

REVIEW OF SCOTLAND'S COLLEGES

**WORKING GROUP: STAFFING, LEARNERS
AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**

**Improving The Overall College Experience for Learners -
Recommendations for Scotland's Colleges**

Introduction

1. We were appointed in August 2005 to examine issues relating to staffing, learners and the learning environment in Scotland's Colleges. One of the first issues we examined was that of the overall college experience for learners and, in particular, issues relating to student representation.
2. There is a recognition throughout the college sector that learners' needs should be at the centre of educational systems and procedures. That is why both the HM Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) and the Scottish Funding Council have highlighted the importance of the learners' voice in their publications. HMIE's quality framework emphasises student input as one of its key strands. Under this strand, colleges should be able to demonstrate that they are listening to students and taking appropriate action in response. The Scottish Funding Council has also made "learner-centredness" a cross-cutting theme of its new draft corporate plan.
3. Research conducted by the Scottish Funding Council has shown that, year on year, there continues to be high levels of satisfaction among students regarding their experience of college life. We believe that one of the key means for ensuring that a college is meeting the needs of its learners is through effective student representation.
4. NUS Scotland, which represents the interests of over 500,000 students in colleges and universities across Scotland, has campaigned for many years to improve student representation in colleges. We believe it is important that student representation in colleges is developed to ensure that the needs of students are fully met. We further believe that the methods and models used to do this should be appropriate to the character of Scotland's Colleges.
5. During our investigations we commissioned a literature review¹ on the student experience. Other sources of information which informed our discussions and the subsequent recommendations contained in this paper were:
 - the HMIE Aspect Report on student representation in Scotland's colleges²;
 - the HMIE report on Implementing Inclusiveness in Further Education³;

¹Go to: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/UniversitiesColleges/17135/RSC/studentexperience>

²Go to: <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/hmiesrsfec.html>

³Go to: <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/Implementing%20inclusiveness%20in%20FE.pdf>

- the HMIE report on Evaluating Inclusiveness. A Guide for Scotland's Colleges⁴;
 - the SPARQS report on student involvement in quality assurance and improvement processes⁵;
 - Section 12 of the 1992 Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act⁶, which requires that Boards of Management of colleges include a student representative; and
 - Part II of the 1994 Education Act⁷, which describes the responsibilities of colleges in respect of student associations.
6. This paper makes recommendations for action by both colleges and student associations to ensure that there continue to be consistent improvements made to the overall learner experience throughout Scotland and to ensure that all learners are able to participate at all levels of college discussions. **Annex A** of the paper clearly sets out the common concerns, themes and areas of innovative best practice which colleges and student associations could use to help them to continue to improve the overall student experience. Meanwhile, **Annex B** contains two case studies which demonstrate the benefits of effective student representation to learners, the college community, and the wider local and national communities. These studies also highlight how different models of student representation can be equally effective in meeting the needs of learners.

Recommendations of the Working Group

7. Scotland's Colleges are committed to meeting the needs of learners in a flexible and responsive manner. In order to build upon the existing high levels of satisfaction amongst learners in Scotland's Colleges, and to ensure that they experience consistent and inclusive learner representation, we believe there is a need to:
- ensure that the views of all students are obtained, considered and acted upon when necessary;
 - ensure that the college listens, and responds to, all learners in a considerate, timely and effective manner;
 - ensure that there is a beneficial flow of communication throughout the entire college;
 - improve the availability of learning and teaching resources, including equipment, books and computers;
 - improve access to general support and guidance relating to academic, financial and personal issues;
 - improve access to facilities and equipment, e.g. convenient opening hours of libraries;
 - improve the gaps in knowledge about the overall college experience;
 - ensure that there is continuity in the way that students are represented; and

⁴Go to: <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/evalincl.html>

⁵Go to: http://www.sparqs.org.uk/upload/documents/FE_MAPPING_REPORT.pdf

⁶Go to: http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1992/Ukpga_19920037_en_10.htm

⁷Go to: http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1994/Ukpga_19940030_en_3.htm#mdiv20

