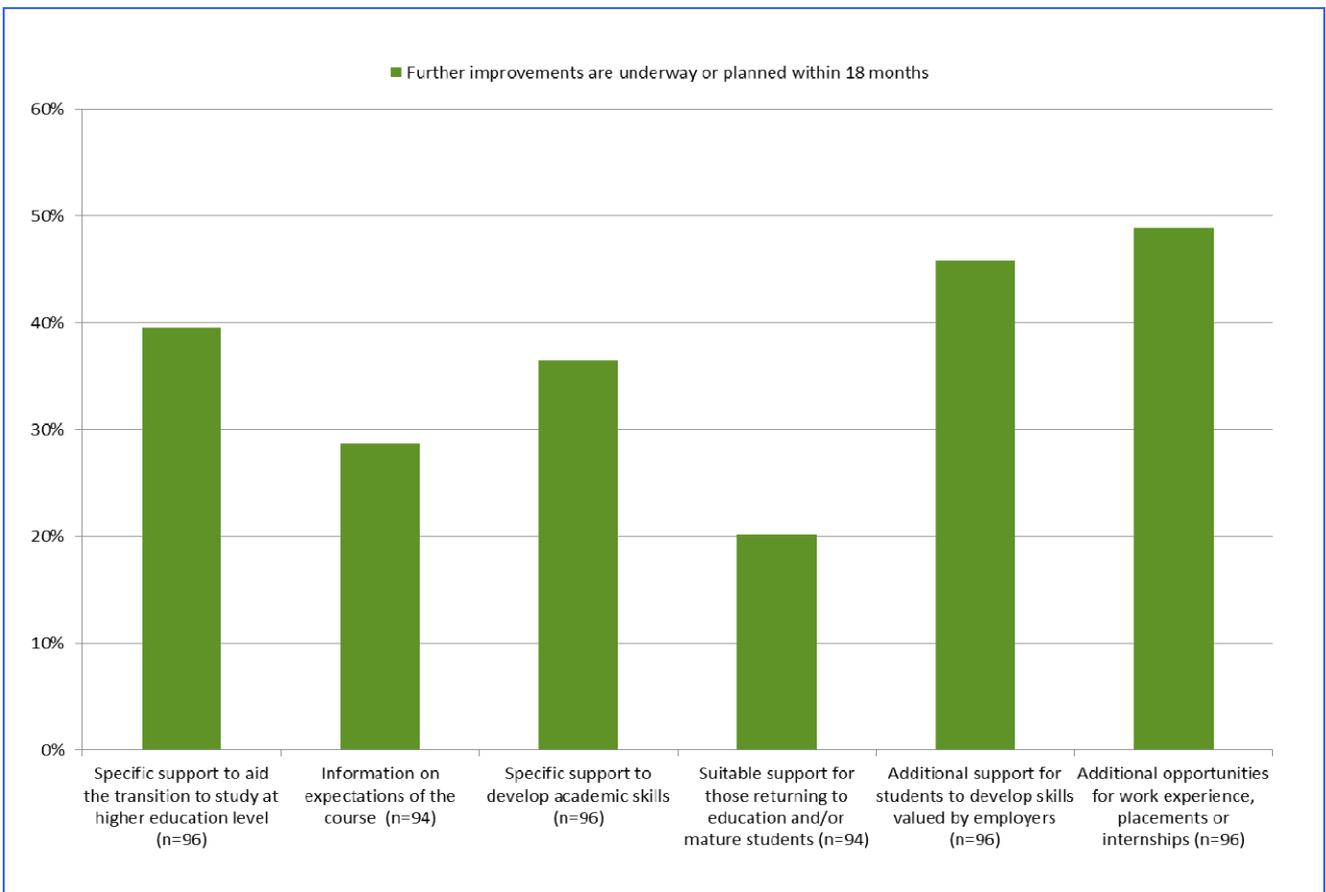

Figure 4.2. Responses from the **managers' survey** to questions relating to **planned further improvements for study support**

Student representatives report a broadly similar picture to that painted by HEI managers for planned further improvements to study support, although at a slightly lower level – student representatives generally report planned improvements at a rate around 10% lower in each category of student support (with the exception of planned improvements to **information on expectations of the course,** where the student representatives figure is approximately equal to the HEI managers' figure).

4.2 Summary of responses from HEI managers by TRAC peer group

Again, the numbers of responses from each TRAC peer group are too small to support any analysis of statistical significance, but there are some patterns in the responses which are observable. Again, peer group G HEIs (specialist music/arts teaching institutions) were consistently among the least likely to report changes and among the most likely to report that existing provision was considered appropriate. The analysis by TRAC peer group for study support revealed only one other significant seeming difference between the groups: peer group F (smaller, more teaching-focused institutions) bucked the trend in reporting that improved provision had been put in place to support mature students or those returning to education. Just over four-fifths (83%, of 12) of peer group F institutions reported changes in this area compared with the average of 46% (of 94) across all TRAC peer groups.

4.3 Qualitative responses from HEI managers

61 HEI managers commented further on study support provision at their institution. Their comments are summarised in Figure 4.1.

Nearly half of those who made a comment on the provision of study support described how opportunities for work experience were being, or had been, enhanced at their institution. This included placements and work experience as part of the undergraduate programmes, as well as 'extra-curricular' opportunities such as internships, temporary employment through university-based agencies and, in a couple of cases, opportunities to work with university staff to gain work experience.

Around a third of those who commented described how the study support infrastructure had been developed over the last couple of years. These comments included reports of increased staffing, the creation of physical and virtual 'one-stop shops' for study support and the restructuring of services and units to better meet the demand for study support.

While managers representing HEIs in all TRAC groups mentioned expanded opportunities for work experience, the frequency with which this was mentioned was highest among TRAC group A managers, who accounted for 7 of the 26 comments on this topic; it was lowest in TRAC group G, where just one manager mentioned this. Again, this could be due to the already abundant opportunities for practical work experience across these specialist institutions.

Table 4.1 Summary of topics raised on the provision **of study support** by **HEI managers**

Topic	n	%*
Improvements to availability of placements, work experience, internships, employment agencies, on-campus employment, etc.	26	43
Support infrastructure changes, e.g. staffing levels, physical location of centres, electronic access, etc.	19	31
Academic skills development support improved, e.g. writing, numeracy, using library resources, IT, etc.	15	25
Improved opportunities to develop employability/professional skills	14	23
Information provision improved for new and/or existing students	14	23
Transition to HE initiatives introduced or improved	13	21
Integration of skills development and support into programmes and curriculum	12	20
Pre-arrival/induction/welcome week activities improved	8	13
Peer mentoring and support introduced or improved	7	11
Awards/credits/recognition for non-academic development activities and achievements	5	8
Framework for tracking progression in personal and professional development introduced or improved	5	8
English language support for EAL (English as an additional language) students	4	7
Mature students support and/or information provision improved	4	7
All areas of study support under constant review and improvement	3	5
Widening participation (WP) support improved or already at high standard	3	5
Careers advice/support from central careers service improved	2	3
Study abroad opportunities improved/extended	2	3

* Base for percentages is 61, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

Support for developing academic skills was discussed in the comments of a quarter of respondents, most of whom described the improved provision of training in areas such as writing, mathematics and/or statistics and library skills. Some had developed these as online resources but the majority described in-person opportunities such as workshops, drop-in sessions and opportunities for one-to-one support from specialist advisors. Linked to this were comments, from approximately a fifth of those who answered this question, stating that specific transition support had been implemented or improved to assist students in making the transition to studying at higher education level, again through both in-person and online delivery modes.

Nearly a quarter of those who commented mentioned improvements in the opportunities for developing employability and professional skills – such as leadership, team building and entrepreneurial skills – through specific activities, training and events. A fifth of respondents described how skills development (personal, professional and academic skills) had been further integrated into the curriculum of their undergraduate programmes making it an integral element of the undergraduate experience.

The improved provision of information for new and existing students was mentioned by just under a quarter of those who made comment. Some described how their Student Charter or KIS (Key Information Set) data meets these needs while others had made additional improvements such as using a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to disseminate course information to prospective, pre-arrival and existing students.

Eight respondents commented on the improvements made to the pre-arrival and induction periods for new undergraduates through a variety of initiatives, including establishing contact between offer-holders and existing undergraduates on their course, the re-focusing of 'week one' activities and events to provide a better preparation for the academic transition and the extension of supportive activities and events over the summer (previously offered to specific student groups only) to the entire undergraduate intake.

Five managers described how their institutions have developed formal recognition schemes for non-academic development activities and achievements by enabling students to gain credits or achieve an award for extra-curricular activities such as voluntary work. This is aimed at providing CV-enhancing opportunities as well as enhancing general personal development.

Respondents from five institutions explained that a formal framework had been implemented to track academic, professional and personal development throughout the programme. Usually forming part of the personal tutor system, these mechanisms, which generally record progress against a set of benchmarks (with targets being set and discussed throughout the programme), aim to provide a more concrete evidence base to support each student's development.

A small number of respondents described support for specific student groups such as those for whom English is an additional language, widening participation students and mature students; in most instances, however, these changes were building upon existing provision rather than introducing completely new support structures and mechanisms.

4.4 Summary of responses by student representatives

Figure 4.3 summarises the response of student representatives to questions on study support.
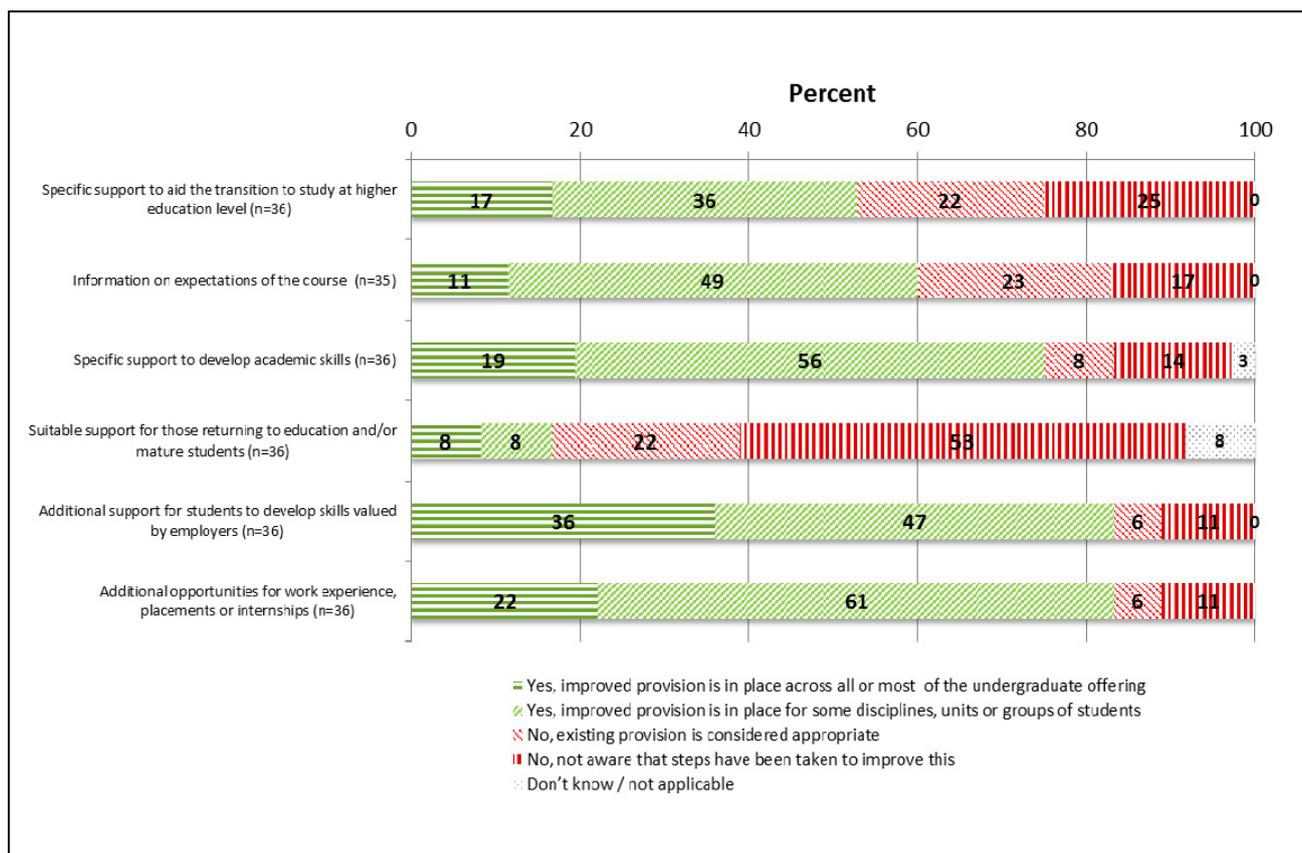
Figure 4.3 Responses from the student representatives' survey relating to **study support**.

