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| Key Theme Report | |
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| The Challenge of Learner Voice  Policy Development Convention, 5-6 December 2013 |

**Why this theme?**

Over the last 8 years since the publication of “Realising the Potential: A review of the future role of Further Education Colleges” (Foster, 2005), the profile of “learner voice” within colleges has risen.

The Foster report introduced the legal requirement for colleges to have a Learner Involvement Strategy, reviewed annually in collaboration with students and their representatives, through students’ unions.

This increase in profile and commitment to learner voice within Colleges has increased the development and impact of student leaders both locally and nationally, most notably through the increase in engagement from further education students’ unions in NUS.

However, there are a range of challenges and opportunities that face the future of student voice both locally and nationally in shaping the future of further education.

**Context**

### Changes in the FE budget

In line with the current government’s Spending Review, Further Education in facing a real term reduction in funding of 25%, equating to over £1bn from 2012 to 2015.

Colleges have already seen a reduction in the enrichment budget for students, which in turn has led to reductions in the support available for students’ unions from colleges.

Furthermore, the reduction in funding means colleges are facing cuts to courses, resource provision, staff and other areas. This increases the need for collaboration and consultation with learners.

There is also an indication from the minister that funding for Adult skills education is to be placed in the hands of employers, through Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs)

### Increased freedoms for FE colleges

“New Challenges, New Chances” (2011) was key piece of Government policy outlining plans to radically reform the Further Education system.

Part of this was to remove restrictions and controls on college corporations to enable colleges to work in partnership with other providers, LEPs and local authorities to deliver education fit for local communities.

Also, Colleges are now able to amend and/or replace their Instruments & articles and change the membership of their board. Corporations do still have a responsibility to publish their arrangements for consulting with learners.

The government has also removed the requirement for professionally-qualified teaching staff in further education. This means that colleges can employ unqualified teachers to teach on courses in further education.

### Diverse students within colleges

According to latest available data from 2011/12:

* 3 million student are educated in colleges
* Over 2 million are adult learners
* 58,000 are 14-15 year old students
* 67% of colleges teach Foundation degrees
* 170,000 student study HE courses in colleges
* There are 370,700 learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LLDD)
* 129,000 learners under 19 started and apprenticeship with 77,900 completing their apprenticeship
* Around 45,000 16-18 students study apprenticeships through colleges
* Further education success rates in colleges are 82.5%, but apprentice success rates are 74%

This is just a snapshot of the range of learners within the FE sector. This list could also include part-time, international, adult, 16-19, 14-15, students dependant on benefits and support, student parents or carers and many other students whose voice needs to be represented.

### Ofsted focus on Teaching and Learning and learner voice

The new Ofsted Common Inspection Framework, introduced in September 2012 has an increased focus on areas which have most impact on learners.

Key points in the new framework include:

* Increased focus on Teaching, Learning and Assessment (now a limiting grade. i.e. no provider can receive and Outstanding grade overall without achieving outstanding for Teaching, Learning and Assessment)
* Empowerment of learners, employers and parents

Furthermore, under Leadership and Management, inspectors will focus on whether institutions are able to:

* Improve teaching and learning through performance management of staff and appropriate professional development
* Take account of users’ views in evaluating the quality of all types of provision
* Planning, establishing and managing the curriculum to meet the needs and interests of learners

Ofsted now use information provided directly from learners to inform their inspection. This is done through the “Learner View” survey.

### Move towards open data and choice in FE

At the AoC Annual Conference in November 2013, Minister for FE and Skills, Matthew Hancock MP said of college accountability under the new freedoms:

“Accountability means publishing, in a useable format, as much data as possible about schools and colleges’ performance, with a level playing field between different providers, so anyone can compare and contrast performance.”

An increase in published data about colleges increases competition and information available for current and future students to make decisions about their future study. This increase in available data also opens the potential for students’ unions and NUS to better utilise data to support evidence-based change campaigns locally and nationally.

**What’s happened so far?**

### Local learner voice structures

* NUS has supported students’ unions in lobbying colleges to develop a strategy for student-led, whole college approach to learner voice through the Learner Involvement Framework
* Piloted a sabbatical apprentice programme to build student representation and advocacy support through increased funding available to colleges for apprenticeships. This has been adopted by one college, with agreement at another in place for 2013/14
* Though not widely researched, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that some colleges have “moved” the staff support resource for FE students’ unions and learner voice over to Quality and Curriculum departments.
* Redeveloped NUS FE officer training for December 2013 with and increased focus on advocacy, understanding of the value and purpose of Further Education and making change happen.