- ensure that colleges are inclusive in their approach to improving the overall college experience.
8. We have been pleased to acknowledge and commend the many examples of innovative and best practice being used in Scotland's colleges to ensure a comprehensive approach to engagement with learners. However, we believe it is important to reiterate the HMIE recommendations for colleges to:
- ensure that students in all sectors of the student body are well informed on student representation issues;
 - ensure that student representatives on college committees receive sufficient and timely training to enable them to participate fully;
 - ensure that sufficient training and support is available to student members to enable them to participate fully and effectively on all committees and boards;
 - ensure that there is consistent guidance for staff on procedures for electing student representatives to programme committees;
 - work in partnership with their students' associations to develop systems of student representation that maximise learner participation for all modes of attendance, including outreach and remote learners;
 - work with their students' associations to improve continuity from year to year in the operation of students' associations;
 - review their college committee memberships so that student representation is included where it would be effective;
 - consider how students could make a more effective and direct contribution to self-evaluation, including the evaluation of learning and teaching; and
 - work with their students' associations to consider how they might use existing ICT resources to improve communications between students and their representatives, especially for part-time and outreach students.
9. These recommendations identify the key components for ensuring that learners are adequately represented and receive a positive and inclusive learning experience at college. They also aim to provide colleges and student associations with some tools for ensuring that this occurs throughout the entire sector. A more in-depth examination of the common themes and examples of innovative practice used by colleges and student associations can be found in **Annex A**.

Features of a college which has a comprehensive approach to engagement with learners

10. We have found, through a wide range of recently gathered evidence, that the following features characterise a college which has well represented students and provides learners with a fulfilling college experience:
- Easy access to full and accurate information about college life, e.g. published in an inclusive format.
 - Access to adequate facilities and learning resources which reflect current lifestyles. (Note: The quality of student life is determined not just by academic facilities but also by recreational, sporting, child care and welfare facilities).

- A determination to identify and address barriers to participation in all aspects of college life.
- Continuity of accessible and effective representation through the provision of:
 - course representatives;
 - student associations; and
 - appropriate college facilities and resources which enable students and staff to respond flexibly and imaginatively.
- A tailored learner representation strategy for the college.

11. Colleges are encouraged to make use of the following tools to ensure that learners are well represented and have a positive learning experience:

- A member of staff to support and liaise between the student association and the college.
- A sabbatical student president – either full or part time and adequately paid.
- Ensuring that student associations and student representatives receive appropriate advice, training (induction and on-going), guidance and support, e.g. by making use of documents/toolkits/training provided by NUS Scotland and SPARQS.
- An effective class representative system which includes appropriate and effective feedback mechanisms. We specifically recommend that:
 - student representatives receive sufficient and timely training
 - they are given adequate time to perform their representative functions
 - a set of guidelines and a remit are produced
 - two course representatives, or a deputy representative, are elected timeously for each cohort, with results communicated to the student association
 - participation is appropriately recognised and, where necessary, rewarded
 - there is effective selection process guidance for both staff and learners on procedures for elections.
- Provision of adequate facilities and resources for students and student associations to hold meetings/forums, e.g. refreshments for meetings held during lunch times, pay for taxis for representatives to come and go from outreach centres, office and equipment and rooms for meetings and confidential enquiries.
- An end of year satisfaction survey.
- An effective means of involving students in the strategic planning process of the college (and a statement within the strategic plan on how the college plans to do this).

12. Student Associations may wish to make use of the following tools for ensuring that learners are well represented:

- The Charter of Minimum Rights produced by NUS Scotland (see **Annex C**).
- Ensuring that student representatives receive appropriate advice, training (induction and on-going), guidance and support, e.g. through training offered by SPARQS and NUS Scotland.
- Early consideration of membership of NUS Scotland.

- Promoting wider awareness of the role of student representatives
 - Use of a wide range of communication methods to promote involvement in student associations, e.g. student handbooks, websites, discussions, notice boards and local radio stations.
 - Holding meetings during convenient times for different groups of students, i.e. lunch times and evenings
 - Use of surgeries, and other methods of outreach, across all college sites.
13. In conclusion we believe that the following would significantly improve the overall college experience for learners:
- An increase in student, staff and board of management awareness of the benefits of effective student representation;
 - A proactive attempt to identify and address barriers to participation in all aspects of college life;
 - An attempt to foster a philosophy which focuses on inclusive learner development, progress and outcomes which will develop effective lifelong learners;
 - An increase in assistance to students to enable them to properly represent their fellow learners;
 - An attempt to broaden awareness of the effective use of proper channels of communication throughout the college and feedback from learners; and
 - Provision of resources to facilitate the recognition of student participation, incl. SPARQS/SQA student representation unit project.