At institutions where both an HEI manager and a student representative response were received, respondents to the student survey generally report less evidence of improvements to study support than HEI managers report (see Figure 4.4). The difference between the two sets of respondents is, however, less consistent than with the availability and accessibility of teaching staff; on three of the six study support areas the differences are relatively small, although HEI managers tend to report that changes affect all or most of the undergraduate offering, whereas student representatives tend to report that changes are in place for only some. The biggest discrepancy occurred when managers and student representatives were asked about **information on expectations of the course**. More than nine out of ten (94% of 33) managers reported changes, 60% (of 33) student representatives agreed.
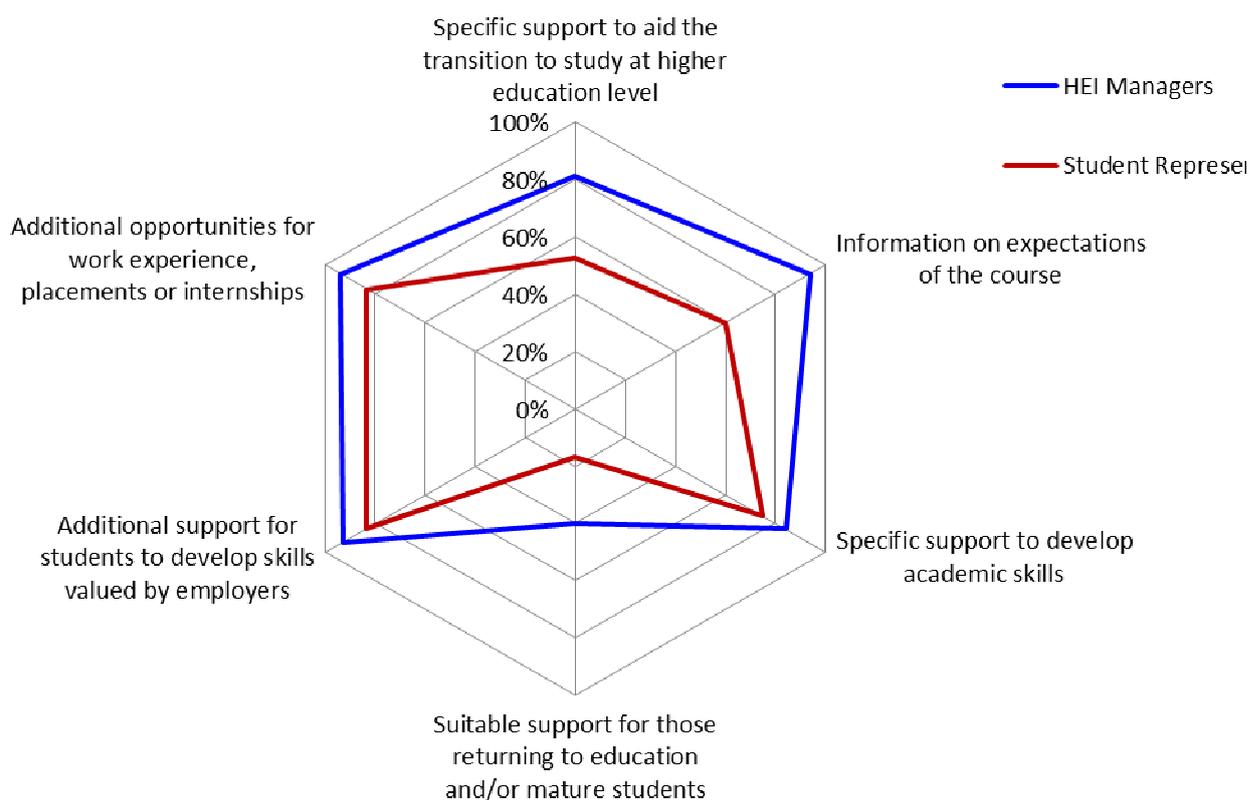
Figure 4.4 Comparison between the scale of HEI manager positive responses and student representative positive responses to questions on **study support** for those institutions from which a response was received from both an HEI manager and a student representative.

Too few responses were received from student representatives in each TRAC peer group to support any meaningful analysis by TRAC peer group.

4.5 Qualitative responses by student representatives

The responses of the 15 student representatives who commented on study support are summarised in Table 4.2.

As was the case with the managers' responses to this question, the most frequently mentioned improvements related to placements and other work experience opportunities. Around half of student representatives who made a comment explained how they had seen improvements in this area. Two respondents explained that they had worked with their institutions' managers to stop the advertisement of unpaid internships, so that now only salaried or fixed fee positions were promoted to students.

Almost half of those who commented (six respondents) reported improvements to the opportunities for developing employability skills. With reference to activities targeted at graduate employment, three respondents expressed the view that these focused too much

on the more traditional graduate entry careers (such as finance and law) and suggested that more diversity was required in this area, in particular, more subject-specific provision.

Table 4.2 Summary of topics raised on the provision of study support by student representatives

Topic	n	%*
Improved provision of placements/work experience/internships	8	53
Improved provision of employability skills development opportunities	**6**	**40**
Academic/study skills support improved	3	20
Concerns over the diversity of graduate employment activity	**3**	**20**
Support for mature/returning students needs further improvement	3	20
Concerns over take-up of academic/study skills development opportunities	**2**	**13**
Improved support for mature/returning students	2	13
Transition to study at HE level – improved provision	**2**	**13**
Transition to study at HE level – more could be done	2	13
Information on course expectations needs improving	**1**	**7**
Problems getting lower-level managers to engage with proposed changes	1	7

* Base for percentages is 15, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

Three respondents noted improvements to academic and study support provision, but two student representatives expressed concerns over the take-up of these opportunities, when they were non-compulsory. Three respondents commented that provision for mature and returning students was in need of improvement while two others reported that this had in fact improved at their institutions.

Two respondents said that the support for the transition to study at higher education level had improved but a further two commented that this was in need of further improvement. In particular, one student representative observed that the onus was on the FE settings to prepare students prior to arrival at university, rather than on the university itself to offer specific support for the transition.

Chapter 5.   Student engagement and consultation with students

In **survey section 3,** HEI managers and student representatives were each asked whether their institution had in the past two years made any changes to the following for undergraduates:

- The mechanisms used to gauge student satisfaction with the learning environment and opportunities

- The commitment to or support for student academic representation and student engagement

- The mechanisms by which course and module feedback is sought from students

- The mechanisms by which students can shape their academic experience

- 'Closing the feedback loop' so that students can see the results and impact of the feedback they have provided

- The student charter or partnership agreement

The options available to them for each question were exactly the same as for the questions discussed in previous sections; as before, they had the opportunity to expand on their responses in an open-text box at the end of the section.

5.1 Summary of responses from HEI managers

Figure 5.1 summarises the response of HEI managers to questions relating to changes in student engagement and consultation over the past two years.

Percent

Category	Values
The mechanisms used to gauge student satisfaction with the learning environment and opportunities (n=95)	73, 15, 13, 0
The commitment to or support for student academic representation and student engagement (n=96)	71, 11, 17, 0
The mechanisms by which course and module feedback are sought from students (n=95)	54, 26, 14, 6, 0
The mechanisms by which students can shape their academic experience (n=90)	44, 33, 17, 2, 3
"Closing the feedback loop" so that students can see the results and impact of the feedback they have provided (n=93)	57, 34, 5, 3, 0
The student charter or partnership agreement (n=92)	68, 4, 23, 2, 2

Legend:
- Yes, improved provision is in place across all or most of the undergraduate offering
- Yes, improved provision is in place for some disciplines, units or groups of students
- No, existing provision is considered appropriate
- No, particular pressures have meant we have not been able to implement improvement
- Don't know / not applicable

Figure 5.1 Responses from the **managers' survey** relating to changes to **student engagement and consultation**

The HEI manager survey provides strong evidence of improvements to student engagement and consultation in all areas. As shown in the graph, at least 72% (of 90 to 96) of HEI managers reported improvements to student engagement and consultation across all areas of interest; for the most part managers also reported that changes were in place across most or all of the undergraduate offering (only **mechanisms by which students can shape their academic experience** was selected by fewer than 50% of the managers).

Furthermore, the survey provides a clear indication of planned further improvements by HEIs (see Figure 5.2). Almost one in four (23% of 92) of HEI mangers reported plans to change the student charter or partnership agreement; plans for the other areas listed are even more widespread, with as many as 39% (of 93) of HEIs having plans to 'close the feedback loop'.
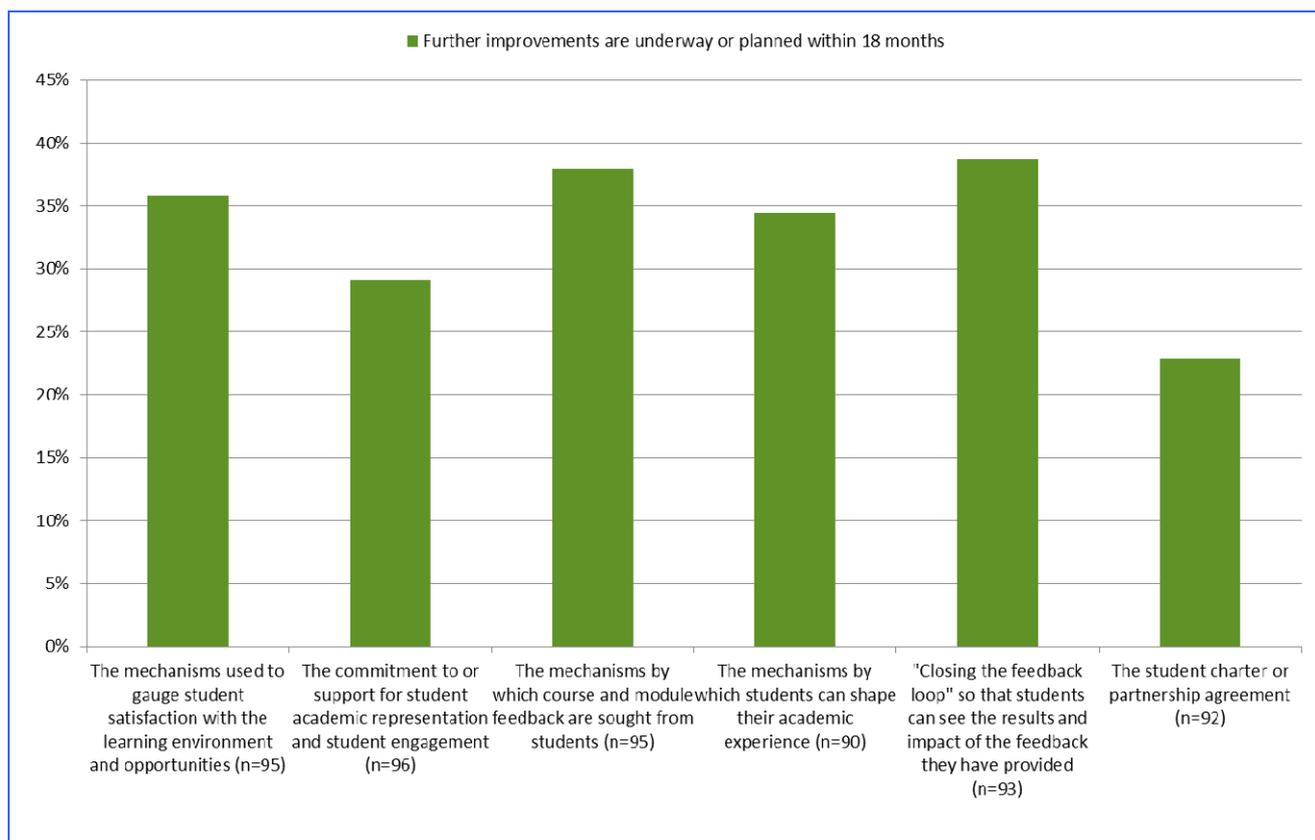
Figure 5.2 Responses from the **managers' survey** to questions relating to **planned further improvements for student engagement and consultation**

Student representatives report a broadly similar picture to that painted by HEI managers for planned further improvements in student engagement and consultation.

5.2 Summary of responses from HEI managers by TRAC peer group

Further analysis revealed fairly uniform responses across the TRAC peer groups in relation to student engagement and consultation, with the following exceptions:

- Only 36% (of 11) peer group G HEIs (specialist music/arts teaching institutions) reported changes to mechanisms by which students can shape their academic experience, compared with the average across all TRAC peer groups of 78% (of 90). The next lowest TRAC peer group was peer group D with 73% (of 15), so there does appear to be a real difference in approach in the smaller specialist teaching institutions – they are less likely to report recent changes and more likely to report that existing provision is considered appropriate, perhaps indicating that such approaches are already embedded in these institutions.

- There are a range of responses from the different TRAC peer groups on whether there have been changes to the student charter or partnership agreement in the past two years, with larger research-intensive universities and smaller or specialist teaching institutions (TRAC peer groups A, F and G respectively) less likely to report changes. However, at least 50% of all peer groups report that changes have taken place.

5.3 Qualitative responses from HEI managers

There were 58 comments on this topic and the main issues raised are summarised in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 Summary of topics raised by HEI managers on student engagement and consultation with students

Topic	n	%*
Greater student engagement and representation on boards, committees, etc.	31	53
Student Charter developed	22	38
Closing the feedback loop enhanced, e.g. 'you said we did'	20	34
Evaluations of teaching/modules/courses improved	18	31
Greater collaboration/consultation with SU	9	16
Introduced training for student representatives	6	10
Cautious of over-surveying students and problems getting students to participate	5	9
Student involvement in QA assessments/monitoring	5	9
Use of social media, online forums and/or email for students to feedback comments and suggestions	4	7

* Base for percentages is 58, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

Approximately half of those who commented on this topic described how their institution had implemented greater engagement and involvement of students in the formal decision-making processes, citing examples such as increased student representation on boards and committees. Though managers across all types of institution mentioned increased engagement and involvement of students, there was a tendency for the more research-intensive institutions to be more likely to discuss this in their comments: 12 of the 31 managers who mentioned this represented TRAC group A or B institutions.

Just over a third of those who commented on this topic explained that a Student Charter had been produced in consultation with the Students' Union or equivalent body and a large proportion of these explained that the Charter had already been reviewed and updated, again working closely with the Students' Union. This suggests that many institutions see the Charter as an evolving document and are striving to retain its relevance by making the necessary adjustments as and when needed. This chimes with the data reported above: 72% (of 92) of institutions reported changes to the Student Charter and 23% (of 92) report that further changes are planned.

Around a third of those who commented described their efforts to 'close the feedback loop' by ensuring students are aware of what actions are taken in response to the feedback they provide through surveys and other evaluation exercises (many referred to this as 'you said, we did' activity). Interestingly, a large proportion of those who mentioned this acknowledged that more needs to be done to ensure students receive relevant, informative and timely 'closing the loop' feedback; several managers indicated that they were actively exploring ways to improve this process.