### Governance

* In 2011, students’ unions and NUS successfully lobbied government to retain student governor places on college corporation boards. However, the minimum number of student governors is now one, with no upper limit.
* Some colleges are reducing the size their boards to switch to a different method of governance. In most cases this includes a reduction in student governors.
* The NUS Student Governor Support Programme (SGSP) in its second year, with over 60 colleges signed up. The programme seeks to champion the role of student governors and learner voice in the sector in supporting colleges to improve their local support structures for student governors
* NUS input into ETF/AoC “Creating Excellence in College Governance” report and action plan, embedding student governors into the development plan and continuing the development of the SGSP
* NUS successfully lobbied for student place on board of new Education and Training Foundation, ensuring student voice is heard

### Teaching and Learning

* In 2012, NUS developed Teaching & Learning Charter for FE, outlining ten principles of excellent teaching and learning that colleges should strive for.
* From this, NUS developed and launched a Teaching & Learning Audit tool to support students’ unions and reps in evaluating the quality of teaching and learning within their colleges
* NUS, along with IfL and other sector partners led on the campaign to Keep FE Teachers Qualified. This has led to Labour Party commitment to reintroduce this requirement.

### Open data

* NUS continue SFA funded project on supporting students’ unions to increase learner engagement with FE Choices Learner Satisfaction Survey.

**What the membership think?**

### FE Zone Conference 2013

At FE Zone Conference, delegates took part in an interactive session exploring the challenges of Learner Voice for different types of students. The session focussed on students who are typically less engaged in their students’ unions and learner voice structures.

Through discussion in groups, delegates were asked to identify some of the potential causes of the lack of engagement in learner voice/SUs and suggest potential solutions. Below is a summarised list of some of the discussions and key themes:

### Part-time students

Causes

* Different priorities (work/children)
* Lack of time
* May only be in 2 hours a week
* Different timetable

Solutions

* P/T officers on Union executives
* Improve Class rep training – more accessible
* Talk to teachers of P/T courses
* Reps to meet with department managers and others higher up

### International students

Causes

* Language barriers
* Self-esteem/isolation
* Discrimination
* Lack of adequate representation

Solutions

* College Zero-Tolerance policy on racial discrimination
* Mentoring/buddying system
* Mixing students together eg. In tutorials to increase interaction with others

### Students dependant on benefits and learning support

Causes

* Fear of losing benefits – Job seekers get free education but can’t attend full-time course
* Cost of living
* Benefit rate is really low
* Changes in living circumstances

Solutions

* Budget advisors in colleges
* Course material subsidies
* New financial system
* Including ‘class’ in E&D talks
* Change jobcentre system

### Disabled students

Causes

* Inaccessible resources coupled with bad communication
* Staff not well trained
* Extensive pending statements for illness/disabilities/conditions
* Accessibility of student services/facilities

Solutions

* Better diagnostic tools and qualified practitioners. Approved recognition upon enrolment and statementing
* Implement training for the class reps so that they can be more understanding towards those with disabilities
* Taking account of student’s needs and preferences in order for them to engage in LV effectively.
* Make student services/equipment/facilities easy to access for all students regardless of disability

### Apprentices and work-based learners

Causes

* Representation – no course, no group who represents
* Often when WBL’s are on site and learning, they’re physically away from the main campus and therefore the action
* Officers not understanding apprentices – who they are, where they study etc.
* Communication – tutors not giving them information

Solutions

* Build relationships with employers – raise issues with education through this
* Lobby the institution to identify apprentices as students
* Training for tutors in apprenticeship programmes in Learner Voice

### 14-16 students

Causes

* “Out of our comfort zone”
* Small numbers of students
* Does the ’94 act extend to 14-15 students?

Solutions

* Separate 14-15 forum/council
* Revise policies/NUS constitution
* Change the law (provision of ’94 act to extend to post-14)

### Adult students

Causes

* Ability to approach union
* External commitments
* Often p/t learners?