Student Representation⁸

Themes	Best Practice/Next Steps
<p>Improve attendance and retention of student representatives at committees/boards of management meetings. Reasons why students might not become involved include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ existing time commitments; ○ a perception that being a representative would take up a considerable amount of time; ○ intimidating to be the sole student member on a committee; and ○ lack of clear remit or profile for course representative means that they are unsure of their role. 	<p>Students and Student Associations could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ provide induction training and further support. SPARQS and NUS Scotland training and other support is reported as having an impact on the effectiveness of learner participation; ○ encourage participation on such courses; ○ increase awareness of the student representative's role associated with their membership of the committee/ board of management through schemes like the Reid Kerr College's Student Association Handbook. <p>Colleges could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ ensure that student representatives receive sufficient and timely training; ○ produce guidelines/remit to assist the student representative; ○ combine Course Team Boards of several cognate programmes; ○ allow the election of two course reps or a deputy representative; ○ have open meetings, ○ encourage participation in student representation by explaining that it will enhance the CVs of representatives; and ○ reward and recognise for undertaking the role of course representatives e.g. by issuing certificates.
<p>Variety of methods used in the selection process of representatives. Sometimes centrally co-ordinated, or organised by the class tutor. Therefore representation is not uniform and the significance of the role can be diminished.</p>	<p>Students and Student Associations could encourage students to think carefully about the selection process so that learners are choosing the most appropriate representative.</p> <p>Colleges could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ wait until October to hold the elections for class representative; and ○ ensure that they give staff consistent guidance on procedures for electing student representatives to committees.

⁸ These common concerns, themes and innovative best practices have been taken from the following sources:

- Scottish Executive, Literature Review On The Student Experience, March 2006, <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/UniversitiesColleges/17135/RSC/SLALE>
- HMIE, Aspect Report on student representation in Scotland's colleges, January 2006, <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/hmiesrfec.html>
- HMIE, Implementing Inclusiveness in Further Education report, August 2004, <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/Implementing%20inclusiveness%20in%20FE.pdf>
- HMIE, Report on Evaluating Inclusiveness. A Guide for Scotland's Colleges, May 2006, <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/evalincl.html>
- SPARQS, Report on student involvement in quality assurance and improvement processes, http://www.sparqs.org.uk/upload/documents/FE_MAPPING_REPORT.pdf

Themes	Best Practice/Next Steps
<p>Improve the participation rates/involvement in student representation among some groups of students (e.g. students from engineering & construction subjects, young males, part time students, on-line students, those in outreach centres and disabled students).</p>	<p>Students and Student Associations could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ use a wide range of communication methods to encourage participation; ○ appoint students with disabilities, women's and race equalities officers who have a proactive role seeking out particular groups of learners. ○ use language and communication methods which reflect the literacy levels of the different audiences. <p>Colleges could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ use inclusive strategies, such as those used at John Wheatley College, to collect views from groups that might otherwise have been excluded, ; ○ expand focus groups to specifically include learners who may face barriers to learning, inclusion and/or progression. ○ invite samples of learners within relevant groups to participate; and ○ adopt a buddy system which could encourage participation. <p>Future work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ SPARQS projects will be looking into supporting engagement from students not undertaking full time studies and how to effectively engage student representation from student in engineering and construction subjects. ▪ Encourage 'Equality Forward', the new Equalities Unit, to look at equality and diversity issues relating to the student experience and student representation.
<p>At times learners appear more interested in raising issues concerning general college experiences i.e. car parking arrangements than learning and teaching issues.</p>	<p>Colleges could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ use 'proformas' for course representatives - this has proven to lead to an increase in the number of comments made about the curriculum; ○ provide other forums which could be used to discuss general issues; and ○ use a learner centred quality review activity – specific classes (ie range of f/t, p/t, evening classes and outreach centres) are identified and provided with a questionnaire designed to focus their group discussion, learners supported by their student assoc. class rep discuss and identify issues which are then presented to the Focus Group. <p>Future work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ SPARQS project will be looking at how to focus discussion at course level meeting on learning and teaching issues rather than on generic experience.