Just under a third of managers who responded described how the evaluation of teaching, modules and/or courses had been or was being improved. Many institutions appear to be

taking measures to make these processes more consistent across the institution (rather than locally designed and administered) and some were employing technology to help to standardise and streamline the process (e.g. by enabling students to complete such evaluations from mobile devices). A couple of institutions had implemented mid-module (as well as end-of-module) evaluations so that problems could be addressed earlier and necessary changes could be made before students reached the end of the module.

Five respondents expressed some reservations about the amount of survey activity being conducted among undergraduates and the difficulties of getting students to take part. Some had addressed this through greater use of qualitative methods (such as focus groups and forums with relevant staff members) and less reliance on surveys; others had taken steps to reduce survey activity, for example by omitting final-year undergraduates from institutional satisfaction surveys, given that these overlap with the NSS.

Five managers specified that students had taken on an increasing role in quality assurance exercises; a further four respondents described how gathering the views of students was being made easier and more relevant through the use of social media and email.

5.4 Summary of responses by student representatives

Figure 5.3 summarises the response of student representatives to questions on student engagement and consultation.
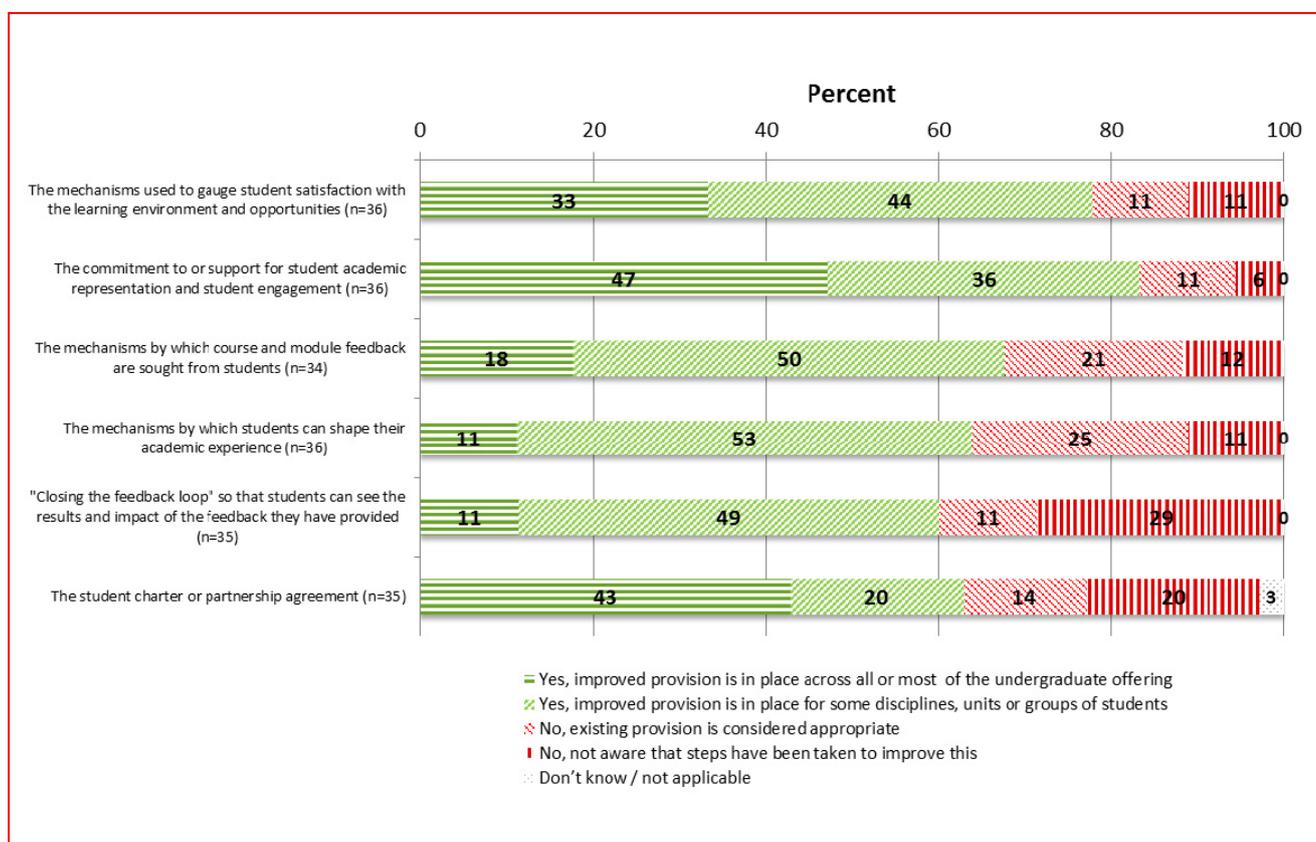

Figure 5.3 Responses from the **student representatives'** survey relating to **student engagement and consultation**

At institutions where both an HEI manager and a student representative response were received the scale of improvements reported by student representatives is broadly similar to those reported by HEI managers (see Figure 5.4). The main exception is **'Closing the feedback loop' so that students can see the results and impact of the feedback they have provided**, for which 97% (of 33) HEI mangers reported that improvements in this area had been made across some of all of the undergraduate offering, whereas student representatives put the figure rather lower, at 60% (of 33).
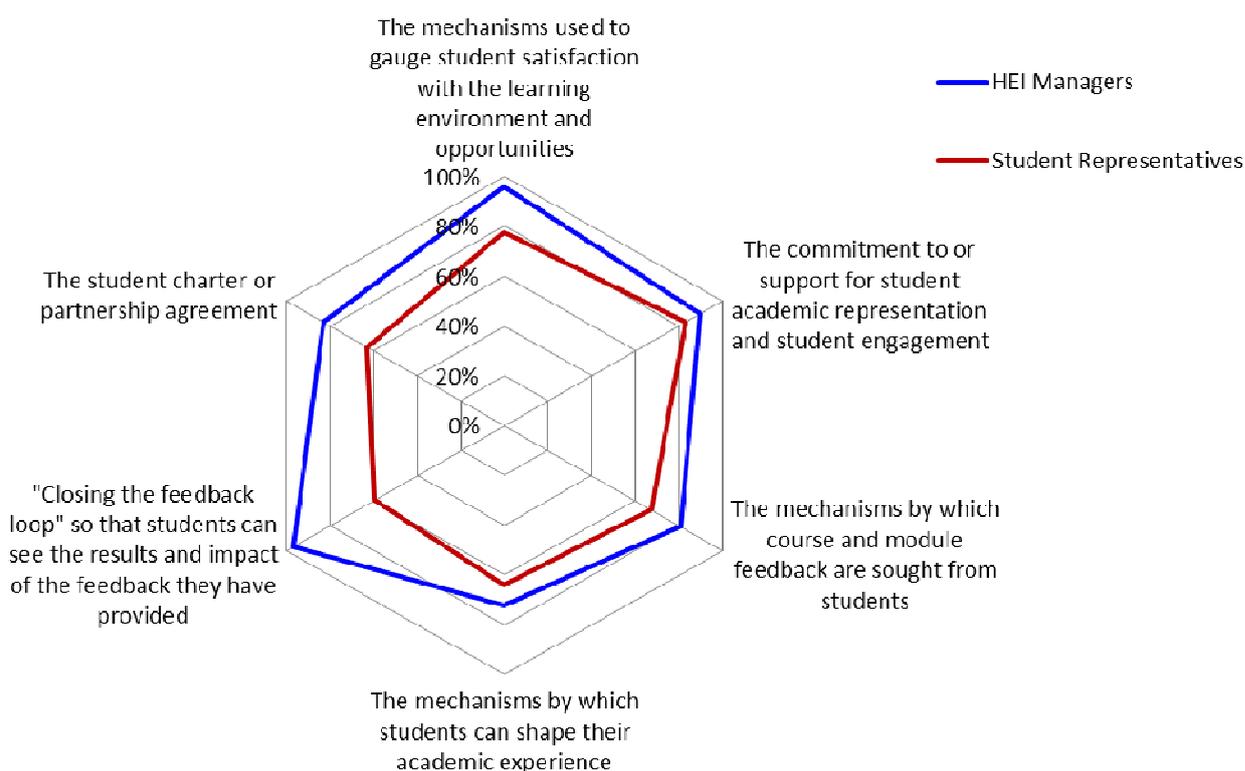
Figure 5.4 Comparison between the scale of HEI manager positive responses and student representative positive responses to questions on **student engagement and consultation** for those institutions from which a response was received from both an HEI manager and a student representative.

5.5 Qualitative responses by student representatives

There were 17 comments from student representatives on the topic of student engagement and consultation with students. These are summarised in Table 5.2.

Nearly a third of those who commented on the topic of student engagement and student consultation said that there was evidence of increased attention being paid to the student voice by managers at the institution. The same proportion were concerned, however, that

the work being done at institution level to ensure students are engaged and consulted is not being implemented at the academic unit level.

Interestingly, in the context of the positive nature of the managers' comments on the Student Charter, five student representatives expressed concerns about the effectiveness and appropriateness of the Charter. Some had already re-written or requested revisions to their Charter to make it more relevant to students and to raise awareness of its meaning in terms of everyday student life.

Areas which had been described by managers as having been improved in the past two years also featured in student representatives' comments – for example, increased efforts to 'close the feedback loop', an enhanced role for course representatives, greater collaboration between the Students' Union (or equivalent) and HEI managers, and greater student representation on institution committees, boards or decision-making panels were all mentioned by two or three respondents each. Three student representatives felt that the module feedback system was in need of improvement.

Table 5.2 Summary of topics raised by student representatives on student engagement and consultation with students

Topic	n	%*
Increased emphasis among HEI managers on listening to the student voice	5	29
Institution-level policies not being effectively implemented at faculty/school/department level	5	29
Concerns about the effectiveness, appropriateness and relevance of the Student Charter	5	29
Increased 'closing the feedback loop' activity	3	18
Module feedback system inadequate/in need of improvement	3	18
Role of student/course representatives extended or improved	3	18
Student 'partnership' has improved/students more in control of their experiences	3	18
SU or equivalent is working with HEI managers to review student engagement and consultation practices	3	18
Greater collaboration and consultation between the SU or equivalent and HEI managers	2	12
Greater student representation on committees, boards, etc.	2	12
More needs to be done to achieve a true 'partnership' with students	2	12
Over-reliance by managers on NSS and other student surveys for feedback	2	12
Module feedback systems or processes have improved	1	6

* Base for percentages is 17, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

While many comments indicated that increased attention was being paid to the student voice, two respondents offered the view that this does not necessary constitute a real 'partnership' with students, and they suggested that more needs to be done to develop the student partnership at their institutions. Linked to this, a further two respondents expressed concern about managers' apparent over-reliance on survey results (e.g. the NSS) as a means of obtaining feedback from students.

In a follow-up question, student representatives were given the opportunity to comment on any changes they had noticed in the past two years to the attention paid by the institution

to the student voice. There were comments from 28 respondents on this topic; these are presented in Table 5.3.

Many of the topics raised in response to this follow-on question echoed the views expressed in the previous question. Of particular note here were the five respondents who reported that, while feedback is increasingly sought from students, there is little evidence to suggest that much is done as a result of the feedback (though a further three respondents said they had noticed more 'closing the feedback loop' activity in the past two years).

Two respondents objected to the importance placed on the 'student voice' and called for greater emphasis on the 'student partnership', of which the student voice is only a small part. One of these respondents observed that the 'student voice' emphasis is symptomatic of a 'students as customers' perception; the other felt that it reflects a transactional relationship which neglects the deeper 'engagement' students should have with their institutions.

Table 5.3 Summary of changes in the attention paid to the student voice in the past two years, as reported by student representatives

Topic	n	%*
Greater student involvement in decision-making structures, e.g. committees, meetings, etc.	**8**	**29**
SU or equivalent is now working more closely/collaboratively with institution managers	8	29
Feedback is increasingly sought but not always acted upon	**5**	**18**
Course or department representatives' role has been extended/enhanced	3	11
More 'closing the loop' feedback provided now	**3**	**11**
The SU or equivalent has been instrumental in improving student voice activity	3	11
Emphasis should be on 'student partnership' not 'student voice'	**2**	**7**
New codes of practice/policies on student engagement have been implemented	2	7
New feedback mechanisms or ways of hearing the student voice have been developed	**2**	**7**
New staff roles created with a student voice/student engagement remit	**2**	**7**
Consultation has improved but still needs to be undertaken earlier in the decision-making process	1	4
Review of student engagement/student voice activity is being undertaken across the HEI	**1**	**4**
Student voice only heard in specific areas; needs to be more wide-ranging to encompass whole experience	**1**	**4**

* Base for percentages is 28, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

Two respondents mentioned that new staff roles had been created with a student engagement remit; a further two student representatives described the implementation of new mechanisms for seeking feedback from students.

Chapter 6.   Assessment and feedback

In **survey section 4,** HEI managers and student representatives were each asked whether their institution had in the past two years made any changes to the following for undergraduates:

- The turnaround time for feedback on assessed work

- The expected format/length/level of detail in written feedback to students

- The use of IT systems to manage coursework

- The opportunities for regular reviews of individual students' progress

The options available to them for each question were exactly the same as for the questions discussed in previous sections; as before, they had the opportunity to expand on their responses in an open-text box at the end of the section.

