



Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

Student representation in further education and sixth-form colleges

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Background

In December 1991, the UK government ratified the UN convention on the rights of the child. The most significant and far-reaching principle is expressed in article 12, the right of all children capable of expressing a view to express that view on all matters of concern to them, and to have that view taken seriously. This principle applies to all individual decisions affecting a particular child and to matters affecting children as a body; it extends to decisions made in the family, school, and to those providing services, to policy makers, and politicians.

The last decade has seen local authorities, government departments and service providers build upon this principle by engaging a broader spectrum of young people in various consultations.

There are many examples of initiatives and policy formulations that aid the expression of the youth voice. These include: the introduction of citizenship by statutory order as a new national curriculum subject for 11–16 year olds in schools, the extension of citizenship for post-16 learners through the learning and skills citizenship development programme; the publication of *Working together: giving children and young people a say*, which contains standards for schools and local education authorities (LEAs) in consulting with young people on issues that affect them. Appendix 2 provides a list of other examples.

While it is not on the current legislative timetable, politicians are discussing lowering the voting age to 16. The consequence of effectively shifting entry to adulthood will require a significant change in the mindset of older adults and the young people themselves. Their engagement with individual and collective rights and responsibilities will be redefined.

All these recent initiatives and policies are creating a new representational context for young people. They are now moving through the educational system experiencing greater consultation in the affairs of their communities, their primary and secondary schools, for example through student councils and youth organisations. Through citizenship education they are also gaining in knowledge and understanding about rights and responsibilities, thus providing them with the necessary skills and confidence to have their say and make change in their communities. Colleges and other post-16 learning providers should not ignore this.

One way the college aims to improve its academic results and its services to students is by supporting and encouraging students to participate in planning and evaluating. Students can contribute in two main ways:

- By negotiating and campaigning through the college students' union for the improvement of college facilities and activities, and through planning and running activities within the union – of which all students are automatically members.
- By discussing with fellow students, tutors, senior tutors and heads of programme possible improvements in the range of courses the college offers and giving feedback on how courses are being delivered.

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Some educational professionals are saying that it does not matter whether the drivers for the current exploration of representative structures in colleges are external, such as inspections,

or as a result of genuine staff desire for cultural change. For these educationalists, students are customers who live in a society where values of democracy, equality and empowerment are a priority. Therefore involving them in representational bodies is an entitlement.

About this paper

This paper encapsulates some of the key findings from a study of student representation in practice across the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) national post-16 citizenship programme. The paper draws together findings from research and discussions with a range of staff working within post-16 learning settings, but has a particular focus on colleges (further education and sixth form colleges). The paper was commissioned by QCA to inform ongoing work to develop guidance for post-16 citizenship.

It is evident from this study that 'no one model fits all'. Colleges are experimenting with different procedures, structures and processes. All are developmental. The heartening fact is that despite the difficulties of multiple sites, huge transient student populations, large staffs of full- and part-time educational workers and ancillary workers, colleges are endeavouring to make the representational systems work.

The paper explores:

- types of representation in colleges
- issues and challenges in promoting effective representation of young people
- a developmental model of student representation.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative method of structured and unstructured interviews of partners and students involved in the project.

The main study processes were:

- A literature review of published documents on the theme of 'youth voice' including case studies from the QCA guidance, *Play your part: post-16 citizenship*.
- Initial discussions with LSDA central team to identify informative practice across the project.
- Attendance of two conferences on the youth representative theme.
- Contacting 85 partners involved in the post-16 citizenship project to identify examples of practice.
- Telephone interviews with six project partners.
- Case study visits to three projects to meet staff and students involved in representational systems.
- Initial draft of findings indicating key principles of effective practice when an organisation is establishing or maintaining representative structures for young people in colleges. Circulation for critical review by LSDA colleagues, contributors and QCA citizenship staff.
- Series of informal discussions with other project representatives at national post-16 conferences and staff development events during the year.
- Revisions to draft.
- Peer review by professional colleagues.

Types of representation in colleges

Introduction

An audit of student involvement in representational bodies across a college will identify a range of routes that give students access to the college's decision-making and policy-making apparatus. Senior management team (SMT) and governors can access student opinions and experiences via any combination of the bodies listed below.

