

Processes and Practices of Governing in Colleges of Further Education in the UK

Project Briefing 6: May 2021

The student governor role and student voice in further education college governing

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The student governor role

Including a student governor on college governing boards is a legislated requirement across the four nations of the UK (Association of Colleges (AoC), 2015; Colleges Scotland, 2016; Colleges Wales, 2016; DfE, 2016), and is regarded as a key component of effective governance. Despite this, guidance relating to the role is ambiguous, and very little research has been carried out which would assist boards in supporting student governors and developing the role.

The role of the student governor is often compared with that of the staff governor in that, unlike other members of the board, they are nominated and/or elected by their peers. However, both staff and student governors are considered to be full members of the governing body, with all of the responsibilities and expectations that the role of governor entails (LSIS, 2009). In Codes of Good Governance and in board meeting papers, we found that colleges in all four UK nations link the role to such concepts as ‘student experience’, ‘student voice’, ‘learner engagement’, and ‘representation of the student body’. However, in our observations of board meetings, interviews with board members, and discussions with student governors themselves, we found great variations in expectations of the role as well as in the engagement of student governors. Here we present some of our findings relating to the different ways in which boards understand, engage, and support student governors, and propose some recommendations that can be made in considering these.

Expectations of the role

Codes of Good Governance in further education colleges across the four UK countries make reference to the importance of the student governor role.

In England, each college must have at least one student governor on the board, and the role of student governor is intertwined with student involvement and learner engagement, while positioning students as customers of the college:

Colleges do their own research and surveys to monitor customer feedback and satisfaction. However, student involvement goes further than this as all colleges are required to have a student governor on their board. Colleges are also expected by Ofsted and others to have effective methods for learner engagement. (DBIS, 2014, p. 11)

In Scotland, each board must include two student governors, elected by the student body. In relation to the ‘Effectiveness of the Board’, the Code of Good Governance frames student governors as having equal importance to other board members, stating that:

Each board member is collectively responsible and accountable for all board decisions. Board members must make decisions in the best interests of the college and/or region as a whole rather than selectively or in the interests of a particular group. Staff and student board members are full board members and bring essential and unique skills, knowledge and experience to the board. (Colleges Scotland, 2016, p. 10)

In Northern Ireland, the Department for the Economy is responsible for appointing the student governor, however, this is made on recommendation from the Governing Bodies (DfE, 2016). The Department dictates that Governing Bodies must include 12 to 18 governors, and that, of these, 'one is elected by students of the college from among such students' (DfE, 2019, p. 12). However, despite this edict, the Code clearly sets out that the student governor role is not designed to represent the student body:

The student member is elected by the student population of the college however they are not on the governing body to represent the views of the student body. Their role is to bring the learner perspective to the decision making process in the college. Like any other governor, they must make decisions based on the best interests of the college. (DfE, 2016, p. 29)

In Wales, each college board must include at least two student governors, drawn from elected members of the association that represents the student body. In addition, in relation to 'Student Voice', the Code of Good Governance for Colleges in Wales states that:

The governing body must have close regard to the voice of its students and the quality of the student experience, which should be central to all governing body decisions. Students should be actively engaged in the college and effective ways should be found to ensure that the student voice is heard through both college and student led processes. (Colleges Wales, p. 7)

There is therefore a tension in these constructions of the role of student governor: whether it should be understood as one of involvement as an advisor, where their knowledge and skills allow them to contribute in the same way as any other governor; or as one of representation, where the elected student governor acts as a mouthpiece for the student voice. This is not mere pedantry, since student governors, as full members of the board, must act in the interests of the college (LSIS, 2009b), not necessarily the students, accepting 'cabinet responsibility' for board decisions.

Engagement in the role

We observed great variation in the presence of student governors in board meetings, both physically, and in terms of their engagement. Student governors were present at most of the 48 board meetings we observed and participated by providing reports of student council activities and feedback from the student representative system. However, they were rarely called upon to participate beyond this, and certainly not on issues unrelated to teaching and learning. Though this was the norm, there was variation. At one college, the student governors never made an appearance. At another, the student governors attended only their first meeting, and, although they were introduced to the board on that occasion, they otherwise did not engage in any way. At one college, however, student governors were full and active members of the board and engaged in discussions around all aspects of college life including the development of strategy.

