Making the Most of the Student Voice in Further Education

Findings from an analysis of surveys and interviews conducted with college student representatives and college staff management teams in England

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Preface and acknowledgments

The 157 Group and Blackboard completed a survey to identify the active involvement of students in maintaining and improving the quality of their educational experience in further education colleges in England. This report presents the findings.

The aim of the project was to identify and promote the most cost-effective forms of learner engagement, in order to assist college management teams in being more responsive to the views and needs of students.

In undertaking this project, we would like to acknowledge the cooperation of officers of the National Union of Students (NUS). In particular, we would like to acknowledge the cooperation of the management teams and student representatives at the colleges who participated. Without their help, this report would not have been possible.

Blackboard commissioned Peter Davies & Associates to work on this research project. We are very grateful for the commitment and enthusiasm of Peter Davies and Nick Warren, whose expertise has been invaluable in conducting this research and in presenting the findings and recommendations.

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Executive summary

Scope of report

This report sets out findings from a survey of the nature and effectiveness of student voice mechanisms within further education colleges in England. The report was completed by 157 Group and Blackboard, Inc., (Blackboard), in consultation with the National Union of Students (NUS).

Central role of the student voice

The survey findings are encouraging. Colleges appear to be paying a good deal of attention to student involvement and significant progress has been made in recent years to strengthen the student voice within colleges. The engagement of active learners is one of the core values underpinning strategic planning and decision-making.

Overall responsibility for student involvement usually rests at second tier management level. Some colleges have restructured with an aim at strengthening student involvement. College management teams appear committed to this direction, despite a tighter financial regime within the public sector.

Student consultation and involvement

Arrangements for involving learners in the direction of their education have become more formalised in order to ensure that they can experience the same benefits across colleges. As a result, greater emphasis is being placed on closing the loop between student input and the decisions resulting from that input. However, the importance of healthy informal links is still recognised, especially between students and tutors/lecturers. With regard to students with learning disabilities or difficulties, management teams and student representatives agree that they are enabled to play the same role in student involvement as other students.

In terms of the types of student involvement, it is important to have a wide variety of mechanisms to obtain feedback and involve students in the decision-making process. However, face-to-face interviews are preferred over surveys, as they allow for an actual dialogue as well as the exploration of issues.

Opinions concerning questionnaire surveys are mixed, but most of those surveyed believe they have a role in providing robust overall data. However, the National Learner Satisfaction Survey (NLSS) was considered too general and insufficiently timely to be of great value to colleges. (It should also be noted that some form of national benchmarking device for learner opinion is supported in principle). Finally, colleges are increasingly using electronic means of communication like online surveys via intranets and virtual learning environments (VLEs). These new ways to communicate also include reaching students on the ubiquitous mobile devices they appear to prefer.

Areas of concern

A few student representatives have issues concerning the arrangements for learner engagement that exist in their own colleges. Some are also unaware of specific representational, consultation or feedback mechanisms that are supposedly in place and operating successfully. Another area of concern involves students who attend college part-time, are located at outreach centres, or are engaged in work-based learning. These students seem less actively involved when compared with traditional students.

Finally, college management teams note the challenges that face student involvement in further education. These challenges arise from short course lengths as well as the maturity and confidence levels of some newly enrolled students. They noted that all too often, seasoned student governors finish their course and leave college just as they are beginning to make an authoritative contribution.

Recommendations

The recommendations focus primarily on continuation in the current direction rather than any need for radical change. Whilst there are many pressures to reduce costs, the need for involvement of students should not be overlooked. Doing so poses real threats to quality of delivery.

Recommendations for College Management teams include the following:

▶ **Student representatives are issued clear specifications and guidance on how they can discharge their responsibilities effectively**

- Student representatives are checked to ensure they are fully aware of all mechanisms in place for student involvement, and regular reminders are provided to all students

- Student representatives receive regular reviews to ensure they are aware of and utilise training opportunities, as appropriate

- Student governors are provided continued support in order to make an effective contribution, and further attention is given to succession planning so that the momentum can be maintained over time

- Part-time students, those in outreach centres, and those engaged in work-based learning are actively engaged in student involvement activities

- Formal consultations specifically devoted to teaching and learning issues should be considered for students

- Further efforts are made to ensure that students are consulted sufficiently regarding programme/course design and delivery; Information Advice and Guidance; and finance and resource issues

- Continued and rigorous attention is given to closing the feedback loop, so that students are kept fully informed of decisions taken in response to their own views and recommendations

- The availability of on-line and interactive Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) continues to be extended

- Innovation is maintained with regard to identifying further user-friendly ways of enabling students to make an active contribution, both face-to-face and via the use of interactive electronic media

To help realise the desired improvements associated with the above recommendations, we further recommend that colleges exploit their investment in learning technologies beyond merely learning and teaching. VLEs and other collaborative technologies have significant potential to help improve support for the student voice, through for example, improved information flow, better targeting of information, and more effective consultation, collaboration and feedback mechanisms among students and staff.

Furthermore, recent innovations surrounding the use of such technologies on mobile devices mean that all students can be reached regardless of their location or length of time spent at the college. This overcomes challenges experienced by students who are part-time, or in outreach centres or work placements.

Recommendations for government, the Learning and Skills Improvement Service and the Skills Funding Agency, include:

- Schools continue to receive support for citizenship education, including the introduction of pupils to representational roles and responsibilities

- Student governors and other student representatives continue to receive support and guidance for training

- In the awarding of the contract for the *Framework for Excellence* Learner Views Survey 2010/11, and in the oversight of its operation thereafter, every effort is made to ensure maximum compatibility with colleges' own survey needs, commensurate with SFA's requirement to calculate the Learner Views PI (Performance Indicator)

1   Background and aims

1.1   Introduction

This document sets out findings from a survey of the nature and effectiveness of student voice mechanisms within further education colleges in England. The 157 Group and Blackboard[1] undertook this research as a joint project, in consultation with the National Union of Students (NUS).

The "student voice" is defined as comprising three inter-related elements:

- Formal systems of student representation

- Systems and procedures for obtaining student feedback and acting upon it

- Ways of actively involving students in the design and delivery of their own learning so as to maximise its effectiveness

This report outlines evidence and opinion gathered from college management teams and student representatives, draws conclusions about the developing patterns of student involvement, and makes recommendations intended to build upon effective practice.

1.2   Aims

The aims of this stage of the project were to:

▸ **Describe the main features of learner engagement as currently practised in further education colleges, including areas of commonality and difference**

▸ **Highlight the key developments in this area during the last five years, together with any plans currently in the pipeline**

▸ **Assess the effectiveness of arrangements for measuring expectations of learners**

▸ **Identify the aspects of learner engagement that are considered to have the greatest positive impact on learner satisfaction and success**

▸ **Make initial recommendations to college management teams based on our analysis of the evidence, with a view to promoting the most cost-effective forms of learner engagement**

1.3   Rationale

In 2005 the then Secretary of State for Education and Skills commissioned Sir Andrew Foster to undertake a review of further education (FE). The "voice of the learner" formed one of the main strands of his evaluation, and his report included a number of recommendations to strengthen mechanisms which permit learners to assist with the design and delivery of the education and training they received.

A number of developments then followed with the stated aim of ensuring that learner satisfaction became an integral part of provider self-assessment and development planning. Providers were asked to demonstrate that learners had been consulted on the key elements of their learning experience, and to provide associated details in relation to the Common Inspection Framework. Learner satisfaction was incorporated as one of the key performance indictors within *Framework for Excellence*, the government's performance assessment tool for FE. *A National Learner Panel* for FE was established in November 2006, followed more recently by a *14-19 Learner Panel*. Elsewhere, in Scotland, learner engagement was enshrined as one of the three underlying principles of the Scottish Funding Council's strategy for

quality enhancement, along with high quality learning and quality culture. This followed on from the successful establishment of the Students' Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs) initiative which supplies SFC-funded training for student governors and class representatives, in association with NUS Scotland.