Student representation may be located in many areas of college life. For example:

- College governing body – the formal constitutional policy-making body responsible for governance and corporate direction.
- Academic board – formal body dealing with academic issues.
- Student union – formal union of students within a college, usually affiliated to the National Union of Students.
- College council – an informal body that takes different forms in different colleges.
- Student liaison committees (whole college).
- Course committees – informal specific course consultative committees of diverse form.
- Faculty or school meetings/committees.
- Students involved in the recruitment of college staff.
- Student surveys.
- Focus groups – established to consider curriculum or wider college issues.
- Distinct operational cross-college committees such as
 - health and safety/security committee
 - international/overseas students
 - quality assurance committee/quality council
 - customer services
 - accommodation strategy
 - equality and diversity sub committee
 - assets and estates.

The map on the following page identifies how students are represented in sixth form and further education colleges. The arrows indicate how different forms of representation connect and communicate with each other. Appendix 3 provides a blank model so that colleges can develop their own maps.

Developing effective representation in colleges

It is evident that colleges as organisations can take steps to either help or hinder effective representational practice. There are seven significant steps that help systems to evolve.

The seven key success factors

- SMT has a conceptual understanding of what active citizenship is, how it can be expressed within the college, and actively supports the development of student representation.
- College professionals act on agreed actions resulting from committee outcomes.
- Student/learner representatives are trained, and have mentor confidants.
- Student representatives are elected, rather than nominated.
- Student elections are fully inclusive regardless of ability, background or newness to the organisation.
- Student members are representative of the diversity of the college.
- Representational systems evolve, rather than being imposed, and young people are involved in each stage of development.

Insights that ensure student representational systems will work

The following generic indicators illustrate issues that aid the development process.

Crucial role of senior executive team and principal

The college principal, SMT and governors have the initial power to make this process work. The key factors are:

- Genuine interest and involvement in representational mechanisms.
- Walking the talk – acting democratically.
- Being seen to act on agreements and student issues.
- College mission and values clearly stated and devised through consultative processes.

Crucial role of ‘student representatives’ support professionals

Often where the students are moving forward constructively, in developing structures for representation, there is an educational professional or team who are designated a role to support them. It is a unique role. It demands exceptional skills and enlightened attitudes. It is a specialism and does not necessarily command the respect from professional peers it should receive. Some of the essential qualities identified for those taking on such a role include:

- Commitment to students and their empowerment.
- Talking their talk.
- Being assertive.
- Being a risk taker.
- Able to act in acceptant, catalytic, confrontational and prescriptive consultancy styles, as appropriate with students and colleagues.

- Exceptional active listening skills.
- Capacity to deal with controversial issues.
- Enlisting support from colleagues and other ancillary staff.
- Credibility with other staff and senior management.
- Self-confidence to assert role with other college managers.
- Unquestioned confidentiality.
- Ability to mediate and handle conflict constructively.

And most importantly:

- Ceaseless energy and enthusiasm.
- Able to modify role as students become more adept and experienced – moving from encourager/driver to detached consultant.

Student representative roles and responsibilities

Different colleges produce different lists of responsibilities of the role of student representation. The main duties listed are:

- Discuss course programme, services and facilities with tutor/course group members.
- Attend and represent collective views in appropriate forums.
- Liaise with the student support services.
- Meet with tutor and head of programmes.
- Participate in training organised by college or student union.

Capacity of student to assume representative role

Democratic colleges do not try to influence the selection process for candidature for election. Consequently representatives come to the role with varied competencies and personal circumstances that could encompass any of the following:

- Varied multiple intelligences, key and social skills.
- Self-confidence, assertiveness and self-esteem.
- Part-time/full-time learner.
- Age, gender and ethnic background.
- Work commitments and potential loss of part-time work income.
- Transport.

Attitudes of students to representation may be influenced by earlier experiences such as school student councils and could comprise:

- Scepticism about effectiveness and hidden purpose to the representational activities.
- Perception that formal education equates with control and subservience.
- Expectation that representation is a right and that staff and students should collaborate to mutual benefit.
- Perceptions that representative roles are only for the more academic students and not for all students.

Training and development of representatives

Colleges actively supporting the development of the student representative system invest in the training of the representatives. This may be provided by staff support from the student

services team or by the National Union of Students. The key features are illustrated in the following example.