6.1 Summary of responses from HEI managers

Figure 6.1 summarises the response of HEI managers to questions relating to changes in student engagement and consultation over the past two years.
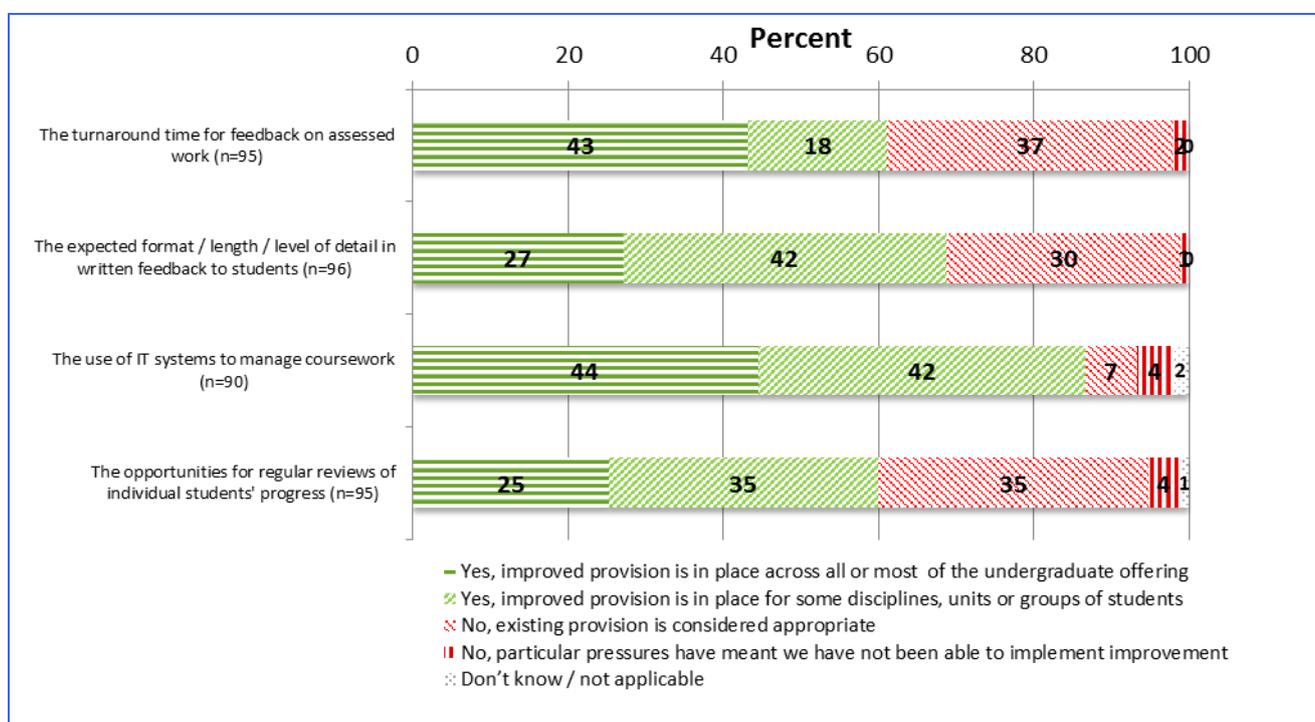

Figure 6.1 Responses from the **managers' survey** relating to changes to **assessment and feedback**

The most widespread change in the past two years is in the use of IT systems to manage coursework, with more than four-fifths (86% of 90) of HEI managers reporting a change in this area. Interestingly, this is also the area where further changes are planned (50% of 90) – see Figure 6.2.

Changes to other areas related to assessment and feedback also appear to be fairly widespread, with at least 60% (of 90–96) reporting improvements to some or all of the undergraduate provision. Approximately one third of institutions report plans for further changes to written feedback to students, and to opportunities for regular reviews of individual students' progress, but the latter is an area where student representatives' and HEI managers' perceptions differ: 36% (of 95) of HEI managers report planned improvements to opportunities for regular reviews of individual students' progress, whereas only 17% (of 35) student representatives are aware of such plans.

One in five (20% of 95) plan further changes to the turnaround time for feedback on assessed work (see Figure 6.2).


Figure 6.2 Responses from the **managers' survey** to questions relating to **planned further improvements to assessment and feedback**
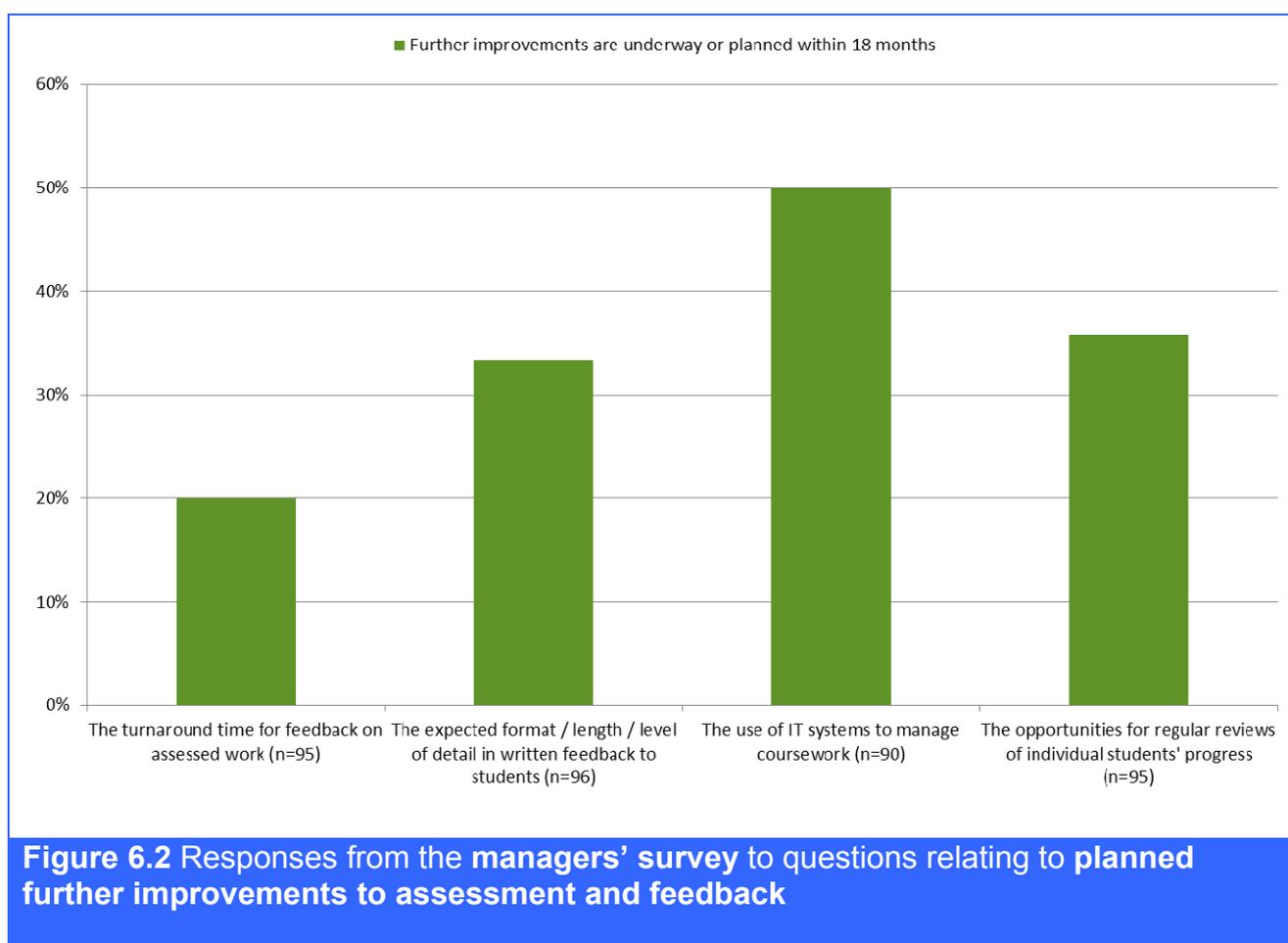
6.2 Summary of responses from HEI managers by TRAC peer group

The following observations can be made:

- More teaching-focused institutions (as indicated by TRAC peer group) appear to be more comfortable that their existing provision is appropriate in relation to turnaround time for feedback on assessed work; TRAC peer groups E, F and G average 46% (of 43) – compared with 29% (of 52) across the other TRAC groups – for satisfaction with their existing provision in this area.

- Larger research-intensive universities and teaching-focused institutions (TRAC peer groups A, E, F and G respectively) were more likely to report that their existing provision was appropriate in relation to written feedback to students (38%, of 57, versus 17%, of 39, respectively).

- More teaching-focused institutions (TRAC peer groups E, F and G) were more likely to report that their existing provision was appropriate in relation to opportunities for regular reviews of individual students' progress (56% of 43, versus 19% of 52 respectively).

6.3 Qualitative responses from HEI managers

Comments on assessment and feedback were made by 56 managers. The topics raised are presented in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 Summary of topics raised by HEI managers in relation to assessment and feedback

Topic	n	%*
Maximum turnaround time for feedback on assessment exists	25	45
Use of IT systems for managing coursework is planned or under development	24	43
VLE or other IT system now used for coursework submission, marking and/or feedback	16	29
Regular reviews of progress are incorporated into the personal tutoring system	14	25
Institution-wide minimum standards/expectations for feedback format have been implemented	9	16
Challenges to introducing IT-based coursework management systems	4	7
Feedback format varies across different subject areas	4	7
Increased use of formative assessments to give more feedback to students on progress	3	5
Video and/or audio feedback formats being used	3	5
Expectations of assessments are now better communicated to students	2	4
Improved staff training and guidance on assessment and feedback	2	4

* Base for percentages is 56, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

Nearly half of those who made a comment in this section of the survey explained that their institution has a standard maximum length of time that students should expect to wait for feedback on assessed work. Most of those who specified what the maximum wait for

feedback should be stated either three or four weeks. Some respondents pointed out that this standard had been agreed before the HE reforms, while others had implemented it since the reforms. Several managers pointed out that these standards were constantly monitored and reviewed.

There was a tendency for the more research-intensive institutions to be more likely to cite the maximum turnaround period for feedback on assessments as a significant change to students' learning experiences, with TRAC groups A, B and C accounting for 16 of the 25 comments on this topic, and TRAC groups F and G providing just one comment each to this effect. Again, this must be considered in the context of the type of institution: smaller specialist institutions are perhaps likely already to be returning feedback on assessed work quickly, so this may not have been seen as one of the most significant areas of development for that type of HEI.

Just under half of those who commented described how they were in the process of implementing IT systems to manage coursework (encompassing any or all of submission, marking and feedback), while nearly a third said they had already implemented such a system. Many institutions are reportedly using their existing VLEs for this purpose, but a few said they had developed or were developing separate systems for coursework management. Four respondents explained that they were facing certain challenges in implementing an electronic coursework management system: two of these said that the practical nature of the subject disciplines made electronic submission difficult; one stated that significant investment in the IT infrastructure was required before such a system could be developed; the fourth respondent acknowledged that considerable work was needed but did not elaborate on any obstacles that might be preventing progress.

A quarter of those who commented said that regular reviews of students' progress were an inherent part of the personal tutoring system. Some of these managers explained how they were ensuring that personal tutors have access to academic performance information on their tutees.

Nine respondents reported that their institution had implemented guidance and minimum standards in terms of the expected format of feedback on assessed work. In some instances this had involved creating forms or templates for the feedback. A further four managers pointed out that the format of feedback on assessed work varies across different disciplines and that it would be inappropriate to attempt to impose standard formats, because of the varying nature of the different subjects covered.

6.4 Summary of responses by student representatives

Figure 6.3 summarises the response of student representatives to questions on assessment and feedback.