The new coalition government has yet to announce specific policies related to learner engagement, although they have announced their intention to simplify the arrangements concerning *Framework for Excellence*. However, there can be no doubt that the government is strongly committed to the further extension of user influence and choice in respect of public services. We therefore believe that this research is particularly timely. We hope that its outcomes will equip college management teams to respond positively to future demands from government, and that FE demonstrates its ability to be more responsive to learners' own views and needs in an era of real-term cuts in funding.

2   Methodology

2.1   Nature of survey

The research project involved an on-line questionnaire survey of college management teams and lead student representatives, supplemented by follow-up interviews.

The survey was undertaken during July 2010. At the end of May, the Director of Partnerships and Employer Engagement at 157 Group sent a letter to all 28 member colleges requesting their participation in the survey. The member of the college management team with overall responsibility for the student voice was asked to coordinate a single response on behalf of the college, via the completion of an on-line questionnaire. At the same time, the 157 Group contacted the Student President (or equivalent) at each college with the same request, on behalf of the student body.

The two questionnaires involved were designed to cover broadly similar ground in four main sections, as follows:

▸ **Student representation: the arrangements for student governors; student councils; course/class reps; and other representational arrangements**

- ▸ **Student involvement: mechanisms for formal and informal consultation with students, including their input to their own learning**

- ▸ **Student communications and feedback: the means by which students are informed about the ways in which they can become involved and are encouraged to do so, plus the arrangements for surveying and otherwise canvassing their opinion**

- ▸ **Overall: the managerial structure related to the student voice, the relative cost-effectiveness – both of different approaches and overall, and key recent and planned developments**

2.2   Number of responses

College managers completed a total of 16 questionnaires – a response rate of 57%. Student representatives completed twelve questionnaires with a response rate of 39%[2]. A total of 19 colleges of the 157 Group made responses or just over two-thirds of the total number of colleges in the 157 Group (28 colleges in all).

At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked if they would be prepared to take part in a follow-up telephone interview designed to explore their answers in greater depth. In the case of both college managers and student representatives, all but two of the respondents agreed to do so. In all, and in line with the agreed target, eight interviews were conducted with college managers who had completed and/or coordinated the response on behalf of their own college. In one of these cases, two members of the college's management team participated in the interview. Unfortunately, only two equivalent interviews with student representatives were conducted. Both involved representatives from college management teams who took place in the questionnaires. One was also related to a college involved in the follow-up interviews that were conducted with college managers.

2.3   Presentation of results

Findings from the survey of college management teams are set out in Section 3 of the report, whilst those from the survey of student representatives are detailed in Section 4. Both sections follow the sequence of the questionnaires

under the four main sub-headings outlined in Section 2.1: student representation, student involvement, student communication and feedback, and overall. Section 5 of the report then sets out our conclusions and recommendations based upon the findings.

Within Sections 3 and 4 of the report, the responses to the questionnaire surveys are broken down by numbers of colleges/respondents, except where otherwise stated. We did not feel it appropriate to indicate exact percentages, in view of the relatively small numbers involved. Please note that in the case of some questions not all respondents provided answers. In other instances, where more than one category of response was permissible, the total number of responses sums to more than the numbers of college management teams (16) or student representatives (12) who completed questionnaires.

Copies of the college management and student representative questionnaires, annotated with a complete breakdown of the results, are available under separate cover, published alongside this report via the 157 Group and Blackboard websites.

3   Findings from survey of colleges

## 3.1   Student representation

Student governors

Students appear to be actively involved in the work of college corporations. Prior to 2007, when the Instrument and Articles of Government for Further Education Corporations was amended to increase the number of student governors on the boards of FE corporations from one to a minimum of two, five of the colleges already had two student governors in place.

In addition, student governors in all but one of the respondent colleges serve on one or more of their college corporation's committees or working groups. The committees on which student governors most commonly serve are those with the lead responsibility for Quality matters and/or for Standards (6 respondents in each case), followed by the

[2] Two were completed independently by student representatives attending the same college.

committee with lead responsibility for Curriculum matters (3). Other committees on which student governors currently serve include those responsible for Audit; Equality & Diversity; Health & Safety; and Sustainability (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Corporation committees/working groups involving student governors
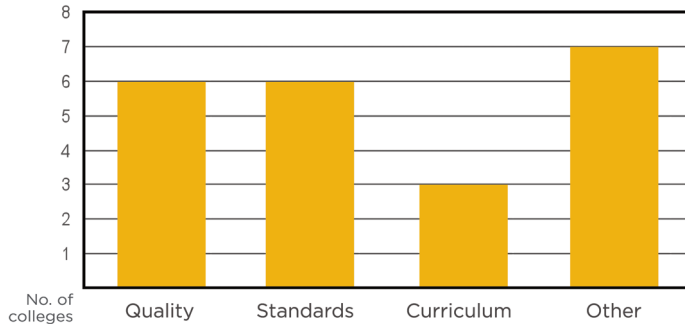
In all of the responding colleges, some form of training support or guidance is provided for student governors and/or for other student members of the Corporation's committees. The main external sources of specific governor training for student governors are the National Union of Students (NUS – used by 6 of the respondent colleges), and the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS – 3). In-house, the main forms or sources of specific training mentioned include induction (6); via the Clerk to the Corporation (4); and via the Principal and/or other members of the senior management team (SMT – 3). Four other respondents made mention of the involvement of student governors in the generic training events provided to support all governors (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Forms & sources of training for student governors
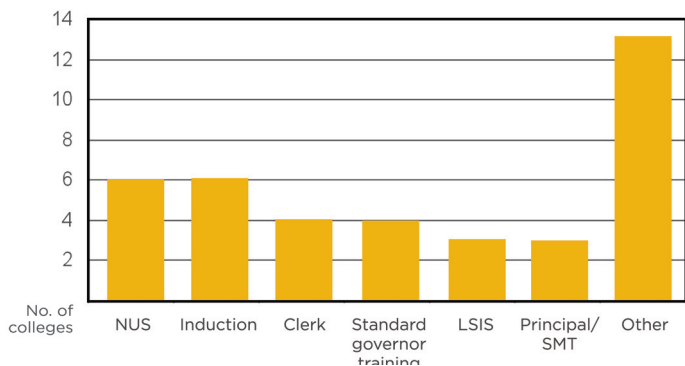
Despite the support provided, the majority of colleges we surveyed consider their student governors to have only middling effectiveness or below in terms of their contribution to the work of the corporation. Only six respondents rated their effectiveness above the mid-point on the scale (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Perceived effectiveness of student governors

Perceived effectiveness: 1 = very ineffective; 5 = very effective
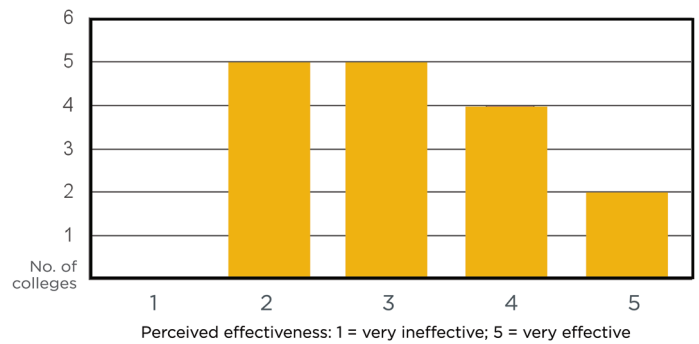
When those who took part in the follow-up interviews were questioned about the factors that helped ensure that students operate effectively as governors, they emphasised the following factors:

▶ **An initial briefing and selection process, designed to ensure that those offering themselves for the post of student governor are fully aware of the responsibilities and time commitments it will involve. This includes those considering standing for election as Student President**