Themes	Best Practice/Next Steps
<p>Little student representation in the decision-making groups at the middle level of college management.</p>	<p>Students, Student Associations and Colleges could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ tackle the issue of the lack of student representation on decision-making groups at the middle level of college management by arranging meetings between course representatives and the Principal every 6-8 weeks; and ○ sector managers could meet groups of course reps from their section monthly and these meetings could also be used to discuss academic issues and the wider college experience.
<p>Communication issues among students i.e. sometimes student representatives are not effectively able to communicate back to their fellow students.</p> <p>Main method that student associations used to communicate with course reps was through regular meetings. However sometimes difficulties in finding a suitable time to hold these meetings</p>	<p>Students and Student Associations could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ use a sabbatical officer to arrange induction talks etc and take the lead role in informing students about the course representative system; ○ hold student association meetings during lunch time; ○ use surgeries and other events in all campuses; and ○ use other communication methods such as student induction process, student handbook/diary, website and the media i.e. local radio stations. <p>The College could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ provide lunch for the student association meetings; ○ provide a nominated member of staff to act as a link between the student association and the college; ○ use other communication methods such as student induction process, student handbook/diary, website and the media. ○ pay for taxis for course representatives from outreach centres etc so that their representatives could attend meetings; ○ provide adequate space for student representatives to meet; ○ providing funding for a full or part time sabbatical officer; and ○ consider existing ICT resources to improve communications. <p>Future work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ SPARQS project will be looking at issues of communication between representatives.
<p>Poor communication between staff and students for example staff not knowing whether or not their college has a sabbatical officer.</p>	<p>Students, Student Associations and Colleges could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ encourage informal contact between staff, students; and ○ encourage the use of guidance time as an effective means of identifying concerns. <p>Colleges could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ consider existing ICT resources to improve

Themes	Best Practice/Next Steps
	<p>communications; and</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ consider the introduction of a guidance forum where central specialists and teaching staff with a tutorial role meet on a monthly basis to discuss and collate the main issues arising from student guidance sessions.
<p>Poor feedback mechanisms.</p> <p>Data Gathering - the use of questionnaires relating to the course, the college experience and for support services. While questionnaires provide useful data and trend information, the integrity of the results depends on the attitude of the students to them.</p>	<p>Students and Student Associations could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ encourage students to complete questionnaires; ○ encourage their disability, women and race equalities officers to seek information/feedback from these specific groups; ○ student association class reps could support learners in learner centred quality review activities; and ○ highlight the value of completing the questionnaires in a responsible manner. <p>Colleges could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ use on line questionnaires; ○ use focus groups and interviews with students especially where basic skills may present a difficulty for students; ○ have staff to help scribe or type responses for students rather than relying solely on written forms; ○ subscribe/sign up to the 'Student Voice' scheme; ○ devise new ways of involving learners in the feedback process ie use of graphics to aid learners comprehension of the text (an example of this can be provided) ○ use the John Wheatley practice of using: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Learner Focus Group (Quality Review Groups) which are organised at various point throughout the year; ▪ End of Year satisfaction Survey (issued to learners in June); and ▪ the information obtained from such exercises is supplied to all curriculum and moderation teams. ○ have regularly timetabled guidance time; and ○ consider the introduction of a Principal's Question Time. <p>Future work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Colleges will be expected to develop appropriate feedback mechanisms as part of their self-evaluation process – these will be part of the evidence base for HMIE college reviews. ○ The Funding Council have now commissioned national student satisfaction surveys and a longitudinal study of 2004 leavers.

Themes	Best Practice/Next Steps
Visibility of the student association.	<p>Students and Student Associations could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ encourage officers themselves to get out and about. <p>Colleges could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ provide associations with a permanent home; and ○ provide adequate resources.
Best practice needs to be disseminated more widely.	<p><u>Future Work</u></p> <p>The Executive and other organisations could consider how best to disseminate best practice more widely. Eg – Events, newsletters, seminars, a dedicated website.</p>

Overall Student Experience⁹

Themes	Best Practice/Next Steps
<p>Overall high level of satisfaction among students. 91% of learners were satisfied with the college as a whole. Corresponding figure for HE institutions is 90%.</p> <p>When comparing the levels of satisfaction from the period 2001 – 2003 there has been an increase in the following areas :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ number of contact hours; ○ size of the group in which they are taught; ○ adequacy of access to computer facilities; ○ relevance of the courses to the job they hope to do; ○ balance between the amount of formal attendance and private study time; and ○ adequacy of general help, learning support and guidance they received with their studies from teaching staff. 	<p>Colleges could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ provide a centrally located, attractive and well publicised student support service, appropriately staffed and proactively seeking out those who may need help; ○ provide induction week activities which help students to settle into their chosen programmes and college life in general.
No significant findings with regard to levels of satisfaction and gender, ethnicity, subject group, disability or year of study.	<p>Future work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Funding Council and or Equalities Forward could be asked to consider to undertake qualitative research to continue to broaden understanding of the satisfaction level of these groups.