Figure 6.3 Responses from the **student representatives'** survey relating to **assessment and feedback**
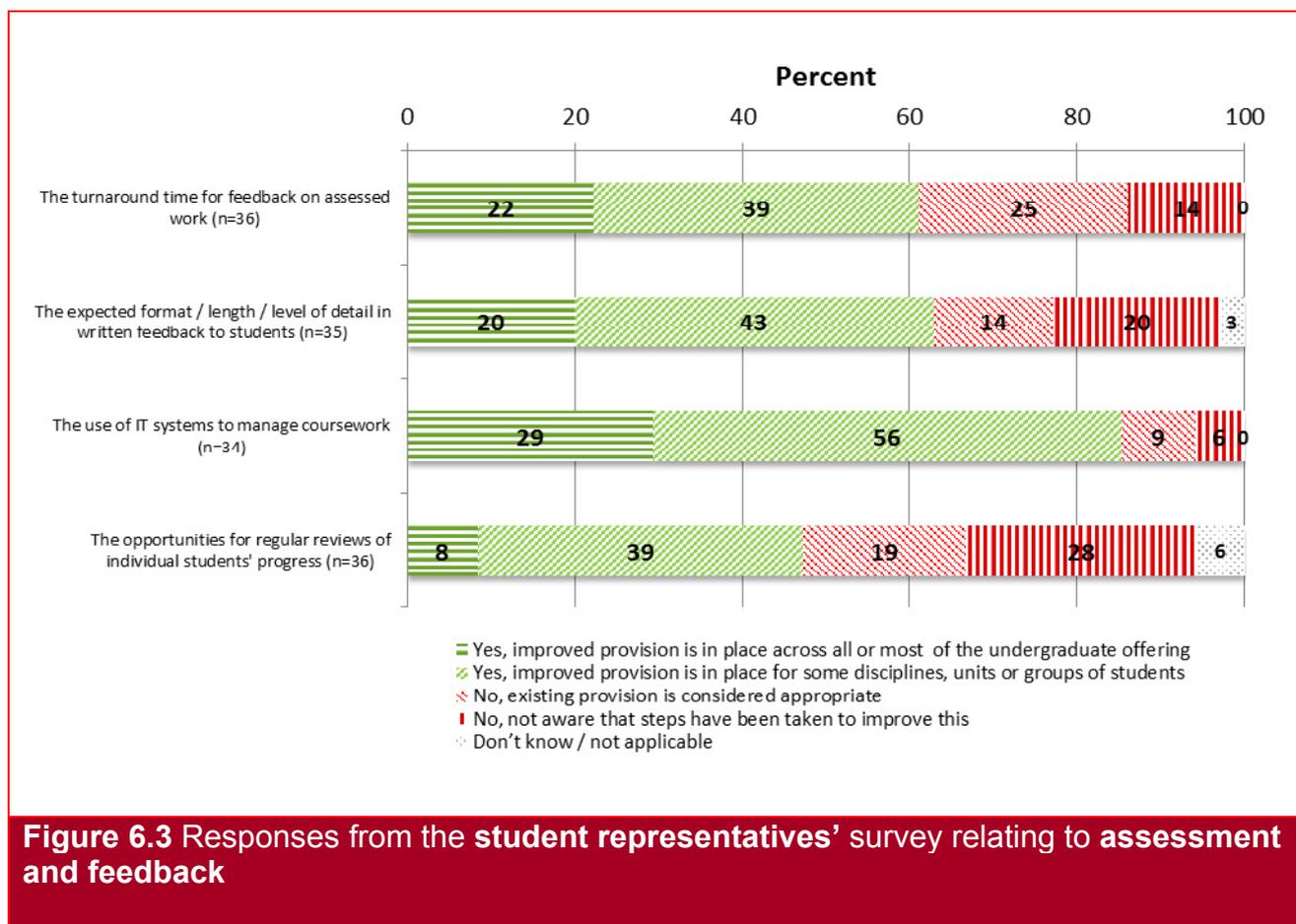
At institutions where both an HEI manager and a student representative response were received the scale of changes reported by student representatives is very similar to those reported by HEI managers (see Figure 6.4). The one exception is **opportunities for regular reviews of individual students' progress,** for which 61% (of 33) of HEI managers report that improvements in this area have been made across some or all of the undergraduate offering; student representatives put the figure rather lower, at 45% (of 33).
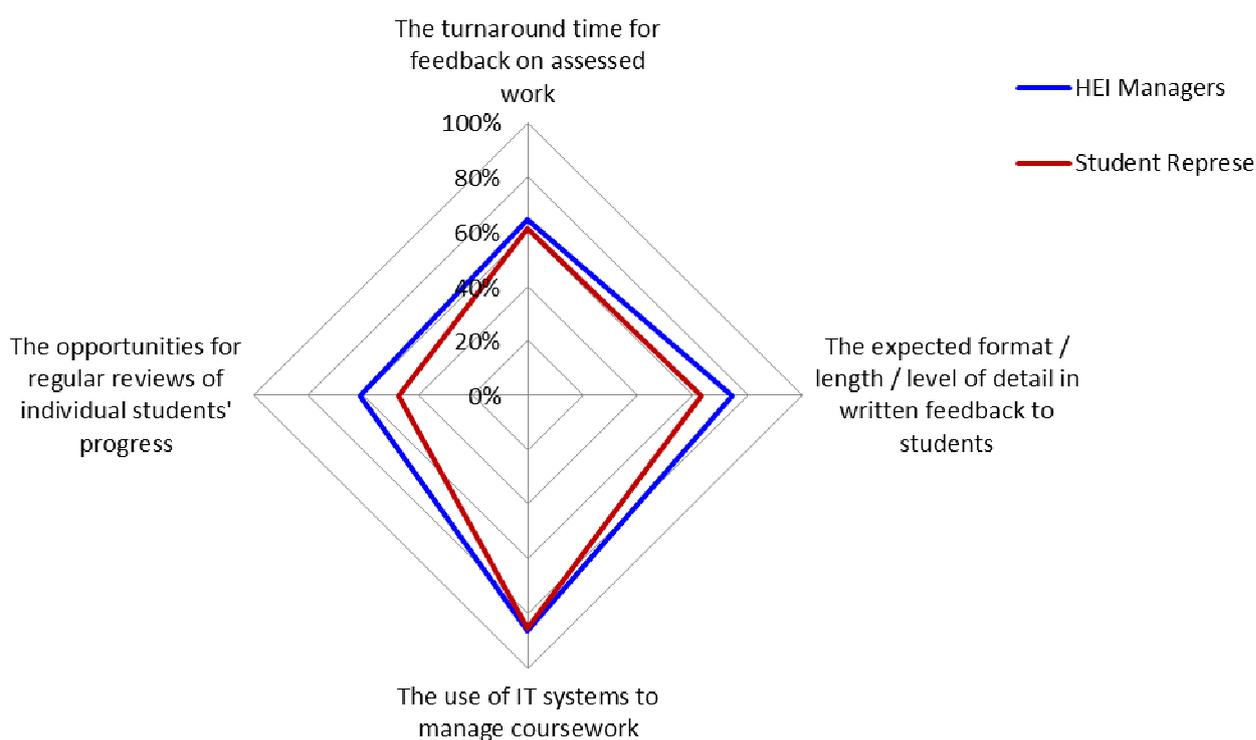
Figure 6.4 Comparison between the scale of HEI manager positive responses and student representative positive responses to questions on **assessment and feedback** for those institutions from which a response was received from both an HEI manager and a student representative.

6.5 Qualitative responses by student representatives

Comments on assessment and feedback were made by 19 student representatives. The topics raised are presented in Table 6.2.

The most prevalent issue among those who commented was that feedback on assessed work is apparently not meeting students' expectations; some respondents described the poor performance on this aspect of the learning experience in surveys such as the NSS. One respondent pointed out that staff and students often define 'feedback' differently, and that this contributes to the failure to meet expectations.

Five respondents reported that online coursework management systems had been implemented or were currently under development, but a further four student representatives reported that there was more work needed before a robust and consistent system was in place across their institution.

Three respondents described improvements to the feedback system, but a further two were disappointed by inconsistent provision across different academic units or even between different staff members.

Four respondents mentioned the turnaround times for receiving feedback on work: two said that maximum turnaround times had been implemented; for another two respondents these times were reportedly not always adhered to.

Table 6.2 Summary of topics raised by students' representatives on assessment and feedback

Topic	n	%*
Feedback on assessed work not meeting students' expectations	6	32
Online coursework management systems in place or being developed	5	26
Online coursework management systems – more needs to be done	4	21
Improved feedback systems and/or formats implemented	3	16
Inconsistent provision of feedback between staff members and/or academic units	2	11
Institution-wide reviews of assessment and feedback undertaken or in progress	2	11
Maximum turnaround times for feedback implemented	2	11
Maximum turnaround times are not always met	2	11
Anonymous marking implemented	1	5
Better provision for regular reviews as a result of enhanced academic advisor scheme	1	5
Inadequate opportunities available for progress reviews	1	5
Quality of feedback is more important to students than fast turnaround	1	5

* Base for percentages is 19, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

Chapter 7. Learning facilities and resources

In **survey section 5,** HEI managers and student representatives were each asked whether their institution had in the past two years made any changes to the following for undergraduates:

- Library facilities

- Library opening hours

- IT resources outside the libraries

- Teaching buildings or spaces

- Learning resources available to part-time or distance-learning students

- Availability of informal learning spaces on campus

The options available to them for each question were exactly the same as for the questions discussed in previous sections; as before, they had the opportunity to expand on their responses in an open text box at the end of the section.

7.1 Summary of responses from HEI managers

Figure 7.1 summarises the response of HEI managers to questions relating to changes in learning facilities and resources over the past two years.

HEI managers report widespread improvements to learning facilities and resources within the past two years. The lowest scoring category is improvements to **learning resources available to part-time or distance-learning students**, but even here two-thirds (67% of 94) of HEI institutions report improvements in the past two years. Improvements to library facilities are reported by 92% (of 95) of institutions and 96% (of 95) report changes to teaching buildings or spaces – the changes to learning facilities and resources by HEIs appear to have been commonplace, although the extent of the changes is not quantifiable. Capital spending is also, of course, an area where the lead time between planning and implementation can be considerable, so in many cases plans for the improvements reported here are likely to have predated the introduction of the reforms.
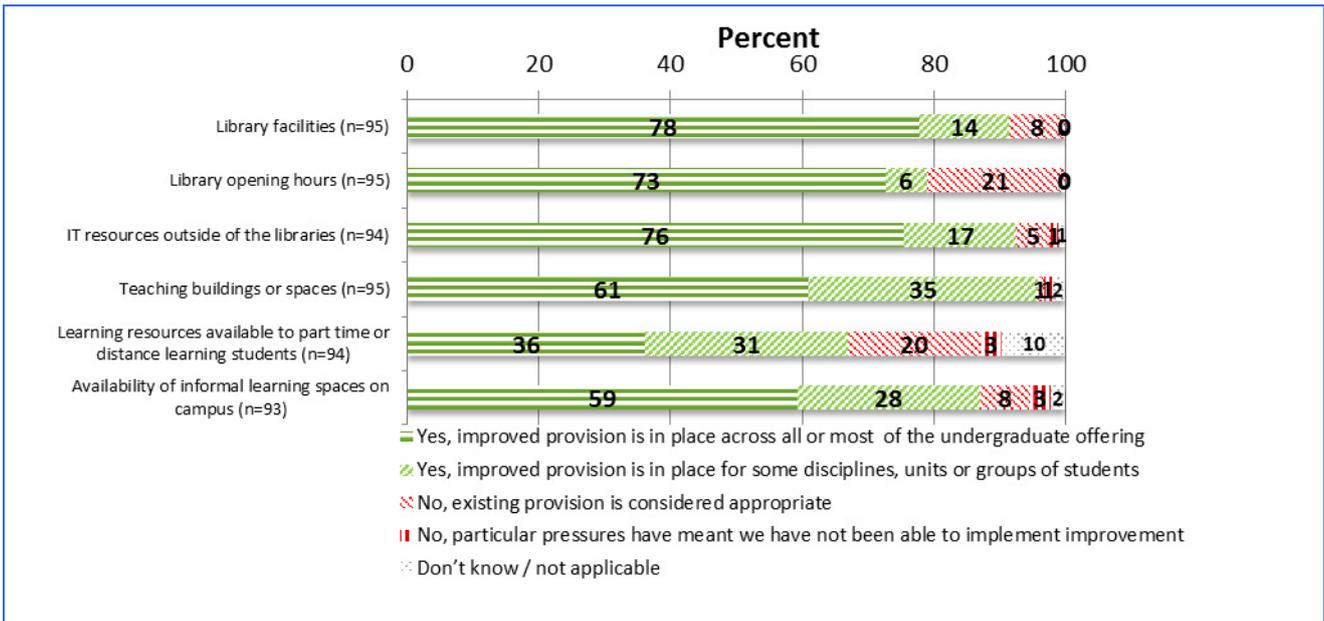
Figure 7.1 Responses from the **managers' survey** relating to changes to **learning facilities and resources**

As can be seen from Figure 7.2, many HEIs (ranging from one in four to almost one in two) are planning further improvements in the next 18 months (although this does not apply to library opening hours, where 14% (of 95) have such plans, perhaps reflecting the fact that 73% have already made changes here). Student representatives report broadly similar awareness of planned further improvements.
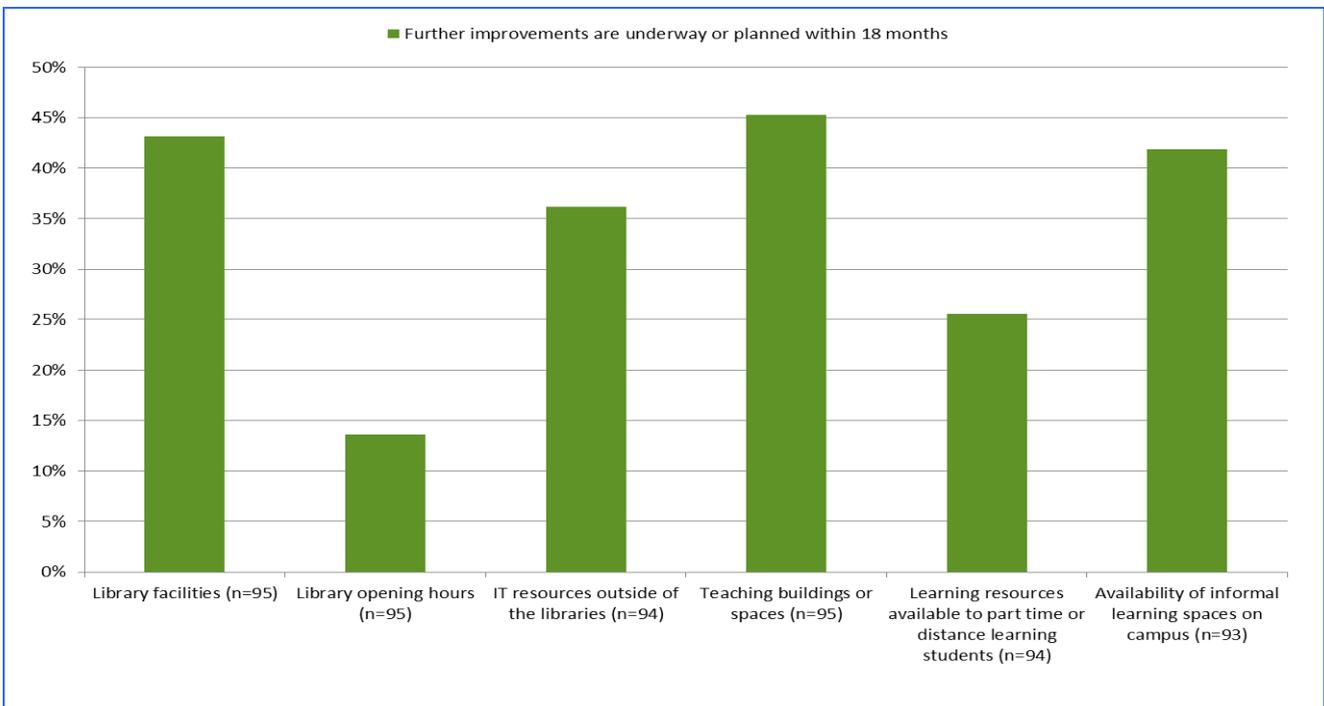
Figure 7.2 Responses from the **managers' survey** to questions relating to **planned further improvements to learning facilities and resources**

7.2 Summary of responses from HEI managers by TRAC peer group

The following observations can be made:

- Fewer changes were reported by TRAC peer group G institutions in each of the six categories, with these institutions generally being the most likely to report that existing provision was considered appropriate.