▶ **A thorough induction process, typically including briefing from the Clerk to the Corporation, the Chair, the Principal, and other governors and members of the SMT**

▶ **Specific training, both at induction and thereafter, including that provided by the NUS and/or LSIS, in addition to the programme of development and training activities designed for all governors**

▶ **Specific briefing sessions on the agenda, in advance of each meeting of the Corporation, most typically undertaken by the Clerk to the Corporation**

▶ **Mentoring arrangements, typically involving the attachment to each student governor of one of the other members of the Corporation, in order to provide them with regular guidance and support**

These types of support are considered vital if student governors are to "hit the ground running" in their capability to make a confident and authoritative contribution at meetings of the Corporation and its committees. Even so, the typical and inevitable short length of service of most student governors means that they have relatively little time to learn on the job. This represents a major challenge, especially to students who are younger and less mature.
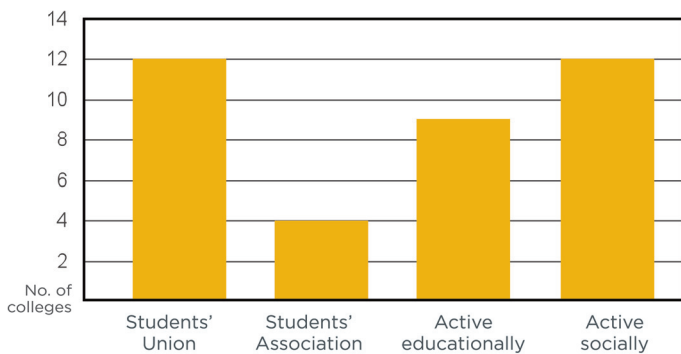
Overall, interviewees are satisfied with the external sources of support available to colleges for student governors. The training provided by NUS and LSIS is generally highly regarded, though it is stressed that it needs to be supplemented in-house to provide sufficiently tailored support to the circumstances of the individual college. A number have also made use of the national guidelines published in 2008[3].

Most interviewees report plans to strengthen the support for student governors in future, most usually by the introduction or reinforcement of specific elements of the arrangements outlined above. Suggestions made in the questionnaire survey to improve the effectiveness of student governors include de-jargonising committee papers, and investigating if student governors can serve for more than one year. The latter possibility is in turn connected to the viability of further financial support, including that for a sabbatical post.

Student representative bodies

Twelve of the colleges report that they have a NUS-affiliated Students' Union, with the remainder having a Students' Association. The large majority indicate that these organisations are active in organising social events, with just over half reporting that they are active in representing students on educational issues (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Student organisations

Support for these student organisations is most commonly provided in the form of training (12 colleges), followed by part-time administrative support (five), and other forms of financial support (five). Four of the colleges provide full-time administrative support, three a paid sabbatical for the Student President[4], and two fund other sabbatical posts (Figure 5). In one college, three part-time Student Involvement Officers have replaced a former single full-time second sabbatical officer post, and are seen as providing better value for money for the same funding. Other forms of support include that from Student Services, and via Guidance and Youth Work teams. One college has two full-time staff members who are employed as Student Union Officers, another employs a full-time Student Council Coordinator, and a third has a full-time Learner Involvement Officer post.

Figure 5: Support for student organisations
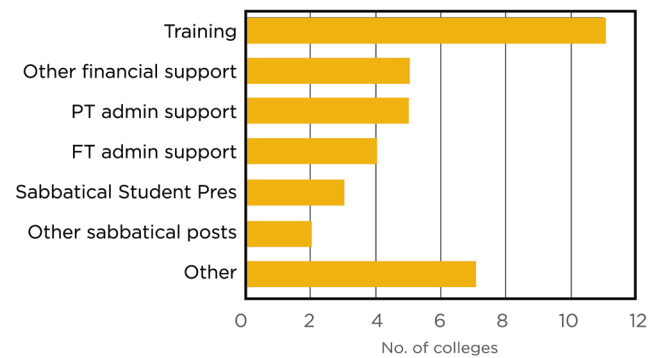
Other forms of student representation

The colleges that responded to our questionnaire survey reported that Course reps were the most common form of other student representation. These Course reps are in place at all but one of the colleges concerned. Class reps exist at eleven of the colleges, whilst some form of Student Parliament has been established in nine[5]. Students are also involved as members of course team reviews at a majority of the responding colleges (9), with an even larger number (11) including them in the membership of other self-evaluation groups (Figure 6). Other forms of representation mentioned include Centre reps, and membership of strategic planning working groups.

Very few respondents perceive any of these mechanisms as largely ineffective, although one (Course reps) received

[3] *Recruiting and supporting student governors in further education and sixth form colleges: a guide to effective practice.* CEL (2008), Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills.

[4] A further college reported having recently abolished a Student President sabbatical post for financial reasons, despite the fact that the college community deemed the program a success.

[5] These bodies are most commonly known as Learner Councils, Student Councils, Learner Forums or Student Forums.

above the mid-point ratings from a majority. Membership of self-evaluation groups and course team reviews are next best rated for effectiveness (Figure 7).

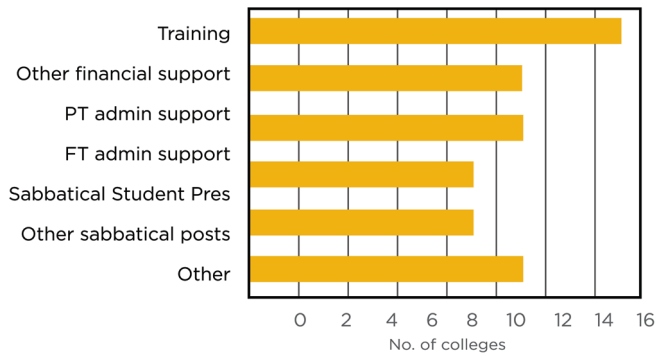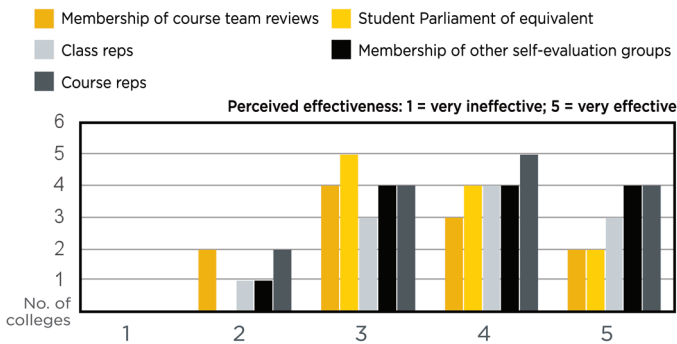## Figure 6: Other forms of student representation

Figure 7: Perceived effectiveness of other forms of student representation

Feedback from the interviews suggests a preference for active representation at the level of course or class, so specific issues can be dealt with when they arise. Nonetheless, there were also many comments in support of Student Forums as an extremely useful vehicle for student governors to use when regularly canvassing opinion for key issues to take forward. It is emphasised that, as with other members of the Corporation, student governors are not delegates. It is also regarded as extremely important that student governors seek to represent the entire student body whenever possible.

Recent innovations in student representation and future plans include:

▸ **The holding of Student Forum meetings at Centre and/or Department level, in order to increase the specific relevance of the agendas and, in particular, to**

encourage a greater focus on teaching and learning, as opposed to "hygiene" issues such as car parking and the like

▸ **Formal student involvement in lesson observation**

▸ **Work in hand with a university to develop an accredited training programme for student reps**

▸ **The employment of "Student Advocates", recruited from the Student Forum, who are paid a modest fee to represent the college at open days, and in external liaison activities**

▸ **Improving communication arrangements, especially where the reporting of actions taken in response to student feedback is concerned**

▸ **Awareness-raising with college staff to improve their understanding and use of student representational mechanisms, with a view to achieving greater cross-college consistency in practice**

▸ **Steps to improve the attendance at meetings of class and course reps, involving a review of their timing**

3.2 Student involvement

Formal consultation

The colleges we surveyed report at least some level of formal consultation with students across all main areas of college activity. Half note that a great deal of formal consultation takes place in respect of facilities and social activities. In the case of the former, there are a number of mentions of specific consultation arrangements in connection with new build projects. A quarter or fewer indicate little or no formal consultation on financial and resource issues (4 colleges), programme/course design and delivery (3), and/or information, advice and guidance (IAG – 2) (Figure 8).

