



national union of students



Student Engagement- A summary of the new duty on Colleges

Foreword from John Hayes

The Government's reform plan for Further Education, "New Challenges, New Chances", said that students should be at the heart of the FE and skills system. From basic skills through to higher education, they should be given power to shape the system in their own best interests as its main customers.

Learners' perspectives provide colleges with a unique insight into the day to day experiences of students and an important tool with which to improve the services they offer. That is why we have retained the requirement to have student and staff members on college corporations. We have also developed a new broad requirement for colleges to publish their arrangements for obtaining the views of its staff and students. This is both a challenge and an opportunity. Indeed, many colleges are already championing staff and student involvement in governance, with a measurable impact and success. Others may draw on these success stories in developing their own approaches.

The information below has been provided by the National Union of Students and the Learning and Skills Improvement Service and offers a useful and thought-provoking perspective on college and learner led mechanisms for learner engagement. The summary highlights areas and approaches that colleges will be considering and offers further support in meeting the requirements of this new duty.

I want a system which is increasingly sensitive to need, driven by demand and measured by its effectiveness. So, for me, this work on student engagement is vital.

John Hayes

Background

What remains of the compulsory elements of the instrument and articles require the Corporation have amongst its membership both staff and students to offer a *perspective* from these groups on the Corporation's duties and business. It is a well established principle that they should not, however, act as direct *representatives* of these groups' views and should not act under any *mandate*.

Corporations have a duty to be responsive to the views of their students and staff and should not *depend* on these members for information and feedback from these groups. As a result, separately the instrument and articles now require the college to publish arrangements for "obtaining the views of staff and students on the specific matters for which the Corporation is responsible"- specifically:

- the determination and periodic review of the educational character and mission of the college
- the oversight of the college's activities
- the effective and efficient use of resources
- the solvency of the college and the safeguarding of its assets

In contrast with the previous duty on colleges to have due regard to guidance issued by the Secretary of State on consultation with learners, which effectively required colleges to publish a learner engagement strategy but did not specifically cover the issue of corporation engagement, this

new duty is designed to cover both the direct responsiveness of the corporation itself to staff and student views in carrying out its duties, and the college's general engagement with learners and staff.

The usual way to approach this duty will be for corporations to keep under review and annually approve a revised Learner Engagement Strategy. It will usefully separately consider its engagement with staff in light of any agreements with staff.

General

Where learners participate in decisions affecting their learning experience, they are likely to succeed and to play a more active role in the provider's quality improvement processes – a key lever of service improvement.

By consultation we mean colleges actively seeking the views of learners, potential learners and employers in connection with decisions affecting them. It also means empowering learners to understand the education system and to create structures and systems such that learners are able to raise and initiate discussion on decisions.

In effectively seeking and responding to the views of these groups, the college will be contributing to the wider ambition of:

- individuals becoming more active participants in their own learning and employers promoting skills development and lifelong learning amongst their employees;
- participation in creating, prioritising and improving services to make them more responsive to the needs of students, employers and of those likely to become students of the college;
- developing a culture of lifelong learning and skills development through giving individuals the approaches and tools they need to become independent and effective lifelong learners and citizens.

It is for each corporation to decide how best to consult with and engage with learners. There is no single model that will suit the varied circumstances in which an individual college operates.

However when dealing with learners, all colleges should

- **seek views** on issues affecting learners (college led approaches) and
- **develop systems and structures** to empower learners to raise and initiate discussion and views (learner-led approaches).

Learner Led approaches

Learner-led approaches to learner involvement will most often manifest through representative systems and groups of students empowered to raise and initiate for themselves, consultation and discussion, on matters of concern for students. Most often this will take the form of a students' union, forum, council, committee or association. Colleges should be aware that many learner-led approaches would be in the form of students' unions as defined by the Education Act 1994. It defines a students' union as:

- an association of the generality of students at an establishment whose principal purposes include promoting the general interests of its members as students; or
- a representative body (whether an association or not) whose principal purposes include representing the generality of students at an establishment in academic, disciplinary or other matters relating to the government of the establishment.

The Act requires the corporation to take reasonable steps to secure that students' unions operate in a fair and democratic manner and are accountable for their finances.

Amongst other things, colleges should ensure that the union has a written constitution, that elections are held and they should supervise any financial arrangements.

Corporation duty to seek views

To fulfil its duty to engage with learner views, the **Corporation** could engage directly in the following:

College Led Mechanism	Learner Led Mechanisms
Regularly review quantitative feedback from students from both national and internal surveys and invite learner representatives to offer perspectives on the data;	Annually invite the Students' Union/Council/Association officers to present to the Corporation on the views of students and issues for the Corporation's consideration;
Directly seek or commission the views of students on any major matter of strategy or provision likely to affect their experience;	Provide the Students' Union/Council/Association with resources to conduct training, regular meetings and focus groups on matters affecting students;
Involve current and potential learners directly in any revision of the college's educational character and mission; paying close regard to decisions which are related to the coverage or depth of educational provision in a community;	Ensure lead learner representatives from the Students' Union/Council/Association are invited to attend college committees and external events that directly impact on the colleges educational character and mission;
Require that any papers reviewing or making recommendations about college facilities or provision have been subject to an appropriate level of engagement with learners;	Request evidence, statistics and data from the Students' Union/Council/Association that demonstrate the level of learner input on recommendations about college facilities or provision
Appoint up to two link Governors to liaise with the Students' Union/Council/Association and attend at their meetings/conferences to hear the views of students directly	
A corporation student affairs committee will be established and meet twice a year to consider all matters affecting teaching and learning and the general student experience	

Corporation duty to ensure the college seeks views

To fulfil its duty to engage with learner views, the **College** could engage in the following:

College Led Mechanisms	Learner Led Mechanisms
Develop an annual learner involvement strategy;	Ensure an election system is in place and outlined in the constitution of the Students' Union/Council/Association for all levels of learner representation;
Schedule regular meetings between the senior management team and learners;	Employ a paid sabbatical President to lead the Students' Union/Council/Association and represent the views of students to the college;
Provide an enrichment programme to generate groups of learners with similar interests or views;	Allocate resources for learner led clubs to be established via the mechanisms outlined in the Students' Union/Council/Association constitution;
Elect learner representative to feedback at class, course, faculty and departmental meetings	Support the role and function of student council meetings
Facilitate individual tutorials or review meetings with learners	Support the Students' Union/Council/Association to conduct peer to peer training sessions inside the college

More detailed guidance and support on learner involvement is available from NUS, to access this additional support please contact learner.involvement@nus.org.uk