⁹ These common concerns, themes and innovative best practices have been taken from the following sources:

- Scottish Executive, Literature Review On The Student Experience, March 2006, <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/UniversitiesColleges/17135/RSC/SLALE>
- HMIE, Aspect Report on student representation in Scotland's colleges, January 2006, <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/hmiesrfec.html>
- HMIE, Implementing Inclusiveness in Further Education report, August 2004, <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/Implementing%20inclusiveness%20in%20FE.pdf>
- HMIE, Report on Evaluating Inclusiveness. A Guide for Scotland's Colleges, May 2006, <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/evalincl.html>
- SPARQS, Report on student involvement in quality assurance and improvement processes, http://www.sparqs.org.uk/upload/documents/FE_MAPPING_REPORT.pdf

Themes	Best Practice/Next Steps
<p>Students lack of involvement in the design and delivery of learning.</p>	<p>Colleges could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ use students during their internal audit process; ○ use HMIE's Guide to Evaluating Inclusiveness; ○ consult learners during the design of programmes and where possible take their views into account; ○ conduct internal subject reviews where students who study within the subject area are interviewed; ○ involve students in the External Review Board.
<p>High level of disruptive behaviour in the sector was reported as a concern by students.</p>	<p>Future work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Funding Council are considering whether to undertake qualitative research to continue to broaden understanding of issues such as this which are raised by students. ▪ SFEU are considering a suite of staff development activities and a tool kit designed to address key issues arising from managing the learning and behaviours of disaffected and disengaged young learners.
<p>Mixed views about facilities – lower levels of satisfaction on matters relating to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ availability of books; ○ adequacy of advice and support with financial and personal issues; ○ appropriate advice on careers etc; ○ quality of equipment; and ○ access to computer facilities. <p>Lack of in-depth information about learners' views relating to the college environment, other facilities and resources.</p>	<p>Colleges could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ arrange the joint use of facilities with other organisations such as universities. <p>Colleges do seem to survey learners about college facilities however this does not seem to be collated at a national level. Possibly need to ask the Funding Council to include more questions relating to facilities in their student satisfaction reports.</p>
<p>Appeals and complaints procedures</p>	<p>Colleges could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ provide a suggestion or comments box – the comments could then be passed to the boards of management; and ○ set up a panel (including a student member) that decides on complaints from students.
<p>Inclusion issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ social events; ○ learning experience; ○ learning support; ○ work experience; and ○ post college experience. <p>Practical solutions to complex needs – arrangements and funding issues.</p> <p>Although almost all colleges have undertaken significant developments to promote inclusiveness there are some gaps between the most and the least effective colleges in the ways that they respond to additional support needs.</p>	<p>Colleges and Student Associations could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ provide information about social events in accessible formats; ○ adopt a buddy system; ○ plan learning support in advance; ○ provide events which are suitable for all students; and ○ encourage disability awareness training. <p>Colleges could also:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ have staff present in areas where students may feel anxious; ○ continue to make use of the BRITE technology facilities and staff development opportunities; ○ continue with their in-house staff development programmes which offers

Themes	Best Practice/Next Steps
	<p>comprehensive coverage (ie not mere compliance of disability legislation) to all staff across the college;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ prepare and use a comprehensive disability statement in booklet form which is widely available in alternative formats and updated annually; ○ provide learning support assistants; ○ Jewel and Esk Valley College's good practice example of identifying support needs of students at risk of dropping out – involves staff monitoring attendance, following up non attendance, then after discussion with the student putting in place a tailored package of support measures – 'a student recovery plan'; ○ use multi agency support and partnership ie with social work, voluntary organisations, schools and Careers Scotland; and ○ pay due care and attention to the HMIE publication on Evaluating Inclusiveness; a Guide for Scotland's Colleges. <p>HMIE have identified the following components of an inclusive college are its:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ethos, values and relationships; ▪ professional activity undertaken to match curriculum content and delivery arrangements to the requirements of individuals; and ▪ infrastructures and partnerships which enable it to respond to need flexibly and imaginatively. <p>Future work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Executive have completed the consultation process and are currently considering the issues raised. ▪ BRITE initiative has and will contribute to colleges ability to meet the needs of learners. ▪ Equalities Forward may have the potential to undertake research. ▪ SFEU will design, develop and facilitate a community of practice for access and inclusion. ▪ A series of access and inclusion events will be launched to help practioners.

Reid Kerr Case Study



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NUS Scotland's Charter of Minimum Rights for Student Associations



minimum rights
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