- TRAC group A (larger, research-intensive) institutions also reported comparatively few changes to learning resources available to part-time or distance-learning students (43% of 14, compared with the average across all TRAC peer groups of 67% of 94).

7.3 Qualitative responses from HEI managers

There were 58 comments on learning facilities and resources by HEI managers; these are summarised in Table 7.1.

Just under half of those who commented on learning facilities and resources described the provision of or improvements to learning spaces outside libraries. For the most part these were references to 'social' or 'informal' learning spaces designed to accommodate collaborative learning and study activities such as group work. In addition, six respondents described the improved provision of social learning spaces within libraries.

Slightly more than a third of managers who answered this question said that there had been activity to refurbish or upgrade teaching rooms, spaces and/or facilities. In many cases, this involved the addition of or upgrades to technology to enhance the teaching and learning experience, for example to allow for 'lecture capture'.

Around a third of respondents said that library opening hours had been increased to 24 hours a day, seven days a week for all or some of the academic year; linked to this, two respondents explained that the introduction of self-service or automated 'front desk' services had been introduced to facilitate longer opening hours.

The improvements to Wi-Fi mentioned by just under a third of those who answered this question generally related to increased coverage (in some case to student accommodation locations), although one respondent also mentioned enhanced security and reliability in the Wi-Fi service.

Nearly a quarter of respondents said that the provision of PCs or laptops had been improved, by upgrading or by increasing the number of units available. Two managers also mentioned the development of mobile apps to allow students to see in real time where there are available PCs that they can use.

Table 7.1 Summary of topics raised on assessment and feedback by HEI managers

Topic	n	%*
Learning spaces outside libraries provided or improved	26	45
Teaching rooms/spaces/facilities refurbished	22	38
Library opening hours extended to 24–7 for some or all of the year	21	36
New builds on campus completed or underway	20	34
Refurbishment/renovation/reorganisation of libraries	18	31
Improvements to Wi-Fi coverage, security and/or reliability	18	31
PCs or laptops upgraded or improved provision	13	22
New builds on campus planned	10	17
Electronic resources access improved, e.g. e-books, e-journals	8	14
Learning spaces in libraries improved	6	10
Consolidation of buildings or campuses	4	7
Improvements to benefit part-time or distance-learning students	4	7
Printing services and facilities improved	3	5
Automation/self-service introduced or improved in libraries	2	3

* Base for percentages is 58, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

Improvements to buildings and new builds were also frequently cited enhancements. A third of those who commented said that new builds had been completed recently or were currently underway. Ten respondents said that new buildings were planned, and four respondents described how their institution had consolidated existing building stock by, for example, reducing the number of separate campuses and/or drawing departments or faculties previous spread across locations to one building.

7.4 Summary of responses by student representatives

Figure 7.3 summarises the response of student representatives to questions on learning facilities and resources.

Percent

	Yes, improved provision is in place across all or most of the undergraduate offering
	Yes, improved provision is in place for some disciplines, units or groups of students
	No, existing provision is considered appropriate
	No, not aware that steps have been taken to improve this
	Don't know / not applicable
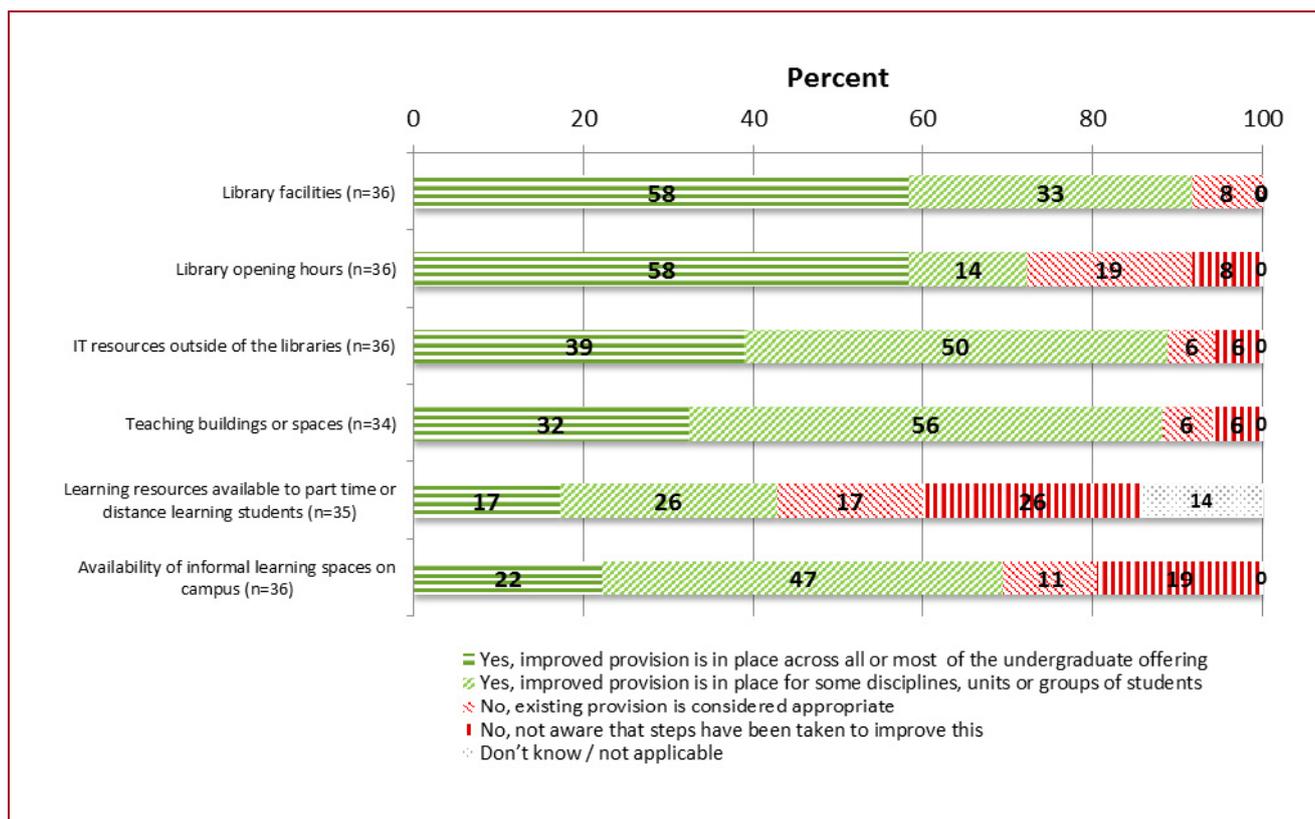
Figure 7.3 Responses from the **student representatives'** survey relating to **learning facilities and resources**

For those institutions from which a response was received from both an HEI manager and a student representative, the scale of improvements reported to learning facilities and resources by student representatives is broadly similar to those reported by HEI managers (see Figure 7.4), with two exceptions:

- 64% (of 33) of HEI mangers report improvements to **learning resources available to part-time or distance-learning students** compared with only 43% (of 33) student representatives

- 85% (of 33) of HEI mangers report improvements to the **availability of informal learning spaces on campus** compared with only 70% (of 33) of student representatives
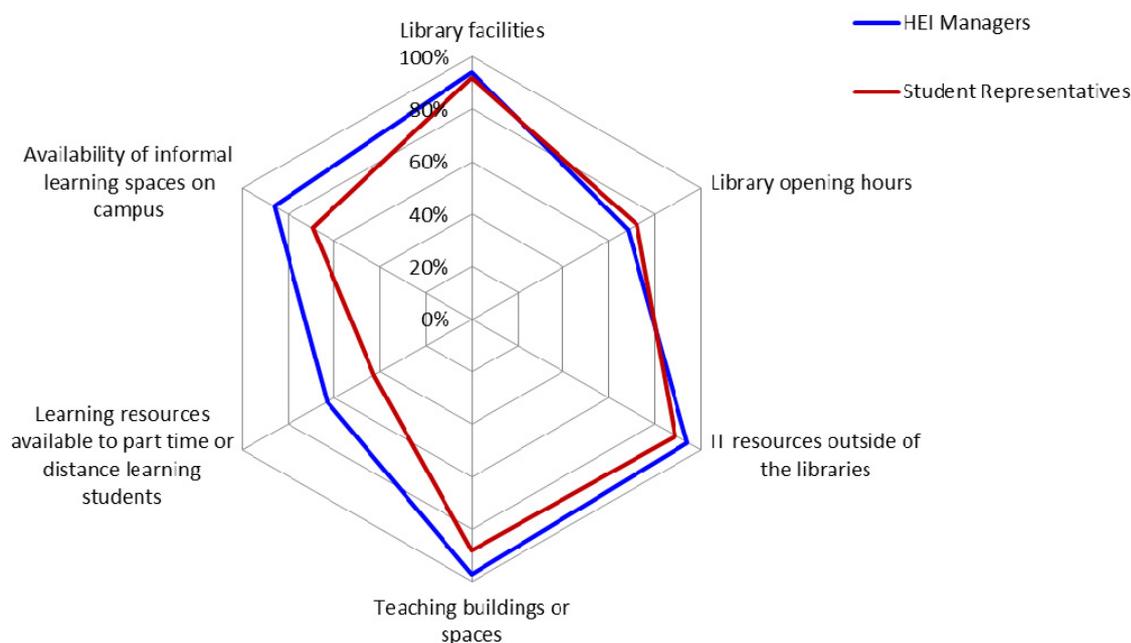
**Figure 7.4** Comparison between the scale of HEI manager positive responses and student representative positive responses to questions on **learning facilities and resources** for those institutions from which a response was received from both an HEI manager and a student representative.

7.5 Qualitative responses from student representatives

There were 19 comments on this topic and the themes of the comments are summarised in Table 7.2.

The provision of social or informal learning spaces appears to be an increasingly important issue; these were the most frequently mentioned issues in the 'learning facilities and resources' comments made by both student representatives and institution managers. Among the student representatives who mentioned this topic, five said that there was room for improvement in provision at their institutions while four described improvements that had been made recently to the provision of these spaces.

Four respondents detailed improvements that had been made to the teaching and learning facilities and/or spaces, but two student representatives expressed concern about the poor quality of these areas and another two were particularly concerned about the capacity of current teaching and learning spaces in the context of increased student numbers.

Two or three respondents mentioned a range of different issues each relating to libraries, including concerns about the available resources (books and journals), descriptions of improvements and refurbishments to libraries, the implementation of extended opening hours and requests for such extensions where they are not yet in place.

Table 7.2 Summary of topics raised by student representatives on learning facilities and resources

Topic	n	%*
Social/informal learning spaces need improving	5	26
Social/informal learning spaces have been improved	4	21
Teaching and learning facilities/spaces/buildings have been improved	4	21
Library learning resources need improving (e.g. physical and electronic books and journals)	3	16
Library refurbishment or rebuild undertaken	3	16
Wi-Fi coverage poor	3	16
Library now open 24 hours a day 7 days a week	2	11
Library opening hours need extending	2	11
Teaching and learning rooms/spaces/buildings generally of poor standard	2	11
Teaching and learning spaces struggling to cope with large numbers of students	2	11
More PCs available in libraries	1	5
Investment in campus buildings uncertain as a result of funding issues	1	5
IT provision/infrastructure needs improving (e.g. access to software, PCs)	1	5
Learning facilities and resources vary in quality across the institution	1	5
Libraries need improving and/or extending	1	5

* Base for percentages is 19, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

Chapter 8.   Communications

In **survey section 6,** both HEI managers and student representatives were asked to detail ways in which the institution communicates major changes related to students' learning experiences.

8.1 Responses from HEI managers

There were 94 HEI managers who gave a response, and their responses are summarised in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1 Summary of methods of communicating changes to the learning experience to students

Topic	n	%*
Staff–student committees or forums	37	39
Students' Union	36	38
Email	32	34
Specific publicity/promotional campaigns, e.g. 'you said, we did'	30	32
Social media	24	26
Web announcements (internet and/or intranet)	22	23
Notice boards or information screens	21	22
VLE	18	19
Course representatives	17	18
University committees or boards	15	16
Face-to-face events/discussions/meetings	14	15
Newsletters or e-newsletters	13	14
Student portal	11	12
Personal tutors	7	7
Students' magazine or newspaper	6	6
Through the faculties, schools or departments	6	6
Flyers, leaflets or postcards	4	4
Text message	4	4
'Point of use' information/announcements/awareness raising (e.g. information in the library about service enhancements)	3	3
Through established user networks or liaison groups (e.g. libraries user group)	3	3
Blogs	2	2

* Base for percentages is 94, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

Most respondents listed several means by which they communicate with students and many pointed out in their comments that the nature of the message dictates the method used to communicate it. For example, text messaging was typically used only for localised announcements requiring immediate attention (such as lecture cancellations) while information on developments affecting the wider student population were more likely to be communicated via newsletters, information screens or web announcements.

Staff–student committees or forums, the Students' Union and email were the most frequently cited methods of communicating learning-related changes to students: these were each mentioned by more than a third of respondents.

The extent to which students engage with online content was reflected in the number of respondents indicating that social media, web announcements and the VLE were used to communicate with students: between a fifth and quarter mentioned each of these methods.

In-person communications were also a preferred communication method within some institutions, with nearly a fifth saying that they expected course representatives to cascade information to other students, and 14 respondents saying that they encouraged face-to-face interactions such as discussion groups and meetings or forums with managers both at the academic unit and institution level.