This year 200 course representatives have been trained (60 last year). All course representatives go through a training programme that includes:

- the role and function of a course representative
- the relationship between the course representative and Leicester College
- student rights and expectations
- meeting and communication skills
- 'the good, the bad and the ugly' – real-life situations
- the first course representatives meeting

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Giving prestige to the representative roles

Students' continuous commitment and engagement in a representative role cannot be guaranteed. However, it can be helped by the college giving official recognition of the essential contribution that the representatives make to the success of the college. Some key factors include:

- Celebrating student involvement.
- Providing quality bespoke training.
- Internal/external certification of involvement and learning in the role.
- Paying expenses or pay in lieu.
- Residential away days for year one representatives (gives more return on investment through improved effectiveness in year two).

Maintaining the support cycle

The student population is diverse and constantly changing. Each new cohort of students needs the same intensity of support, through mentoring and training. The centrality of representation requires a constant institutional commitment of resources to help the systems operate and develop.

- Recognising that students are transient, change, have variable interest.
- Constant support and routine training are part of the role.

Electoral procedures: the best representative vs. most popular

All colleges were experimenting with different election calendars. The most common approach is to have different elections for different representative roles at different times, for example:

- Six weeks into course, election of course/tutor group representatives (usually two per group, one male/one female).
- Student union sabbatical offices or president/secretary in July ready for next academic year enables shadowing. Other officers in early October.
- Student governors – two positions elected, one in spring and one in autumn, serving one year, ensures continuity.

There is a concern that the social/ethnic balance of student representatives may skew the validity of who is being represented. This is a complex and core issue. Colleges are aware of this and attempting to introduce opportunities that preserve equity. The current issues are:

- Social/ethnic/gender of representatives.
- Raising participation in democratic voting across all students.
- The cult of the charismatic personality.
- Lack of understanding of responsibilities of representative roles.
- Access to manifesto.
- Access to ballot boxes.
- Experimentation with email and mobile phone voting processes.

Election timetable

- Elections to the governors and the student union take place twice a year.
- The president, the four welfare officers and the additional student for the governing body are elected during the summer term.
- In the autumn term the more elections take place for the other student representative functions.
- Ballot boxes are placed around the campus; there is a week of voting. Manifestos are distributed and campaigning organised.

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Integrating the representative function with tutorial, key skills, citizenship and other validated qualifications

Once the concept of citizenship becomes established in some dimensions of the college's provision, then different programmes in the core curriculum, tutorials and enrichment activities can support the representational process. Some key illustrations include:

- Staff recognising the positive function of tutorials as supportive to the whole representative structure/system, and its status as a main avenue of representative social skill development.
- Modelling democratic practice in devising the tutorial programme.
- Opportunities for campaigning.
- An initial opportunity for prospective representatives to experiment and gain representative experience.
- Viable route of feedback on actions taken, rationale and gauging new concerns and issues for resolution through the representative system.

Student governors and the governing body

Some colleges include students on their governing bodies, using different 'selection methods'. They have the same duties and rights as existing governors. A representative example is printed below.

The college corporation governing body comprises 20 governors (two students) that meet on eight occasions per year (five in the evening).

The student governors:

- one from the student union and the other from the college population
- are full governors with voting rights
- one elected in July, the other in November
- serve one year
- Undergo an induction programme
- serving governor acts as mentor to student governors
- clerk of governors supports student governors throughout the year.

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In other colleges students are allowed to attend some meetings but not all.

Benefits and outcomes of representation within the student campus

The most important outcome expressed by both students and staff in the projects was the identification of issues and problems before they became serious. There are significant benefits to be gained by the college and its students from effective representational processes, such as:

- Feedback on teaching methods and effectiveness.
- Programme viability and fit with work needs.
- Raising retention, student achievement and identity, quality of learning programmes and staff development.
- Improving core services.
- Addressing ongoing college issues (eg canteen, toilets) fundamental to the working and learning environment.
- Provides a dynamic sense of participation and ownership, 'this is our college'.
- Youth/learner voice on governing body gives direct and immediate insight to the mindset and concerns of learners. Significantly reduces the time delay on feedback.