Other areas on which students are reported as being formally consulted include:

▸ **Equality, diversity and faith issues**
▸ **Health and safety**
▸ **Policies and procedures**
▸ **Sustainability**
▸ **Transport**
▸ **Staff appointments**
▸ **The award of catering contracts**
▸ **Strategic planning**

Figure 8: Levels of formal consultation with students

Legend: Little or none | Some | A great deal

Categories (top to bottom):
- Financial & resource issues
- Social activities
- Facilities
- IAG
- Programme / course design and delivery

X-axis: No. of colleges (1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14)
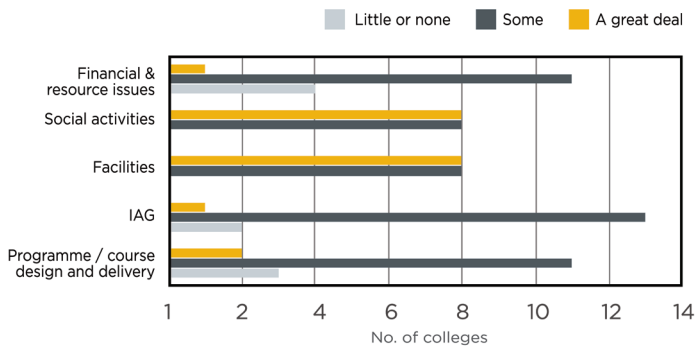
The interviews indicate a variety of ways to consulting students and in many cases, where processes have become more formal over time. Ad hoc mechanisms (such as students voting using the college intranet) may also be used to address topical issues, as in the case of one college's decision regarding designated smoking and smoke-free areas.

In some instances there is a concern that meetings involving students tend to pay insufficient attention to teaching and learning. As a result, in one college, focus groups are now held at the end of each year to deal specifically with these issues, and have so far proved very effective. At another college, there has been a move from campus-based student boards to curriculum-based boards for the same reason.

At the college where students are involved in procedures for lecturer recruitment, this year they were also involved in the interview process for the appointment of a new Clerk to the Corporation. Their inclusion is said to have worked very effectively, with the learners reaching the same conclusion as the governors who were involved. Ten learners were also amongst the membership of a panel that interviewed contractors tendering for the college's catering contract.

The questionnaire survey also had questions about the benefits to be gained from formal consultation with students. The response from one of the responding colleges is generally representative of opinion overall:
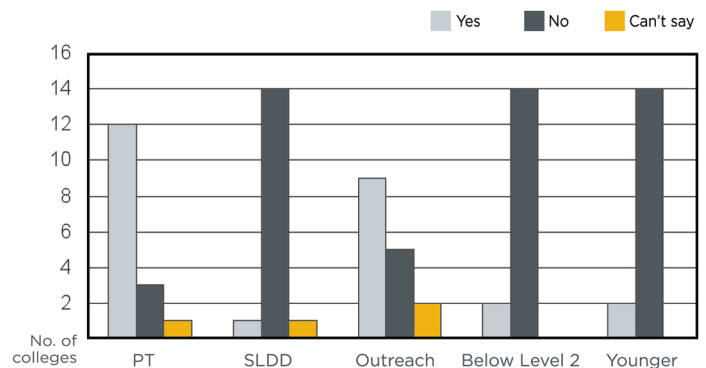
"It contributes to quality improvement in many ways, such as improving the college's understanding of learners' expectations and needs by involving them in decision-making – e.g. concerning capital builds IT developments, etc. Active participation by learners in decision-making also helps to improve their understanding of the constraints in which the college operates and why and how decisions are made – particularly those decisions affected by financial implications. It promotes a sense of ownership and belonging. It also inspires staff within self-assessment and improvement activities to listen to learners and act upon their views."

A clear majority of the colleges we surveyed did not find it difficult to obtain the active involvement of students. Otherwise, there were two mentions of general problems concerning student attendance at meetings, two instances where problems have been encountered regarding student inputs to equality and diversity issues, and one relating to difficulties concerning health and safety.

Participants were asked if some types of students make a less active contribution to formal consultation than others, and two groups stood out where a majority of those surveyed considered this to be the case – those attending part-time, and those based at outreach centres. It is reassuring, however, that very few colleges believe that there is a less active contribution from younger students; those with lower levels of attainment; or those with learning difficulties and disabilities (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Do some types of student make a less active contribution than others?

Legend: Yes | No | Can't say

X-axis categories: PT, SLDD, Outreach, Below Level 2, Younger
Y-axis: No. of colleges (2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16)

A number of respondents emphasise the significant efforts made in recent years to ensure that students with learning difficulties and disabilities, as well as other vulnerable groups, are fully engaged. A comment typical of many is:

"We have developed a strong focus on active participation of learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. They have organised conferences and other activities that focus on seeking and expressing views. LLDD learner reps participate in Student Council meetings supported by staff."

Steps taken to ensure the active participation of learners with disabilities or difficulties include the rigorous use of plain English in written communications, including surveys. Another step entails providing the students with one-to-one support in responding to surveys as well as taking part in other forms of consultation.

Other types of students noted as being difficult to involve as actively as others are:

▸ **Those engaged in work-based learning (5 colleges)**

▸ **Adult students attending part-time (3)**

▸ **Students studying towards higher education (HE) qualifications (3)**

▸ **14-16 year old school-link students (1)**

Respondents noted the following efforts used to gain greater involvement from these types of student:

▸ **The introduction of more flexibly timed consultation arrangements for part-time students**

▸ **The increased use of on-line communications and the college's VLE**

▸ **The involvement of community workers and teaching staff in particular initiatives to involve students at outreach centres**

▸ **Coordination with a community based organisation in order to consult with students who are refugees**

When asked how students' contributions to formal consultation might be made more effective overall, all of those interviewed indicated their intention to continue in already established directions. A common theme is to be more systematic and consistent in closing the feedback loop to inform students of how their input has influenced management decisions.

Involvement in own learning

Where students' involvement in planning and reviewing their own learning is concerned, in every college we surveyed all students (7 colleges) or most students (9) have ILPs against which their progress is monitored and reviewed regularly. Respondents identified other forms of involvement in students' own learning which include:

▸ **Regular tutorials**

▸ **Assessment, including self-assessment and peer assessment**

▸ **E-portfolios and other forms of user-friendly on-line portal**

▸ **Personal and professional development sessions**

▸ **Recognition of achievement events, including Leadership Academy, course awards, annual celebrations of achievement, and external competition entries**

There were a number of instances where interviewees report the recent or planned introduction of on-line ILPs. Students' feedback is said to indicate that ILPs are greatly valued, but that there is a demand for continuous on-line access to targets, including from home, which makes the system much more interactive. One interviewee noted the introduction of a more technical approach for IT students, making full use of the VLE, which is said to have proved highly successful and is about to be extended to the business studies programme area.

In another instance, college students were reported as being involved in an "Assessment for Learning" initiative, whereby peer and self-assessment training takes place with teachers aimed at better lesson-planning and a greater degree of student ownership.

A further interviewee reported problems in taking personalised learning as far as the college's management would like:

"Students are not used to this at school, and arrive at college without the confidence to engage in these issues. A great deal of support is therefore needed in order to rectify matters. But there is outstanding practice in certain areas of the college that we plan to disseminate more widely – especially via the "Active Citizenship" approach used in several programme

areas. We also support guidance on choice for 14-16 year olds, and we have extended projects at Levels 1, 2 & 3 using the Active Citizenship approach. These have proved very successful in widening thinking and in increasing confidence."