Solutions

* Adult student forum
* Night union
* Mature students rep

### Student parents and carers

Causes

* Absences due to dependant illness
* Lack of time to engage in extra activities
* Costs of course/childcare
* Lack of recognition of what a student carer is

Solutions

* Student parent/carer networks
* College to pay for nursery support
* Information, advice and guidance

### Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities

Causes

* Prejudice
* Lack of candidates for roles in union
* Perception of fear

Solutions

* Increase resources eg. Laptops with Dictaphones
* Introduction of different learning styles
* Increasing facility for students to have learning facilitators

## Opinion poll

In November 2013, the NUS Group Student Opinion Survey asked as sample of 932 students to what extent they agree or disagree with two statements about learner voice and students’ union structures at their institutions.

### ‘My students’ union actively seeks to represent all types of learners (i.e. mature, disabled, part-time, apprentice etc.)’

* 63% agreed with this statement
* 30% are either neutral or just don’t know.
* Students’ who have never visited their SU are least likely to agree with this statement (45%)

### ‘My students’ union has an effective and democratic structure in place for gaining feedback from all learners in the institution.’

* 57% agree with this statement
* 35% are either neutral or just don’t know.
* Part-time students are most likely to say they don’t know (28%)

# **Conclusions and Recommendations**

### Local learner voice structures

* How do we safeguard and increase the level of resource invested in learner voice and students’ unions in a college-sector facing cuts?
  + Calling for legislation to centralise funding for learner voice from government is unlikely to be welcomed by the sector given the focus on increased freedoms for colleges
  + Could NUS work nationally with sector partners to embed the principles of student-led, college supported learner voice through the Learner Involvement Framework?
  + NUS could explore extending the Sabbs as apprentices work, exploring potential development of an accredited framework specific for student representatives
* How do we ensure that learner voice is being heard in decisions about funding, with adult learning funding to be diverted through employers through LEPs
  + Should we lobby for legislation that learners reps should sit on LEPs? With a sector narrative of reduced legislation and increased freedoms, would this be realistic?
  + LEPs would serve funding to a range of providers in a locality – how would we decide who reps should be, given there may be several local colleges and other providers involved?
  + What else could we do to build relationships between employers and students’ unions?
* How do we increase engagement in learner voice structures locally from diverse groups of students to ensure that education empowers and engages all students?
  + Does NUS believe that students’ unions should have officer positions for Adult, mature, part-time, work-based learners etc.
  + How should 14-15 year old students (now able to be directly recruited by colleges) fit into unions, given the legislation in 1994 Education act pertains to post-16 education
  + Would lobbying/seeking clarity on the provisions in 1994 act being these safeguards into the focus of the government and possibly lead to a reduction in this legislation?
* Having defended the position of student governors and given the increased freedoms for college boards, do we stand by keeping at least two student governors on boards?
  + Are there other methods of ensuring learner voice reaches the strategic direction of colleges that we could look to lobby for?

### Teaching & Learning

* With Ofsted increasing focus in Teaching & Learning in inspections, could NUS work in partnership with Ofsted to increase learner voice and engagement in inspections?
  + Could NUS work with Ofsted to increase engagement and participation in Learner View?
  + How else might we support learner voice within inspection?
* Should students’ unions engage more with Quality and Curriculum teams in colleges to embed learner voice in curriculum design and delivery?
  + Should we train and support quality and curriculum staff in colleges in student-led learner voice structures?
  + NUS could champion student rep involvement in different areas within the quality cycle, such as Self-Assessment Reviews.
  + If we were to do this, how could NUS support reps to make meaningful impact in this?
  + Could we build on the use of the Teaching & Learning charter and audit within colleges and unions?
* What can NUS do to increase learner voice of Apprentices, given the significantly lower success rates of apprentices compared to Further Education colleges as a whole?
  + How do NUS and students’ unions engage with employers better to champion learner voice?
  + Could NUS work more closely with the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) to develop learning voice structures within the workplace?

### Other Considerations

* Where do we stand on freedoms and open data as accountability?
  + Colleges and providers are broadly supportive of increased freedoms
  + Are there any definitive lines on freedoms that NUS should stand by? (Teacher qualifications, learner involvement strategies etc)
* Where do we stand on moving adult funding to local employers to allocate through LEPs?
  + Will this affect the range of courses available to students at their local colleges, with provision led by local demand from employers – this could increase travel times, decrease options for students to study the course they want to. However, might increase the potential for students to go on to employment.