Potential benefits that extend beyond the college campus

Young people are being drawn into many consultative processes in their communities. This could become an onerous and divisive practice if there is not some understanding by those policy makers, and those arranging such activities, of the affect on the young people involved. It is important that the pool of young people is extended, so as not to draw on the same bunch of willing volunteers.

The representative processes in colleges and in schools are contributing to this wider representative agenda by developing a broader cohort of young people with the transferable representative skills and experiences to make these other representative mechanisms work.

Starting from the beginning

It is important to recognise staff concerns, suspicions and reactions to change. Staff may not have sufficient experience or skills to facilitate and support democratic practice. Student may also have little experience or understanding of democratic processes. Their attitudes to active citizenship and representational processes may also inhibit change.

The most common features in these experimental representational systems are:

- It was pragmatic to start out from where staff and students were right now.
- Practice should evolve.
- A desire to learn from mistakes.
- A belief in democracy.

While current practice may be imperfect, all practitioners accepted that it was an important step towards an ideal that they currently could not describe. It was more than an act of faith. Staff and students were learning much about each other and the complexities of how to represent within the constraints of running large educational businesses within the government framework for education.

A developmental model of student representation

Representational processes in colleges are complex. They involve a large transient body of full- and part-time students on a variety of courses, located at multiple campuses and outreach centres.

This model is an attempt to make sense of how a student college council could develop through three stages: *functional*, *collaborative* and *learner ownership*. Many of the colleges contributing to this study were midway between stage 1 and 2, having features of both present. Stage 3 is speculative and is included to promote debate.

Colleges wanting to involve students in consultative and feedback processes are establishing class/learning group/tutorial representatives and providing students with training. Direct feedback to faculties or subject departments and schools is more obvious and effective. However, the real challenge is direct student involvement in major decisions affecting the college as a corporate body.

If ownership is seen as the preserve of the governors, the executive and staff then that perspective will give the representative structure a *functional* complexion. If students are regarded as important central stakeholders with an investment in the life of the college, then the character/nature of the college will be more *collaborative*. The representational system will develop beyond the functional to involve students in constitutional matters.

The ultimate empowerment of students in their learning community will be the establishment of a college council that embraces *learner ownership*.

Whilst sixth form colleges are sometimes less complex in terms of how they are organised, the same model can be applied. It is a useful tool to assist review of current representational practice and to identify the next developmental step.

Student college councils as representational bodies in sixth form and further education colleges – a developmental model

Stage 1 – Functional

- SMT driven
- Consultative vehicle for college staff
- Students essentially reactive
- Chaired by senior manager
- Students mainly from full-time courses
- Meets inspection requirements
- Student representatives usually nominated, not elected

Stage 2 – Collaborative

- Joint agenda setting
- Consultative and developmental
- Students are proactive for change
- Rotational chair
- Broader representation of full- and part-time students
- Increased membership creates need for tiered structure
- Student representatives elected, rather than nominated

Stage 3 – Learner ownership

- Students responsible for running the council
- Partnership (with college professionals) agenda in meetings and in wider college activities
- Students drive change
- Student chair
- Fully representative of all students
- Integrated electoral processes

References

There is now considerable interest in this theme; the most helpful papers and reports are listed below.

Citizenship schools, Titus Alexander Teaching Citizenship, autumn, 2002.

Cutler, David and Taylor, Alice, *Expanding and sustaining involvement – a review of participation structure affecting young people living in England*, Carnegie Young Peoples Initiative, July, 2003.

Dixon, Josie, Knight, Tim and Tibble, Mike, *Feedback from the ministerial listening tour, young people talk, ministers listen*, National Centre for Social Research, DfES, 2003.

Fielding, Michael, 'Beyond the rhetoric of student voice: new departures or new constraints in the transformation of 21st century schooling?', *Forum*, 42(2), 2001, pages 100–109.

Hannam, D H, *A pilot study to evaluate the impact of the student participation aspects of the citizenship order on standards of education in secondary schools*, CSV, London, 2001, online at www.csv.org.uk/csv/hannamreport.pdf.

Hannam, D H, 'We could be interviewed by an alien so long as they LISTENED!' *Students' views on how to express their perceptions of the curriculum to government*, draft report conducted for QCA in association with CSV, 2003.

Treseder, Phil, *Empowering children and young people*, Save the children, 1997.