Links between students, staff and management

A majority (11) of the respondents consider the combination of formal and informal links between students, staff and college management to be fairly even at their college. The remainder indicate that arrangements are mainly formal (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Nature of links between students, staff and management

Interviewees were at pains to emphasise that they nevertheless regard informal links as extremely important, and believe that those in place generally work very effectively in their college. Almost invariably, though, systems have become more formalised over time. The main driver for this has been the wish to achieve greater rigour and consistency in ensuring that student concerns are properly addressed across the college. Equally, there is a desire to "close the feedback loop" so that students can see value in becoming actively involved. Amongst the comments made are:

"The current even combination has evolved over time in response to student feedback. Things are now more formal than they were, though. Student Voice meetings now have formal agendas and action minutes, and there is a laid down procedure for following up any points

that are raised. All Course Reps are given written feedback, which is also uploaded onto the college's VLE. The first agenda item in Student Voice meetings is to report on actions taken since the last meeting. In HE programmes, students are also involved in completing a self-evaluation document."
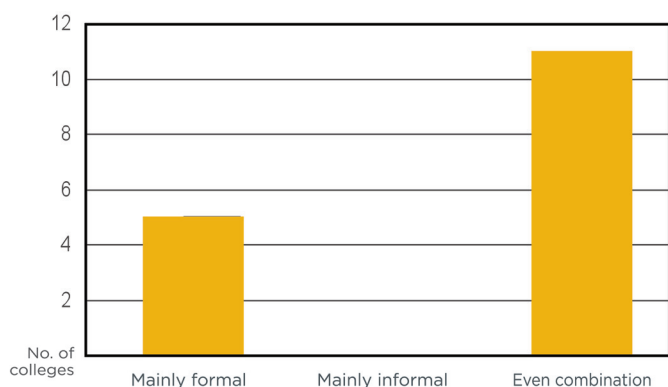
"Though the current even balance is a desirable state of affairs, more formality has been introduced into the system over time to improve its effectiveness. An example of this concerns the monthly meetings between the Students' Association Officers, Course Reps and the SMT. These were never very effective because it was impossible to find a single time that suited all reps. From this year, therefore, a much improved approach has been introduced whereby every month SMT members attend Student Council meetings. This provides for an effective combination of formal and informal approaches."

"The college has arrived at the current mainly formal arrangements because of a desire to make learner engagement more systematic and efficient. Nevertheless, the college has recently instituted a series of focus groups and "walk-throughs" in order to increase the degree of less formal face-to-face contact."

Additionally, respondents identified a number of ways in which students could be encouraged to make a more active contribution to maintaining and improving the quality of their experience at college, including:

▸ **Increased extra-curricular activities and opportunities for volunteering**

▸ **Training of students as "mystery shoppers"**

▸ **Enhanced arrangements for peer communication, including those related to sexual health, and anti-bullying strategies**

▸ **An initial joint "roadshow" for new students at all campuses involving the Student President and the Vice-Principal Quality**

▸ **The increased use of ad hoc action groups involving staff and students in tackling current issues**

▸ **Greater support to student reps to collect student opinion and feedback actions taken in response**

When asked what might provide the most assistance in ensuring students made a more active contribution, interviewees' recommendations included suggestions for a nationally organised and funded scheme for training student governors and other student reps, and greater emphasis on the student voice within schools. Specific comments included:

"The college's strongest and most effective links are with other colleges – not with the National Learner Panel or with central bodies. However, a sparqs-style[6] arrangement in England would be strongly supported, as would some form of national recognition of the students that the college encourages to enrol in the Leadership Academy – eg via annual national awards."

"Schools in our area in general provide little in the way of effective citizenship education, so that students usually arrive at the college lacking in confidence, and with a narrow world-view. However, the college is keen to encourage community involvement, via Enrichment Programmes, etc. "Service and contribution" is a key element in the college's strategy for its informal curriculum."

"It would be an enormous help if learner engagement was more formally established in schools, so that students would arrive at college better equipped to make an active contribution. We would also like to see a closer alignment of the curriculum requirements of the awarding bodies with the Active Citizenship approach".

3.3 Student communications and feedback

Informing students about how they can become involved

When asked to identify the methods most commonly used to encourage them to take an active role in their learning, every respondent identified an induction pack or equivalent. Other commonly employed methods for this purpose include other printed materials and the college intranet (14 colleges in each case) and face-to-face briefings. The latter

are most commonly delivered by tutors/lecturers (13) and Student Services (13), though members of the SMT are also involved in a majority of cases (9). E-mail communication is also widely used (10) (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Methods of communicating with students to encourage involvement
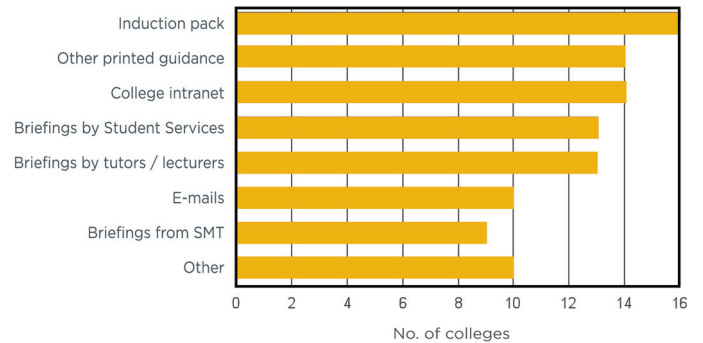
Respondents also mentioned other methods for contacting students for this purpose, including:

▸ **Electronic means designed to have appeal, including texting; Twitter/Facebook/other forms of social networking; virtual learning environments (VLEs); and plasma screen displays**

▸ **Student handbooks plus programme-level handbooks**

▸ **Student newsletters both online and printed**

▸ **Poster campaigns run throughout the year**

▸ **Briefings by the Clerk to the Corporation, members of the Enrichment Team, and youth workers**

Most respondents indicated that a combination of these methods is necessary if communication is to be effective across the whole student body. Most also feel that face-to-face contact is most effective, as it allows for their understanding to be checked and queries to be dealt with immediately. A majority also reported increasing use of electronic means, especially using formats that appeal to younger students. Interactive online facilities were noted as particularly valuable to students, especially where access is possible from both home and college and at a convenient time. Opinion concerning the value of electronic communication is more mixed, though, with one respondent regarding the college intranet as the least effective vehicle for communicating with students. Another stressed that:

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6 sparqs – Student Participation in Quality Scotland, a training scheme for student reps in universities and colleges funded by the Scottish Funding Council, and operated via the National Union of Students Scotland.

"There is no doubt that technology helps, but it is not effective if used in isolation."

Related comments made by those we interviewed included:

"Experience suggests that effective induction is the key factor here, but the college strives constantly to try out lots of different approaches to see which provide the best matches with the different needs of different types of learner."

"The induction process and the student handbook have been shown to be the key elements for FT students. A strengthening of electronic communications is seen as being the most hopeful way forward to communicating with and engaging more PT students."

"Plans are in hand to improve communications to students of actions taken as a result of their earlier feedback, using posters and the college's on-line portal. The latter is relatively new, but has proved highly successful, and there are plans to strengthen and extend its use in future.

"Over time the college has moved successfully to a "less deep but wider net" scope of learner involvement. This year for the first time a Learner Involvement Roadshow was held at each centre, and there are plans for future improvements as a result of this year's experience."

"Experience indicates that induction is the key process here – though a whole range of other measures are also relevant, including the tutorial system."