A follow-up question asked managers to comment on how these communications have changed over the past two years. There were 86 comments on this topic and these are summarised in Table 8.2.

Table 8.2 Ways in which communications with students have changed in the past two years according to HEI managers

Topic	n	%*
Greater emphasis on 'closing the feedback loop'	24	28
Greater use of social media	13	15
More electronic/online communications (e.g. via the VLE, portal, etc.)	13	15
Closer liaison/cooperation with the Students' Union or equivalent	9	10
Greater student involvement in committees, boards, working groups, etc.	9	10
Changes to frequency and scope of communications rather than methods	7	8
Little or no change in the past two years	7	8
Additional staff to manage communications across the institution	6	7
Expansion of numbers of, or greater use of, student or course representatives	6	7
Making managers more accessible, e.g. through regular forums or face-to-face meetings, direct email contact, etc.	6	7
More channels for 'two way' communications and feedback	5	6
Review of communications undertaken or ongoing	5	6
Developed a communications protocol/strategy/guidance across the institution	4	5
More targeted communications rather than indiscriminate contact with all students	4	5

* Base for percentages is 86, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

Nearly a third of managers who made a comment on this topic described a greater emphasis on 'closing the feedback loop' as a major change in the way the institution communicates with its students. Many of the comments described 'you said, we did' communications, where findings from opinion-gathering exercises (such as the NSS) are reported back to students with details of what action is being taken to address any specific issues.

Increased use of online communications was also frequently mentioned; the increased use of social media and greater use of other online channels (such as the VLE and student portal) were cited by 13 respondents each.

There was also a sense of greater involvement of students in decision-making, for example through the inclusion of student representatives on committees and working groups, the expansion of course representative systems and roles, making institution managers more accessible and increasing the channels for 'two way' communications. These topics were all mentioned by between five and nine respondents each.

Some were taking action to manage and coordinate communications at the institutional level: six respondents said additional staff had been allocated to the role of overseeing and coordinating communications within the institution, five were undertaking a review of communications, and a further four had developed a communications strategy or protocol in the past two years.

8.2 Responses from student representatives

When asked to describe how major changes related to students' learning experiences are usually communicated to students, 32 student representatives gave a response. The methods reported are detailed in Table 8.3.

Table 8.3 Summary of methods of communicating changes to the learning experience to students, as reported by student representatives

Topic	n	%*
Email	18	56
Communications are poor/in need of improvement	12	38
Course representatives	6	19
Social media	5	16
Specific publicity/promotional campaigns e.g. 'you said, we did'	5	16
Students' Union	5	16
Through the faculties/schools/departments	5	16
VLE	5	16
Departmental communications are good but institution-wide communications are poor	4	13
Computer screen savers, tickers, login messages	2	6
Face-to-face events/discussions/meetings	2	6
Handbooks/course booklets	2	6
Newsletters or e-newsletters	2	6
Notice boards or information screens	2	6
Staff–student committees or forums	2	6
Web announcements (internet and/or intranet)	2	6
Student pigeon holes	1	3
Student portal	1	3
Text message	1	3

* Base for percentages is 32, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

The methods of communicating with students detailed by student representatives largely mirrored those listed by managers. More than half of those who commented mentioned email as a primary form of communicating with students; some of these respondents, however, voiced concerns about the over-use of emails, the use of inaccessible language,

unnecessarily long emails and (possibly as a result of these issues) problems in getting students to open and read institution-wide emails.

More than a third of student representatives who commented on this topic voiced concerns about the quality of communications with students and many were keen to see improvements in this area.

Four respondents described how the individual academic units communicated well with students but that institution-wide communications were in need of improvement.

A follow-up question asked student representatives to comment on how these communications have changed over the past two years. There were 31 comments on this topic, which are summarised in Table 8.4.

Table 8.4 Ways in which communications with students have changed in the past two years, according to student representatives

Topic	n	%*
Little or no change in past two years	8	26
More electronic/online communications (e.g. via the VLE, portal, etc.)	5	16
Improvements have been made but still more to do	4	13
Greater use of social media	3	10
Closer liaison/cooperation with the Students' Union over communications	2	6
Improvements to the frequency of communications	2	6
Institution has not kept up with advances in communications such as increased use of social media	2	6
Review of communications undertaken or ongoing	2	6
Faculty/school/department level communications have improved	1	3
Greater emphasis on 'closing the feedback loop'	1	3
Greater use of text messaging	1	3
More consultation/feedback opportunities generally	1	3
Student Charter – poorly written and poorly communicated	1	3

* Base for percentages is 31, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

Around a quarter of those who commented reported that there had been little or no change to communications at their institution. Five student representatives said that greater use was being made of online and electronic methods of communicating and a further four specified that the use of social media had increased, but two respondents voiced concerns that their institution had failed to fully adopt these means of communicating.

Four respondents described how improvements had been made to communications with students but said that more needed to be done in this area; two student representatives explained that reviews of communications strategies were ongoing at their institutions.

Chapter 9.   Reflections on the changes

In **survey section 7,** both HEI managers and student representatives were asked to detail up to three changes that had had the most significant effect on undergraduates' learning experiences in the past two years. Taken together, the responses add some weight to the idea that there has been an increased emphasis on improvements to teaching within the HEIs. Reported improvements go beyond capital expenditure on buildings and facilities, and encompass all areas of study support, learning resources and student engagement and consultation. As noted, there is some evidence of a 'culture shift' among institutions towards putting students at the centre of what the institution does and how decisions are made.

9.1 Responses from HEI managers

The most significant changes to students' learning experience, provided by the 94 managers who responded to this question, are summarised in Table 9.1.

As might be expected, responses to this question echo the comments made throughout the survey. The most frequently cited significant changes (mentioned by between around a quarter and a third of respondents) include the increased or improved use of e-learning, the creation of or improvements to social learning spaces, enhanced opportunities to develop skills for employment and changes to the subject, programme or module offering.

Comments relating to changes in the subject, programme or module offering referred to a range of developments: the introduction of completely new subjects or disciplines at the institution, reviews of the curriculum and module offering, changes to the structure of undergraduate programmes (often with the intention of harmonising this across the institution) and greater integration of core skills (including those relating to employability) into courses. Several of those who mentioned changes of this nature explained that they had been implemented to reduce the complexity of the course structures and to create greater coherence for students across their undergraduate programme. There were also a few comments relating to the desire to provide more flexible degree pathways, for example by introducing cross-disciplinary module options.

There are once again indications of relatively high levels of investment in campus buildings, with a fifth of managers saying that library refurbishment or new builds have been among the most significant improvements to the student learning experience and a similar proportion mentioning such investment in teaching spaces and buildings.

The prevalence of comments on e-learning suggest a move towards more blended learning; this is further supported by the 12 comments classified as 'IT infrastructure improvements', the majority of which related to Wi-Fi improvements and adapting existing IT systems for use on mobile devices.

Table 9.1 The most significant changes to undergraduates' learning experiences in the past two years, as reported by HEI managers

Topic	n	%*
E-learning/VLE developments or enhancements	30	32
Social/informal learning spaces created or improved	23	24
Activities and initiatives to enhance employability	22	23
Reviews of or changes to programmes/courses/modules/curriculum	22	23
Library expansion, refurbishment or new build	19	20
Teaching spaces improved, refurbished or new builds	18	19
Improved quality and/or timeliness of academic feedback	13	14
Extended opening hours of libraries and/or learning spaces	13	14
Enhancements to assessment methods and/or quality	12	13
IT infrastructure improvements	12	13
Campus development and new builds	11	12
Student engagement in decision making, e.g. committee membership, course reps	11	12
Increased focus on the student experience and putting students at the centre	11	12
Opportunities for work experience, placements, internships, etc. improved	9	10
Academic/study support improvements	8	9
Personal tutoring improved	8	9
Better collection of and use of student opinion and feedback, e.g. survey results	7	7
Pastoral or non-academic support improved	7	7
Awards or programmes to recognise academic and non-academic achievements	6	6
Restructuring the academic year	6	6
Induction/first-year experience improved (including transition support)	5	5
Peer learning/mentoring opportunities or systems improved	5	5
Staff development and training opportunities and systems improved	5	5
Timetabling improvements (including attendance monitoring)	5	5
Better identification and communication of expectations on the students and the institution, e.g. through student charter	4	4
Improved quality of teaching and learning	4	4
Small group teaching increased	4	4
Closer working with the Students' Union or equivalent	3	3
More central and less localised control over aspects of the learning experience, e.g. timetabling, academic planning, etc.	3	3
Opportunities for undergraduates to access academic staff improved	2	2
Contact time increased	2	2
New management roles to focus on the learning experience	2	2
Student progress review systems improved	2	2
Improved access and/or support for WP/under-represented groups	2	2

* Base for percentages is 94, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

When comments on e-learning developments are viewed by TRAC group, managers representing institutions in group E were the most likely to have mentioned such enhancements (10 of the 30 comments were from TRAC group E institutions), followed by institutions in group D, which accounted for six of the comments. The small number of comments from the research-intensive institutions (e.g. just two from group A) and from the smaller specialist institutions (e.g. three in TRAC group G mentioned this) suggests that improvements in this area either were not needed for these groups (for example, the practical focus of the offering in some of the group G HEIs makes it unlikely that e-learning

can be widely implemented) or have been less significant than other changes implemented in the past couple of years.

There is also some evidence of a 'culture shift' among institutions towards putting students at the centre of what the institution does and how decisions are made. Eleven respondents listed increased student engagement in decision-making and the same number specified that a shift in focus towards putting students at the centre of the institution had been one of the most significant changes in the past two years. Similarly, seven respondents described how their institutions were making better use of student feedback and opinions, and two respondents mentioned the creation of managerial posts specifically focusing on maintaining a high quality learning experience.

Viewed by TRAC group, TRAC group A managers were the most likely to describe in their comments how students had become more engaged in the decision-making processes: six managers from TRAC group A HEIs mentioned this compared with between none and two across each of the other TRAC groups.

9.2 Responses from student representatives

Respondents were asked to detail up to three changes that had had the most significant effect on undergraduates' learning experiences in the past two years. The 34 respondents who listed at least one change are the base for the percentages quoted in Table 9.2, which summarises the topics raised.

Whereas managers who completed the survey took the opportunity to describe positive changes to students' learning experiences in the past two years, a small number of student representatives detailed areas in which the experience has worsened – for example, a restructuring of the academic year that had not benefited students, increasing student numbers, and issues around student finances and stress levels (the negative comments appear in the shaded rows in Table 9.2). Other than this, student representatives mentioned many of the same topics that managers did.

More than a third of those who commented described how they had seen activities around the student voice and consulting with students improve over the past two years, though some pointed out that this had been driven by the Students' Union or equivalent body at their institution. Around a fifth of student representatives mentioned changes that aimed to enhance employability across the undergraduate offering; a similar proportion reported improvements to the use of e-learning.

Assessment and feedback also featured in student representatives' comments: six respondents explained that the feedback on assessed work had been improved, while three described improvements to assessment procedures such as the introduction of anonymous marking and moves to ensure that coursework deadlines are more evenly spread throughout the year.

Table 9.2 The most significant changes to undergraduates' learning experiences in the past two years, according to student representatives: shaded rows denote comments made in a negative light; unshaded rows represent positive comments (i.e. improvements)

Topic	n	%*
Student voice/student consultation activities improved	13	38
Employability opportunities and skills development improved	7	21
E-learning/VLE developments or enhancements	6	18
Extended library opening hours	6	18
Feedback on assessed work improved (e.g. quality, timeliness, format)	6	18
IT facilities/infrastructure improved	5	15
Teaching spaces improved, refurbished or new builds	5	15
Library expansion, refurbishment or new build	4	12
Assessments procedures improved (e.g. anonymous marking, scheduling of deadlines)	3	9
Closer working/cooperation between the SU and institution managers	3	9
Reviews of or changes to programmes/courses/modules/curriculum	3	9
Contact hours improved	2	6
Improved extra-curricular activities (e.g. clubs and societies)	2	6
Increased investment in the Students' Union or equivalent	2	6
Quality of academic staff/staff training/development	2	6
Restructured the academic year – negative impact	2	6
Social/informal learning spaces created or improved	2	6
Student expectations have risen and not always been met	2	6
Student experience reviews/programmes/units established	2	6
Academic/study support improvements	1	3
Bursaries/scholarships/financial support improved	1	3
Greater opportunity/flexibility for students to shape their learning experiences	1	3
Greater transparency over 'hidden' course costs	1	3
Increasing student numbers	1	3
Professional services reviews to improve interactions between academic and professional units	1	3
Research intensity	1	3
Restructured the academic year – positive impact	1	3
Restructuring of academic units	1	3
Student–staff ratios improved	1	3
Perception of students as consumers has increased, should be a 'partnership'	1	3
Students increasingly stressed and under pressure (as a result of fees, employment concerns, etc.)	1	3
Timetabling improvements	1	3
Worsening student financial situation	1	3

*Base for percentages is 34, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

Teaching and learning resources were mentioned by several respondents: library refurbishments or new builds, longer library opening hours, improved IT facilities and the refurbishment or new build of teaching spaces and buildings were all mentioned by between four and six student representatives.

Higher-level management issues and initiatives had also had a positive impact for some student representatives. Three respondents said their Students' Union or equivalent now enjoyed closer working relationships with the institutions' managers, a further three said that the institution had instigated reviews of the course or module offering which had been beneficial to students' learning experiences and two respondents praised the improved

quality of academic staff recruited and the new opportunities for staff to undergo continuing professional development to enhance their teaching skills.

9.3 Further comments about changes to the learning experience or the effect of the reforms

The final survey question asked HEI managers and student representatives to comment further on changes to students' learning experiences or on ways in which their institution has responded to the reforms.

