

REVIEW OF SCOTLAND'S COLLEGES

WORKING GROUP: STAFFING, LEARNERS & LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Purpose

1. As originally recommended by the research sub-group of SLALE, this paper pulls together the common concerns, themes and areas of best practice which are highlighted in:
 - o the literature review on the student experience (Paper 10);
 - o the HMIE Aspect Report on student representation in Scotland's colleges;
 - o the HMIE report on Implementing Inclusiveness in Further Education report;
 - o the HMIE report on Evaluating Inclusiveness¹: A Guide for Scotland's Colleges²; and
 - o the SPARQS report on student involvement in quality assurance and improvement processes.

Background

2. On behalf of SLALE, the Analytical Services Division of the Scottish Executive recently conducted a literature review which examined the findings from recent studies of FE in Scotland and the UK. The review focussed on student experience, student representation and inclusion issues.
3. In May 2006 HMIE published a guide to help colleges evaluate how inclusive they are, with a view to enabling the widest possible range of potential learners to benefit from education and training.
4. In January 2006 HMIE published an Aspect Report on 'Student Representation in Scottish Further Education Colleges'. The report draws on evidence from a range of sources including telephone interviews with staff, meetings with learners and evidence drawn from twenty HMIE reviews carried out during 2003-04 and 2004-05.
5. During academic year 2005/06 SPARQS undertook a mapping exercise examining how students were represented across the college sector in Scotland. Through interviews with college staff and students, information was gained on how students and their representatives were involved in institutional quality assurance and enhancement processes. The aim of this exercise was to provide the sector with information on its strengths and weaknesses, as well as identifying practices which other colleges may wish to consider adopting.

¹ <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/Implementing%20inclusiveness%20in%20FE.pdf>

² <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/evalincl.html>

6. In August 2004 HMIE published a report for the Scottish Further Education Funding Council on the response of the FE sector to the recommendations of the Beattie Report: Implementing Inclusiveness, Realising Potential. The report cites examples of good practice and the main activities in colleges which contribute to inclusiveness. One of the key messages contained in the report is that almost all Scotland's colleges have undertaken significant developments to promote inclusiveness in terms of the Beattie agenda. The report also identified some gaps between the most and least effective colleges in terms of how they respond to the additional needs of learners.

Themes and Best Practice

7. These pieces of research highlight a number of common themes, concerns and examples of best/innovative practice. The reports also contain points of action and state next steps which could be undertaken by learners, colleges, student associations and other organisations such as the Scottish Funding Council. See the table below for a summary of this information, which has been arranged under the two key categories of 'Student Representation' and 'Overall Student Experience'.

Student Representation

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 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 NUS Northern Ireland representative pack. <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</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>

Themes	Best Practice/Next Steps
significance of the role can be diminished.	<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.
<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 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. Use this similar method for Mid Programme Evaluations.

Themes	Best Practice/Next Steps
	Future work: <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.
Little student representation in the decision-making groups at the middle level of college management.	Students, Student Associations and Colleges could: <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 “minor” 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.
Poor communication between staff and students for example staff not knowing whether or not their college has a sabbatical officer.	Students, Student Associations and Colleges could: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ encourage informal contact between staff, students; and

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 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 communications; and ○ 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; ▪ Mid-Programme Evaluation (recently revised in line with the new HMLe quality framework); and ▪ End of Year satisfaction Survey (issued to learners in June); ▪ College makes sure that 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

Themes	Best Practice/Next Steps
	<p>their self-evaluation process – these will be part of the evidence base for HMIE college reviews.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The Funding Council have now commissioned national student satisfaction surveys and a longitudinal study of 2004 leavers.
<p>Visibility of the student association.</p>	<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.
<p>Best practice needs to be disseminated more widely.</p>	<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 Experience

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.
<p>No significant findings with regard to levels of satisfaction and gender, ethnicity, subject group, disability or year of study.</p>	<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.
<p>Students lack of involvement in the design and delivery of learning.</p>	

Themes	Best Practice/Next Steps
<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 faculties 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 comprehensive coverage (ie not mere compliance of disability legislation) to all staff across the college; ○ prepare and use a comprehensive disability statement in a booklet form which is widely available in alternative formats and updates annually; ○ provide learning support assistants; ○ Jewel and Esk Valley 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

Themes	Best Practice/Next Steps
	<p>plan’;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 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.

8. There is a wealth of information available from a variety of sources. However, the reports highlighted in this paper indicate that there are also some information gaps. These gaps include the specific views of certain groups (e.g. disabled students), and the views of students on the range of student services and facilities. In response to the issues summarised in this paper the following list of actions will/could be undertaken.

- i. The Executive will be meeting with Equalities Forward Unit to discuss equalities issues; feedback from this meeting will be provided to members.
- ii. The Executive or the Group could request that the Funding Council ask questions relating to the range of student services and facilities in their Student Satisfaction Survey Reports.
- iii. The SPARQS project will be looking into supporting engagement from students not undertaking full time studies as well as those in engineering and construction subjects.
- iv. The SPARQS project will be looking at how to focus course discussions on learning and teaching issues rather than on generic experience.
- v. The SPARQS project will be looking at issues of communication between representatives.