"The Student Handbook is key in this respect, and is being produced in on-line format from this year. Tutors also provide additional briefing during induction. From the outset, curriculum staff are expected to consult students regularly and ensure that their views are heard."
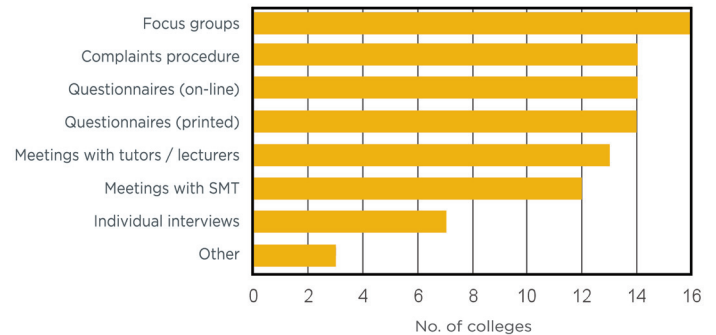
Canvassing student opinion

All of the colleges make regular use of focus groups to obtain feedback from students. Between them, the large majority also make regular use of complaints procedures; printed and on-line questionnaires (14 colleges in each case); meetings with tutors/lecturers (13); and meetings with members of the SMT (12). Only in the case of individual

interviews with students do fewer than half of the respondents (7) employ this as a methodology (Figure 12).

The other canvassing methods that were mentioned (by 3 of the respondent colleges) include feedback via Learner Forums; the use of a "Comments Wall"; and informal discussions between managers and groups of students.

Figure 12: Methods of obtaining student feedback

The most effective methods for canvassing student opinion are identified as a combination of questionnaire surveys and focus groups, plus other face-to-face methods. . Questionnaire surveys are seen as helpful in monitoring trends and providing large-scale, robust and reliable data while focus groups enable exploration of the issues in greater depth, so that the "why?" questions can be addressed as well as the "what?" and the "how?"

The feedback from those we interviewed confirms that experience suggests there are benefits in employing a combination of methods in order to appeal to and engage every type of student.

Related comments made by interviewees include:

"Mechanisms used are adapted to meet different needs – eg perception surveys are generally much less appropriate in the case of ESOL and of PT students. Printed questionnaire surveys generally only "scratch the surface". Internal surveys have been on-line for the past 3 years. They are much more accessible as a consequence, with a good response to the cross-college surveys, albeit involving a lot of hard work. Instant surveys are also used in respect of ad hoc issues, but with a more mixed response."

"The methods in place have been tried and tested over time. However, the quality of data analysis is now much improved, including breaking down cross-college survey results by School, gender, ethnicity, disability, etc."

"Questionnaires are useful but limited. Face-to-face mechanisms are generally more effective, though some students don't speak out enough. There are plans to increase the number of focus groups held by the Students' Union. However, the student facilitators of focus groups need more training and support. The appraisal measures for student reps could also be strengthened, as they are an invaluable means of feedback."

"One of the most effective mechanisms has proved to be the "Talk-back" complaints/compliments boxes that are dotted around each centre. The boxes are emptied every week, and each month a report is circulated listing the actions that have been taken in response to the comments received. This has proved a more effective medium than online channels. Surveys are almost all on-line now. In general they work well, providing good basic feedback that can be followed up by focus groups. From next year, open surgeries are to be instituted via the Students' Association."

"The on-line questionnaires have very good response rates, and the results and consequential actions are fed back via the student newsletter. The college's multi-faith chaplaincy has been extremely successful at mounting events attracting around 300 students, whereby comments and questions to external speakers are communicated via students' mobile 'phones and displayed on a screen. This works much better than expecting students to speak in such large public gatherings. A "Big Brother" chair format "My-Pod" has also proved successful in obtaining feedback from younger students in a manner to which they relate."

"Suggestion cards submitted via boxes, the college's VLE, and the confidential helpline have all proved effective. Four college Enrichment Officers also play a key role."

When asked about the structure of the survey mechanisms, most respondents (10) employ standard surveys that apply to all students. In a number of cases (8) these standard surveys are supplemented by specific surveys at department or course level. Two of the colleges surveyed only employ these kinds of specific survey. A majority of the responding colleges (9) have established a continuous on-line survey facility.

Where frequency is concerned, almost all of the colleges survey their students near to or at completion (14 colleges), with a large majority also doing so shortly after enrolment (13), and/or mid-course (12) (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Structure of survey systems
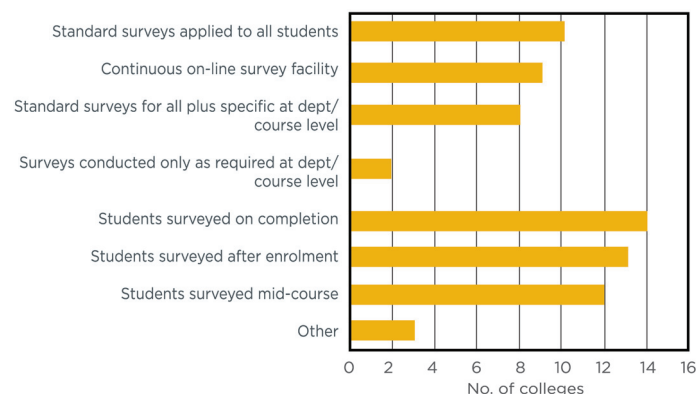
Other survey arrangements reported as being in place include a destination survey of all full-time students and additional ad hoc surveys.

In general, our interviewees confirmed their satisfaction with existing survey structures, which have usually been developed over a number of years. However, two particular issues stood out as exceptions – increasing problems regarding student "survey fatigue" and the external demands of the National Learner Satisfaction Survey (NLSS). In recent years, the NLSS has been conducted to fulfill the requirements of *Framework for Excellence* , and a number of interviewees regard it as being over-generic and not timely for college-level needs. Some of the specific comments made are as follows:

"Survey fatigue is a mounting problem – eg via the NLSS on top of the college's own surveys, the latter being seen as more helpful, since they are more specifically tailored, and are more timely in delivering their results."

"The induction survey has proved very useful in giving an early indication of any issues that need to be tackled. The end of course survey is likewise valuable in showing the distance that students have travelled and how their opinions have developed over time. Comparison between the two is therefore very illuminating. By contrast, the results of the NLSS are received too late to be of much use."

"The current systems are well established, and there are no plans to change them significantly, though survey overload is a constant worry. There is a need, however, to improve the evaluation of events and activities involving the Students' Union."

"The current survey timings have been in place for some time, though with some reductions to reduce survey overload. The fewer surveys now in place have better average response rates as a result."

"The current structure has been in place for some time. The arrangements required by the NLSS are regarded as being over general in their analysis and insufficiently timely in their delivery, as well as being distracting and "alienating" for learners."

Improvements made in response to student feedback

All the colleges report that their systems aim to identify student expectations and check the extent to which they are fulfilled. Four of the responding colleges believe they do so to at least a moderate extent, with the remainder recording ratings above the mid-point on the scale (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Extent of tracking student expectations/fulfilment

Extent of tracking student expectations / fulfilment:
1 = very little; 5 = very great
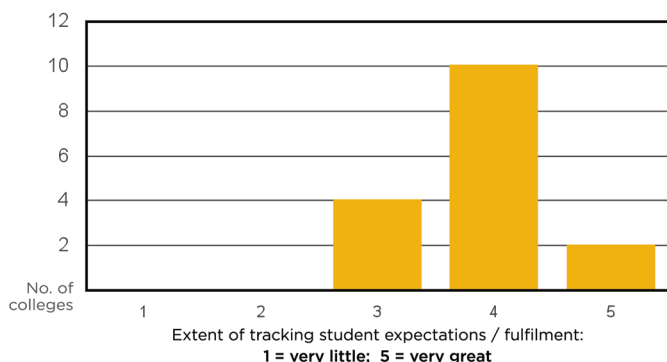
Interviewees were asked for instances where remedial action was required due to gaps between student expectations and their fulfilment, and their responses included:

"The induction process has been amended to spend less time on general issues, and move more quickly to course-specific matters. Also, HE students' feedback on the timing & delivery of work experience has led to significant changes in the arrangements for placements."