9.3.1 Responses from HEI managers

Table 9.3 summarises the main topics raised in the comments made by the 51 managers who responded to this question.

Table 9.3 Further comments by HEI managers about changes to the learning experience or the effect of the reforms

Topic	n	%*
Becoming more student focused/students as partners	12	24
Employability enhancements	10	20
Measuring and monitoring improvements to the learning experience	10	20
e-learning improvements	7	14
Strategic reviews/change programmes undertaken across the institution	7	14
Specific effects of reforms	5	10
Responding to and managing students' expectations	5	10
Student support improved	5	10
Student finances/WP issues	3	6

* Base for percentages is 51, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

Around a quarter of those who commented described the increasing focus on students being a central aspect of the way in which the university operates and makes decisions. Several respondents mentioned the perception of students as partners; many pointed out that students had always been at the heart of their institution, but there was evidence of this approach being supported and confirmed through strategic plans and the management style at the universities.

Some of the topics raised in response to this question reiterated those mentioned in response to earlier questions, for example the increased emphasis on employability and improvements in areas such as student support and e-learning.

A fifth of those who made a comment described how they were measuring and monitoring improvements to the learning experience. Many rely quite heavily on NSS results, but there were indications of a more general monitoring of the student voice. A couple of respondents pointed out here that there can be a long 'lead time' before the full effects of improvements become visible in outcomes such as NSS results and graduate employment.

Seven respondents explained that their institution had undertaken, and was currently undertaking, widespread reviews of the student experience – many of these reviews were

aimed at ensuring quality and consistency in the learning experience and at ensuring that the development of wider skills is an integral part of all programmes.

Of the five respondents who described specific effects of the reforms, two mentioned an increased demand for undergraduate places (one specified that this was particularly notable among higher-achieving applicants), two reported that it had encouraged them to redress the balance between teaching and research, and one explained that the changes had made no difference to the 'per student' funding they receive, so the reforms had not made a significant difference at their institution.

Five respondents specifically addressed the issues of meeting and managing students' expectations in the context of the reforms. Three of these managers discussed how value for money and return on investment were increasingly important for students since the new fees regime had been introduced; two respondents explained that they were addressing students' expectations in this context through better information provision among prospective and current students; one manager noted an increased awareness of and sensitivity to students' expectation across their institution.

Three respondents referred to student finances in their comments. One noted a substantial increase in the number of hours undergraduates are spending in paid employment during their courses, another explained that they had concerns over how their traditionally high levels of 'widening participation' (WP) students could take full advantage of some of the extra-curricular developmental opportunities at the institution due to outside commitments such as paid work and caring responsibilities. The third manager to comment on this topic observed that the scholarship scheme had made a vast improvement to financial support for that institution's students.

9.3.2 Responses from student representatives

Ten student representatives made a comment on changes to students' learning experiences or on ways in which their institution has responded to the reforms. Table 9.4 summarises the topics raised in these comments.

Table 9.4 Further comments by student representatives about changes to the learning experience or the effect of the reforms

Topic	n	%*
Library improvements welcomed	2	20
Changes have tended not to benefit all students	1	10
Conflict between competing for students/doing well in league tables and providing high-quality learning experiences for students	1	10
Improvements to learning experiences have been generally well received but still more to be done	1	10
Institution has not modernised or responded to reforms innovatively	1	10
Issues over WP and financial support need further attention	1	10
Social media – both staff and students need training on appropriate use	1	10
Students are increasingly becoming partners and engaging in their experiences and taking opportunities to shape them	1	10
SU has identified priorities for the institution to improve students' learning experiences	1	10

* Base for percentages is 10, the number of respondents who provided a free-text response

As Table 9.4 shows, the range of topics mentioned in these 'parting thoughts' was varied. The only common theme was praise for improvements to libraries, which was given by two respondents; all other topics were mentioned by just one respondent each.

Chapter 10. Conclusions

The survey of HEI managers received a very high response rate (**84%**) and the student representatives' survey, while not as well supported, still produced a response rate of 35% of invited institutions. The surveys have, accordingly, produced very rich data. It is worth noting the following, however, in relation to representativeness:

- Not all respondents took the opportunity to expand on their responses in the 'further comments' boxes following each question 1–5. These questions followed the main tick-box questions and asked for any further explanation or any other ways in which provision had changed in each of the five main areas of the student learning experience. Of the 99 respondents to the managers' survey, 32 did not make a comment in any of the free-text boxes following the five main questions; and of the 36 student representatives who completed the survey, six did not complete any of the comments boxes associated with these five questions. This means that, while the response rates to the main parts of questions 1–5 were very high, further comments relating to questions 1–5 represent the views of only approximately two-thirds of respondents to the managers' survey and a slightly higher four-fifths of student representatives.

- To balance this, however, non-response to the final free-text questions was very low across both groups of survey respondents. These questions asked respondents about communications with students and about (perhaps most importantly) the most significant changes to the learning experience in the past two years. Just four managers and one student representative did not provide any comments across these questions. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the surveys did adequately capture the most strongly held views of respondents.

Overall, therefore, the two surveys provide sufficient data to support a better understanding of what the higher education (HE) sector in England is doing to promote and improve the learning experience and environment of its students.

The main message emerging from the two surveys is that HEIs appear to have implemented widespread changes in the past two years. Across each of the areas covered by the survey, both HEI managers and student representatives have reported widespread change across some or all of the undergraduate offering. HEI managers and student representatives agree (in both quantitative and qualitative responses) that the greatest changes in the past two years appear to be in the areas of:

- **Study support** (including focusing on skills and opportunities to enhance employability). At least eight out of ten HEI respondents indicated improvements for some or all of the undergraduate offering for five of the six areas of interest relating to study support.

- **Learning resources** (including library and IT facilities). Nine out of ten institutions report changes to library facilities and an even greater proportion report changes to teaching buildings or spaces.

- **Student engagement and consultation**. At least seven out of ten HEI managers reported improvements to student engagement and consultation across all areas of

interest, and for the most part managers reported that changes were in place across most or all of the undergraduate offering.

In many cases additional changes are planned within the next 18 months, with learning resources and study support the areas where most improvement seem to be planned.

The two groups the surveys engaged with – HEI managers and student representatives – are of course quite different, so it is unsurprising that managers and student representatives had a different perspective on occasion. Comments made by managers tended to focus on any positive changes implemented in the past two years and/or (to a lesser extent) on any provision that was already considered to be of an adequate standard. Student representatives on the other hand were more likely to be critical in their comments and, while acknowledging where improvements had been made, were also more likely than managers to highlight areas where more work was needed and/or where the 'improvements' had not been well received by students. The comments made on the Student Charter illustrate this point: several managers described the positive move of implementing a Charter, with many describing how it had been reviewed and adapted to ensure that it continues to serve a useful purpose; several student representatives, however, described how the Charter was considered irrelevant and had had to be rewritten to make it a useful document relevant to students' everyday lives, and one that they would read.

Overall, however, it is still notable that there is a great deal of commonality in the issues raised by both sets of respondents, and a significant level of agreement that there has been a significant degree of change in the past two years.

The key messages emerging from the exercise are summarised below under the main section headings of the surveys.

Availability and accessibility of teaching staff

- Most widespread change in this area in the past two years appears to be related to increased support from individual members of academic staff, such as through more use of informal drop-ins, emails or on-line discussions (reported by 75% of HEIs) and increased access to additional support from postgraduates and other networks of non-academic staff (67%). More than one quarter are planning additional support in these areas within the next 18 months.

- Approximately half of all HEIs reported that they had increased contact hours with academic staff and/or increased small-group teaching arrangements for undergraduates; the remaining HEIs generally reported that existing provision was already at a high standard in these areas.

- Approximately four in ten institutions have made improvements to class sizes, and one in five plan further improvements within the next 18 months. In contrast to the message emerging from the HEI manager's survey, however, a significant proportion of student representatives responding to the survey felt that the increase in student numbers is having an adverse effect on class sizes and student–staff ratios.

- Many institutions appear to have implemented improvements to personal tutoring systems and peer-assisted learning or support, with more changes planned in this area. Student representatives appear to confirm the improvements in peer-assisted learning reported by HEI managers and see this as beneficial to the student experience.

Study support

- Four in five institutions report extensive improvements to study support for some or all of the undergraduate offering. For example, more than 90% of institutions report improvements in these three areas:

    o   Information on the expectations of the course

    o   Additional support for students to develop skills valued by employers

    o   Additional opportunities for work experience, placement or internships

- Almost half plan further improvements to develop skills valued by employers, and to provide additional opportunities for work experience, placement or internships.

- Student representatives tended to agree that significant improvements had taken place in the area of study support with the large majority of respondents agreeing that there had been additional support for students to develop academic skills, employability skills, and/or additional opportunities for work experience, placements or internships.

Student engagement and consultation with students

- At least seven in ten HEIs report improvements to student engagement and consultation across all areas of interest, citing examples such as increased student representation on boards and committees. Student representatives agree that there is evidence of increased attention being paid to the student voice by managers at the institution, although not always to the same extent as indicated by managers. Managers report that improvements are in place across most or all of the undergraduate offering, but some student representatives are concerned that the good work being done at institutional level is not always being implemented at the academic unit level.

- The survey provides a clear indication of planned further improvements by HEIs in areas such as the mechanisms by which students can shape their academic experience, and in closing the feedback loop so that students can see the results and impact of the feedback they provide (the latter being an area where student representatives report less progress than the HEI managers).

- According to managers, many institutions appear to be taking measures to make evaluation of teaching more consistent across the institution.

Assessment and feedback

- The most widespread change here in the past two years is in the use of IT systems to manage coursework, with 86% of HEIs reporting a change in this area and 50% planning further improvements. Many are using their existing virtual learning environments (VLEs) for this purpose, but some are developing separate systems for coursework management.

- Around two in three HEIs also report other improvements to assessment and feedback, with a significant proportion planning further changes. For example, many institutions now have a standard maximum length of time that students should expect to wait for feedback on assessed work.

- Student representatives support the view that feedback on assessed work has improved in the past two years, but also report that feedback on assessed work still does not always meet students' expectations. Opportunities for regular reviews of individual students' progress are one area where student representatives are less likely than HEI managers to report improvements.

Learning facilities and resources

- HEI managers report widespread improvements to learning facilities and resources within the past two years, with more than 90% of institutions reporting improvements to library facilities, IT facilities and/or teaching buildings or spaces. A similar proportion have implemented or improved 'social' or 'informal' learning spaces designed to accommodate collaborative learning and study activities such as group work. The provision of social or informal learning spaces appears to be an increasingly important issue; these were the most frequently mentioned issues in the 'learning facilities and resources' comments made by both student representatives and institution managers.

- Many managers also stated that they are adding or upgrading technology to enhance the teaching and learning experience, for example to allow for 'lecture capture'. Many HEIs are planning further improvements in the next 18 months.

Communications

- The survey asked how institutions communicate major changes related to students' learning experiences. Staff–student committees or forums, the Students' Union and email were the most frequently cited methods of communicating learning-related changes to students.

- Most HEIs, however, now use several means to communicate with students, with the nature of the message often dictating the method used to communicate it. For example, text messaging was typically used only for localised announcements requiring immediate attention (such as lecture cancellations) while information on developments affecting the wider student population were more likely to be communicated via newsletters, information screens or web announcements.

- Many managers described a greater emphasis on 'closing the feedback loop' as a major change in the way the institution communicates with its students, where findings from opinion-gathering exercises, such as the National Student Survey

(NSS), are reported back to students alongside details of what action is being taken to address any specific issues. However, some student representatives reported concerns about the quality of communications with students, and many were keen to see improvements in this area.

- The extent to which students are engaging with online content was reflected in the number of managers indicating that social media, web announcements and the VLE were used to communicate with students.

Reflections on the changes

- The most frequently cited significant changes include the increased or improved use of e-learning, the creation of, or improvements to, social learning spaces, enhanced opportunities to develop skills for employment, and changes to the subject, programme or module on offer.

- There are indications of relatively high levels of investment in campus buildings, with a fifth of managers saying that library refurbishment or new builds have been among the most significant improvements to the student learning experience and a similar proportion mentioning such investment in teaching spaces and buildings.

- The prevalence of comments on e-learning suggests a move towards more blended learning (a mixture of on-screen and face-to-face learning).

10.1 Analysis by TRAC peer group

In general, the numbers of responses within each TRAC peer group are too small to support any meaningful analysis of statistical significance. Where there appear to be some patterns in the responses between TRAC peer group institutions, however, we have noted this in the report. These include:

- There appears to be a trend that the larger an HEI is (as indicated by TRAC peer group as a proxy for income), the more likely it is to report recent improvements to the number of formal teaching contact hours in small-group sessions.

- More teaching-focused institutions (as indicated by TRAC peer group) and, to an extent, larger research-intensive institutions tend to be more comfortable that their existing provision is appropriate in relation to assessment and feedback.

- There were a range of responses from the different TRAC peer groups on whether there have been changes to the student charter or partnership agreement in the past two years, with Larger research-intensive universities and smaller or specialist teaching institutions (TRAC peer groups A, F and G respectively) less likely to report changes. However, at least 50% of all peer groups report that changes have taken place.

- Peer group G HEIs (specialist music/arts teaching institutions) were consistently among the least likely to report changes to: the availability and accessibility of

teaching staff; study support; aspects of student engagement and consultation; learning facilities and resources. In each case peer group G HEIs reported that existing provision was considered appropriate; only occasionally did a minority of these HEIs report that changes had not been made due to financial or other pressures.

The above general caveat to statistical significance notwithstanding, the survey data (including the qualitative responses) does seem to indicate that there is a difference in response in some areas by the smaller specialist teaching institutions who report that existing provision was already considered appropriate, indicating that student-focused teaching approaches were already deeply embedded in these institutions.