- vi. 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.
- vii. The Funding Council are considering whether to undertake qualitative research to continue to broaden understanding of issues such as disruptive behaviour and other issues which are raised by students.
- viii. The SFEU are considering a suite of staff development activities and a tool kit focussed on managing the learning and behaviour of disaffected and disengaged young learners.
- ix. The Executive have completed a consultation process on complex needs and are currently considering the issues raised.
- x. The Executive and other national organisations could consider ways of encouraging colleges to make full use of the vast array of best practice examples contained in the highlighted reports.

9. Members are asked to discuss whether these pieces of work will be sufficient to improve student representation and the overall student experience.

10. Members are asked to endorse the examples of best practice which some colleges are undertaking to improve student representation and the overall student experience.

11. Members are asked to consider whether or not it would be useful to produce a draft Guide for colleges to help maximise student representation and further improve the overall college experience. A draft Guide is contained in Annex A.

**Reviews Team,
June 2006**

Improving The Overall College Experience for Learners – A Guide for Scotland's College

Research has shown that year on year there continues to be high levels of satisfaction among students with their experience of college life. However, there is always room for improvement. In particular there is a need to:

- ensure that the views of **all** students are obtained and acted upon;
- 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 resources such as availability of books and computers;
- improve access to general support and guidance relating to financial and personal issues;
- improve access to facilities and equipment, e.g. convenient opening hours of libraries;
- improve the gaps in our knowledge about the overall college experience; and
- ensure that colleges are inclusive in their approach to improving the overall college experience.

We have been pleased to acknowledge and commend the excellent examples of innovative and best practice being used in colleges to ensure a comprehensive approach to engagement with learners. At the same time, 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.

This guide seeks to identify the key components for ensuring that learners are adequately represented and receive a positive and inclusive learning experience at college. It also aims to provide colleges and student associations with some tools for ensuring that this occurs throughout the entire sector.

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

We have found, through a wide range of evidence, that the following features characterise a college which has well represented students and provides learners with a fulfilling college experience:

- Access to full and accurate information about college life that is published, easily accessible and in an inclusive format.
- Equality of opportunity to participate in the full college experience.
- 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.
- Access to effective representation, such as:
 - course representatives;
 - Student Associations; and
 - appropriate facilities and resources which enable students and staff to respond flexibly and imaginatively to effective representation requirements .

Colleges are encouraged to make use of the following tools which help to ensure that learners are well represented and improve the overall learning experience:

- Full or part time nominated member of staff to act as a link between the student association and the college;
- A sabbatical Student President – either full or part time and adequately paid.
- Ensure Student Associations and student representative receive appropriate advice, training (induction and on-going), guidance and support.
- A buddy system – students ‘buddying’ students and staff ‘buddying’ students.
- An effective class representative system
 - student representatives should receive sufficient and timely training
 - production of guidelines and remit
 - election of two course representative or a deputy representative
 - reward of participation
 - effective selection process
 - wait until October to hold elections
 - guidance for staff and learners on procedures for elections.
- Sample groups of learners for their views
- Proformas for class representatives
- Provide other forums for discussing general issues.
- Principal’s Question time
- Appropriate feedback mechanisms- both for learners and staff
- On-line questionnaires and focus groups.
- Provide adequate facilities and resources for students and student associations to hold meetings/forums, eg. refreshments for meetings held during lunch times, pay for taxis for representatives to come and go from outreach centres, office equipment and rooms for meetings and confidential enquires.
- Learner Focus Groups – organised to maximise inclusive participation at various points throughout the year.
- Mid-Programme Evaluation – in line with HMIE quality framework.
- End of year satisfaction survey.
- Sector managers meeting groups of course representatives from their section on a monthly basis to discuss academic issues and the wider college experience.

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

- student representative(s) receive appropriate advice, training (induction and on-going), guidance and support ie SQARQS training.
- increase awareness of students representatives role – ie schemes like the Northern Ireland representatives pack.

- use of a wide range of communication methods which reflects the literacy levels of different audiences, e.g. student handbooks, websites, discussions, notice boards and local radio stations.
- hold meetings during convenient times for different students, ie lunch times and evenings
- use surgeries and other events across different campuses and in outreach centres.

Overall we recommend the following five strategic goals:

1. Reduce the number of factors which prevent learners from participating in full college life.
2. Increase student, staff and board of management awareness of the benefits of effective student representation.
3. Foster a philosophy which focuses on inclusive learner development, progress and outcomes which will develop effective lifelong learners.
4. Increase assistance to students to enable them to properly represent their fellow learners.
5. Broaden awareness of the effective use of proper channels of communication throughout the college and feedback from learners.