"Gaps identified have led to improvements to the clarity of the wording of student IAG documentation, and to computing facilities."

"Misunderstandings regarding EMA payments have been corrected."

"The experience of opening new halls of residence revealed that insufficient guidance had been given to the students located there as to what they should expect. A programme is now in place to rectify this in future years."

"Four years ago, the college's induction system was completely re-designed in response to adverse student feedback in relation to their expectations."

"Some learners arrive from schools which have excellent computing facilities and therefore have high expectations. In response the college has recently upgraded its software, and re-allocated equipment to ensure more appropriate support."

'A' level students were found to expect and prefer a separate 6th Form Centre, and this has now been introduced with the help of a grant from the local authority. A student common room has also been introduced in response to feedback, as have open access to computer facilities."

When asked to identify the main student feedback improvements over the past five years , the most common instances relate to course organisation and delivery (13 instances), and learning resources (11) – especially IT facilities. However, a number of these examples were quoted by the same respondents and, taken overall, there are even more instances of improvements in areas less directly related to teaching and learning, including general facilities (9 instances); catering (8); buildings – including the design

of new builds (5); and the costs and prices associated with attendance at college (4). Three instances each of improvements in arrangements for student involvement, and in college policies, were also quoted. Other examples include changes to student involvement in the recruitment of staff; sustainability; health and safety; equality and diversity; and opening hours (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Improvements made in response to student feedback
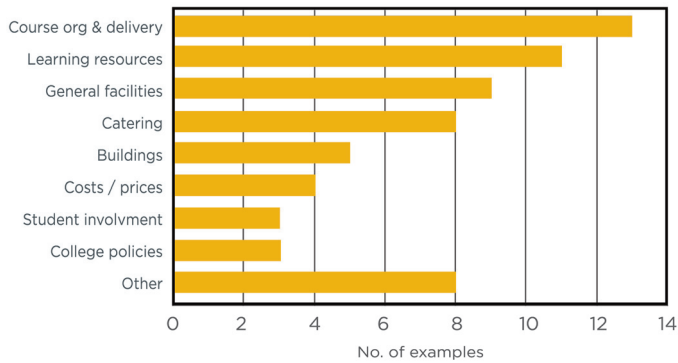
According to the respondents, colleges have become more adept at responding effectively to student feedback and several identified specific examples:

"Recent examples include the provision of an HE common room; student input into the design of the college's new build; student facilities in the new Construction centre; revisions to pre-course information & guidance; and the provision of more information on progression routes to employment, supported by relevant LMI."

"Recent improvements have included to the timing of 'bus services, and to safety & security measures, including e-safety and the prevention of cyber-bullying."

"In the past there had been relatively little cross-college communication. In recent times this defect has been addressed by the introduction of the successful student newsletter. Also, previous restrictions on sporting activities that applied in some centres have now been lifted. An FE Sports Coordinator post is now in place. An end of year Olympiad is being planned. Money management advice is also being introduced next year, in response to student feedback."

"Many examples relating to "hygiene" factors such as car parking, the college shop, housekeeping, etc. The college's smoking policy and its implementation emerged from annual discussions between students and staff, initiated by the students. Timetabling changes have also been made in response to student feedback."

"Significant improvements in the college's re-cycling facilities, involving changes in the waste management contractors; lifting of the wholesale ban on students' own food and soft drinks within the college's new build."

"The public services curriculum area has been extensively reformed in response to poor student feedback, involving increased use of FT staff and improvements in delivery. As a result, the retention rate this year is 100%, with superb feedback."

"Improvements in the internal configuration of the college's 6th Form Centre, and in catering; the introduction of the online ILPs; amendments to the college's policy on attendance and punctuality".

3.4   Learner engagement overall

Management structure

In the majority of cases, survey respondents reported that overall responsibility for encouraging an effective student voice within the college rests at the Vice/Deputy Principal level. In some cases there are specific Directors of Learner Engagement or Directors of Student Support Services who report to the VP Curriculum & Quality. In one instance, overall responsibility is charged to a Director of Communications and Marketing, and in another to a Student Union Coordinator.

Those we interviewed are generally satisfied with the current structures and regard them as effective. Comments include:

"The current system has been in place for some time and is seen to be effective. The Head of Student Support Services has overall responsibility for student support and the student voice, and all Heads of Department are expected to involve students in programme review. The

Academic Board structure has been retained, but now includes student representation."

"The fact that learner engagement is led by a member of the Executive Team is important in giving it a suitably high profile."

"Though the current system generally works well, improvements could be made. Teaching and learning is rightly the college's key priority, but the student voice needs to be more fully integrated within it – and with employability, and with citizenship. The Student Union has capacity issues that limit the amount of mentoring and support that it can deliver to students."

"The current structure works well even though it is only short-lived. Feedback suggests its effectiveness is linked to the more direct links that now exist with Quality Improvement."

"A large re-structuring exercise followed on from a new strategic model, which placed responsibility for excellence in learner entitlement under an Assistant Principal-level post.

"The student voice has always been a VP level responsibility at the college. Two Directors report to the VP – one dealing with Learner Support, and the other with Quality."

Compared with opinions of student voice mechanisms five years ago, survey respondents now overwhelmingly agree that there has been considerable improvement in college mechanisms for securing an effective student voice. All but two agreed that this is the case, and none saw little or no improvement over this period (Figure 16)

Figure 16: Improvement in student voice mechanisms over past 5 years
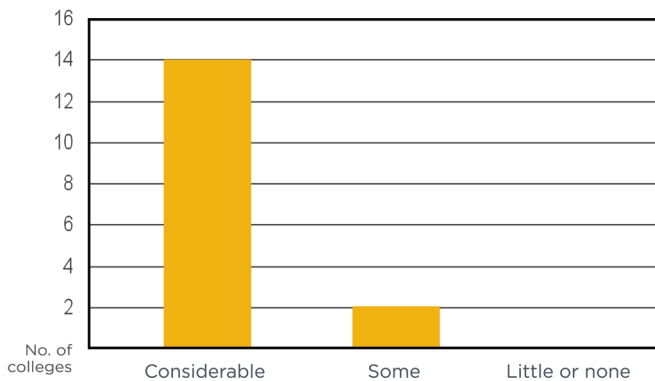
Respondents quoted a wide variety of changes that have been introduced in student voice mechanisms over the past five years. Also noted were changes to structure, policies and arrangements for student representation and involvement in curriculum review processes. Specific instances quoted include:

"The development of a formal Learner Involvement Strategy, plus explicit inclusion of Learner Voice in course reviews and self-assessment."

"In the last two years the effort has been considerable and the progress steady. Many strategies have been deployed – more regular and timely meetings between learner reps and senior managers ; closer working with NUS regionally; and small scale action research involving learners in observations of learning."

"Following a merger, more robust and structured systems; online surveys analysed at many levels; learners on interview and tender panels."

"A more structured approach, with responsibility to curriculum teams to use survey data to plan improvements."

"The Matrix standard has given us a framework for seeking and using effective feedback."