Voter engagement and young people, research report, The Electoral Commission, July, 2002.

Wade, Harry, Lawton, Anthony and Stevenson, Mark, *Hear by right – setting standards for the active involvement of young people in democracy*, Local Government Association, July, 2001.

Working together: giving children and young people a say, consultation on draft guidance, DfES, July, 2003.

Young people and politics, a report on the yvote/ynoyt project by the Children and Young People's Unit, 2002.

Appendix 1

Case studies

The following case studies in the QCA post-16 citizenship guidance and issues of LSDA's *Citizenship News* were reviewed as part of the research for this study.

Case studies

Sir Bernard Lovell School – school council and post-16 forum

Youth comm. Worcester – Youthink

Camden Job Train – student consultation

Richmond upon Thames College – student union elections

Brook House Sixth Form – a citizenship college student representation

Ash Field School Leicester – city youth forum and Ash Field school council

Tower Hamlets – student involvement in college affairs

Merton College – college parliament

Bath and North East Somerset Council – democratic action for BANES youth

Whally Range High School Sixth Form – sixth form forum

Sefton Enterprises Limited – Sefton enterprises forum

Case studies – key skills

Bournemouth and Poole – key skills and citizenship – student representation system

Citizenship News – published by LSDA

January 2003 Connecting with the council – Sefton LEA – page 17

A forum for our views – Buckingham life long partnership – page 9

April 2003 Learning to let go – Merton College – pages 4/5

Apprentice citizens – Aylesbury training group – page 9

Union activists – Tower Hamlets Sixth Form College – page 11

Right to be heard – Bath and Northeast Somerset – page 13

A community of interest – Brooke House Sixth Form College – page 15

The youth voice in west London – Hounslow youth council – page 16

July 2003 Some for all – more for some (youth forum) – Leicestershire – pages 14/15

Union matters – Richmond College – pages 17

October 2003 Reference to college student forum and student union – Hyde Clarendon Sixth Form College – Tameside – pages 14/15

Appendix 2

Examples of initiatives and policy formulations

1. Establishment of the 'Children and Young Peoples Unit' within the DfES (June 2003) – to coordinate government policy across departments for the 0–19 age range; a central concern is the participation of young people in public decision making. It has a dedicated democracy and participation team.
2. Appointment of a young people's minister.
3. Local authority practice guidelines – Hear by Right; setting standards for active involvement of young people in democracy. Four principles are stressed:
 - diversity of young people is recognised
 - young people are valued
 - involvement is underpinned by adequate resources of expertise, time, money and organisational systems and processes
 - there are systems and processes for reviewing, evaluating and continuously improving young people's involvement.
4. Schools Achieving Success - white paper and the Education Act (2002) – with special reference in sections 3.46 and 3.47.

'That we will encourage students' active participation in the decisions that affect them, about learning and more widely'

'Ofsted inspectors will now systematically seek the views of a school's pupils as part of inspection'

'Citizenship will promote political literacy'

The act also enables young people to become associate members of school governing bodies.
5. Introduction by Statutory Order of Citizenship as a National Curriculum subject for 11 –16 years olds in schools – see *The National Curriculum A handbook for secondary teachers* and QCA guidance including schemes of work (www.qca.org.uk/citizenship).
6. Citizenship at post 16 – advisory group report in 2000 – establishment of LSDA project.
7. LSDA and LSC have a commitment to young people's participation in the design, delivery and evaluation of services written into their constitutions.
8. National Healthy Schools Standard (NHSS) – stresses that all local programmes must involve young people in planning and be responsive to young people's needs through consultation processes. Schools must ensure that they give pupils a voice.
9. Connexions – all local Connexions partnerships are required to show how they are involving young people in the design, running and evaluation of the service in order to gain approval by the central unit.
10. Working together: giving children and young people a say (July 2003) – a DfES consultation founded on the belief that 'giving children and young people a say in decisions that affect them will impact positively on standards, behaviour and inclusion', Charles Clark, secretary of state.

(For further details on above see 'Expanding and sustaining involvement – a review of participation structure affecting young people living in England' – David Cutler and Alice Taylor – Carnegie young peoples initiative – July 2003.)

Appendix 3

A map of student representation in sixth-form and further education colleges – blank copy