While some Principals attributed a lack of engagement by student governors to individual capabilities, others suggested that it is the role itself that is flawed:

I think there's a tendency for the student members especially to be strictly lip service, and I think that there should be far better ways of getting the learner voice to the board than through the student rep. (Principal)

In other colleges, however, the student governors were active members of the governing body and were routinely encouraged to contribute to debate and discussion. In addition, we also observed instances where the student governor engaged in strategy away-days and contributed strongly to steering strategic planning by considering the proposed strategy from the perspective of the student experience. In these colleges, the student governors were associated with student representation, but were also valued for the knowledge and insight they brought to the board through their contributions:

We don't regard them as student representatives, they're just members of the board. And, therefore, they have as much opportunity to offer insight and discussion and to share the priorities of students, which they have identified through the very substantial class rep representation ... So they actively participate in all board meetings as full members and therefore are able to offer insight. (Chair)

Supporting the student governor role – a case study

Our impression, therefore, from talking to board members and student governors was overall that the role was not well understood and that there was a tendency towards tokenism, though this was certainly not always the case. This suggests that the role is problematic and not being used in a way that benefits the board, the student governor, or the college. We were therefore particularly struck by the efforts of one college to develop the role further. In this case we saw active involvement of the student governors in the work of the college, including in the development of strategy, and we therefore decided to undertake a 'mini case study' to examine this further and to provide guidance for other colleges to follow. The Chair at this college had, as a deliberate policy, developed the role of the student governor, and included both Student Governors in all Board strategy development events. They were also expected to attend all Board meetings. We therefore conducted an interview with one of the Student Governors to explore her experiences of engaging in Board activities.

When asked how she is perceived by other Board members, the Student Governor described being worried at first that she would not be taken seriously as a member herself; however, she was surprised at how quickly this perception shifted, as she felt immediately that her contribution was highly valued by the Board and that her position was very well respected.

And at the Board we give our full presence, it's not as if we need a little bit of our report, we need a full report and everybody asks questions, so we are very well heard. (Student Governor)

When asked to describe how this sense of value was facilitated, she described how the support of various individuals was integral to her success as a student governor. For example, she described how the Student Development Officer facilitated a working relationship that allowed the Student Association to have a very close relationship with the Senior Executive Team. It was also extremely important to her that the Principal in particular was approachable and open to meeting the student association representatives – she mentioned meeting other Student Governors and being shocked to discover that they had never met face-to-face with the Principal outwith the Board meetings, whereas she had regular meetings established and also felt comfortable meeting with him on an ad hoc basis. It was also very important to her that she felt able to approach the Chair and other members of the Senior Executive Team of the college to ensure that they understand the student experience.

It was clear within the case study that the Senior Executive Team at this college also placed great value on this relationship, as it provided a method for allowing the learner experience to influence their strategizing. In addition, the strength of these relationships promoted greater engagement by Board members in student-run events. Such engagement between the student body and the Board was also greatly valued by the Secretary of this Board, who highlighted the benefits of authenticity when asked about the value of having a student governor on the Board:

I think ... there's something in that about the whole college culture because it's not, you can't just do that and it's the Board or it's one event, it needs to pervue a kind of everything that goes on, otherwise it's just false and it's lumpy and students see through that, just as staff do, in a nanosecond ... It needs to be the cultural values that the organisation has as a whole. (Secretary)

This illustrates how important it is that the student governor role is not just lip service – it is more than meeting the legislative requirements to ensure that there are students on the board – boards must invest completely in supporting the student governor to contribute to the board as a means of promoting and facilitating the cultural values of the organisation.

When asked about her perceptions of the purpose of the Board of Governance, the Student Governor clearly articulated this:

To make sure that the students are getting the best experience, and the only way that we can do that is by the Board having so many different people on it, from different backgrounds, different opinions, that do bring together the best for the students. So, I would say that's the main purpose

of the Board – is to make sure the College is running the best for the students. (Student Governor)

Our close analysis of the strategizing practices of the Board (Watson and Ireland, 2020) in the case study revealed the importance of developing the role of student governor by providing ways in which the role is understood – both by the Student Governors themselves, and by the wider Board members.

Implications for practice

While all of our partner colleges situated the quality of the learner experience as being central to all board processes, we observed different levels of engagement by student governors in these activities. In the case study, the effectiveness of the student governor role can be attributed to close and meaningful engagement with all governors – particularly the chair – and the senior executive team, with the student governors and the wider student body. In addition, this close engagement, with all board members, also contributed to promoting a strong sense of belonging for the student governors, enhancing their experience of contributing to governing practices, including the development of strategy. Providing student governors with adequate space in board proceedings, such as allowing routinely scheduled items on the agenda, also seems to contribute to promoting more meaningful engagement; in their role and with the board as a whole. It has also been suggested that placing the students' association/union update early in the agenda is beneficial in both foregrounding learner engagement in governing practices and in providing a sense of value in the student governor's engagement in governing processes. Notably, in those colleges where such updates were included as a regular board agenda item, the attendance and engagement of the student governors was much more visible.

One crucial difference in Scottish colleges is that the student governor role is undertaken as a sabbatical over a two-year period. This is regarded as one way in which the student governors can be supported to engage more meaningfully in governing practices. In addition, they are supported by a designated member of staff, who trains and guides them in their role, both as student governor and as student president.

Within the mandate to include student governors in governing practices, the challenge for boards is to strive to support them to contribute meaningfully. Here we have shown that, despite the perceived limitations in the value of involving students in college governing, student governors can be supported to participate meaningfully in governing practices. Considering the importance of student voice in establishing and maintaining a learner-centred ideal in FE college governance, supporting student governors to participate as experts, rather than simply paying lip service to the mandate to include them, can help to promote this ethos.

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