Overall effectiveness

Over two-thirds of survey respondents regard their college as effective or very effective in securing a meaningful student voice, though three respondents rate current effectiveness in this respect as only middling, and one recorded a rating below the mid-point on the scale (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Perceived effectiveness in securing an active student voice

Perceived effectiveness: 1 = very ineffective; 5 = very effective
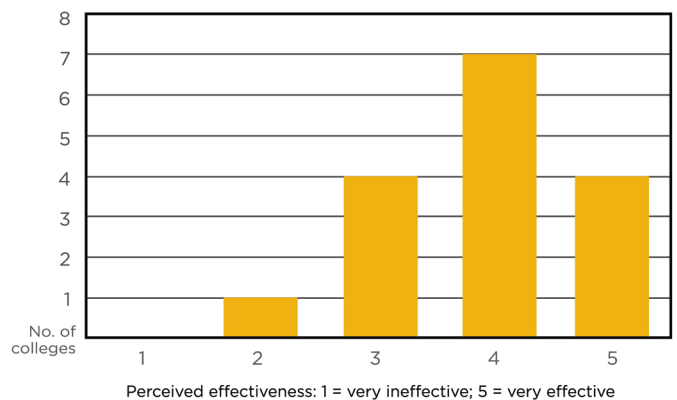
When asked to identify the most and least cost-effective means of ensuring an active student voice in the college, respondents gave a wide range of responses. Face-to-face mechanisms are most prominent within the list of most cost-effective means – including focus groups (mentioned by 3 respondents), informal contacts between students and tutors/lecturers (3), and formal meetings with students (2). Between them, three respondents mentioned the work of the Students Union or Student Council, whilst another listed the creation of Learner Engagement Officer Post. However, questionnaire surveys – typically online – also feature in the most cost-effective list (4 respondents), as do e-portal mechanisms (2).

When asked about the least cost-effective means of ensuring an active student voice, national surveys, and the NLSSS in particular, were the most commonly mentioned mechanisms (4 respondents). Further insufficiently cost-effective means listed by respondents include other forms of questionnaire survey (2); individual interviews with students (2); and printed means of communication (2).

Comments include:

"Though surveys are least effective, they are useful in giving an overall indication of the key issues. However, face-to-face contact is invariably more effective in developing a real understanding of the issues and getting to grips with them."

"It is important to have a balance between the quantitative data provided by questionnaire surveys, and the qualitative data gained from focus groups. There are constant dangers of survey overload, though. The college is now concentrating on "closing the loop" by constantly feeding back to students along the lines of "You wanted…", as a result "We've done…"."

"External help is critical, especially where funding is concerned. Volunteering is one way forward that could be given more attention, but here too greater cross-college coordination is needed for which resources do not exist at present."

"Investment in tailored support at college level provides the best value for money. On-line surveys are more effective that the former printed versions."

"The college obtains excellent value for money from its Student Advocates. Conversely, we see little benefit from the external national surveys."

"As a nationally standardised survey, it would be useful if the NLSS could also be capable of providing sufficiently tailored data. The LSIS learner networks are very effective, however."

"Face-to-face methods have generally been found to be the most cost-effective, though the college is currently reviewing the arrangements for the use of on-line questionnaires."

"The college is reviewing its current mechanisms, as surveys tend to provide rather over-generic results – though some form of them will still be maintained. At local level face-to-face feedback is usually much richer. We see little value from the NLSS, as it is both over generic and insufficiently timely. Neither does the college have an input to the design of the questions."

When asked if they would recommend any further changes to improve the cost effectiveness of the student voice in FE, the most common recommendation (from 4 respondents) concerned the NLSS requirements as they have operated under the *Framework for Excellence*. They wish to see a greater alignment of the national survey with local needs. This would ensure data is sufficiently tailored and timely for meaningful use at college level and can be delivered in the absence of parallel college surveys. If this can be delivered in a way that is compatible with robust national benchmarking, then everyone would gain.

Other suggestions for improvement include greater financial assistance to fund student sabbatical posts, and greater engagement of student volunteers in undertaking work for the Student Union.

Final remarks recorded by respondents include:

"Colleges need to ensure they manage the inclusiveness of the process, otherwise the most able/affluent students (at least in terms of cultural capital) tend to dominate the agenda."

"Continued development and involvement of the learner voice is important for us (and in all institutions). To be

effective, a large resource is required in terms of administration and staff time, which is important to be able to maintain in times of financial pressure."

"Needs to be a constant factor in improving quality and we need to find more robust ways of involving those not doing full-time courses."

"We are passionate about this but we must keep working hard to improve as it is not easy!"

4 FINDINGS FROM SURVEY OF STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES

4.1 Student representation

Post held

Of the 12 student representatives who responded to the questionnaire survey, four are Student Presidents, one is a Student Council Officer, one a Student Communications Office, and two are Course reps. Six serve on the governing body. In the case of the two students with whom we were able to conduct follow-up interviews, one is a Student Governor, and the other a member of his college's Student Council.

Two-thirds were chosen for their post by contested election, one via an uncontested election, one by the Student Council, and one at the request of the college's management. One of our two student interviewees had been nominated to her post rather than elected. She indicated that she would prefer to have taken part in an election as this would have created greater visibility for her role.

At the time of the survey, two of the student representative respondents had been in post for around 2 years, six for around one year, with the remainder having only recently taken up their responsibilities. Both of our student interviewees have been in post for one year.

Support for post

Just over half of the student respondents receive some form of support for their post. Most commonly this takes the form of related training (7 respondents). Three respondents are beneficiaries of a paid sabbatical, whilst four receive

some other form of financial support, including support from the Student Union; expenses; and specific payments for undertaking mentoring activities. None indicated that they receive full-time or part-time administrative support (Figure 18).

Of those who have received some form of related training, all except one have been involved in at least one event, or activity, provided via the NUS. Four have received training provided by their college, and two via LSIS. Three of the student respondents refer specifically to having received governor training, and a wide variety of other areas are also noted.

In the case of our two student interviewees, one is dissatisfied with the absence of financial and administrative support provided to her post, whilst the other also mentioned the lack of administrative support, though in his case expenses are reimbursed. Neither has received any formal training as yet, though both have had briefings via Student Services. They are likewise critical of this state of affairs.

Figure 18: Support provided to student representatives
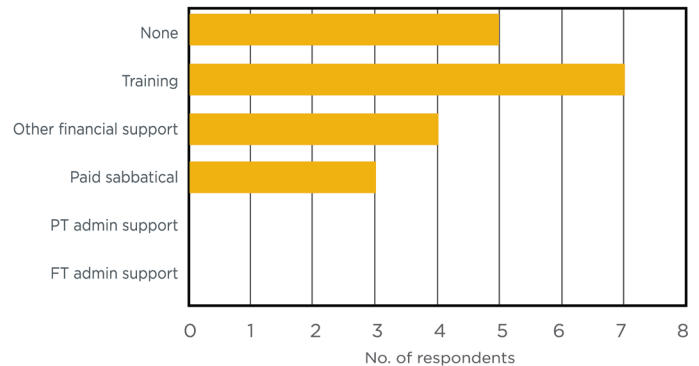
Student governors

All but one of the student respondents to our questionnaire survey who sit on the governing body of their college also serve as members of one or more of the Corporation's committees or working parties – most commonly those concerned with curriculum and/or quality matters.

Most of the interviewees who are governors consider that they are very effective in contributing to the work of their college's corporation. Only one claims to have middling effectiveness and none feel that they have been ineffective (Figure 19).
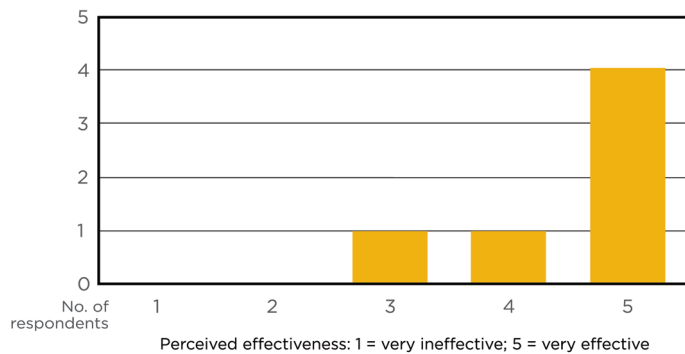
In this respect, the student governor we interviewed comments:

"I try to make sure that the other students feel free to approach me and talk to me about any issues – and I now feel confident about raising them at meetings. They are mainly non-academic matters such as the perennial canteen-related stuff. When I've raised matters I've been generally satisfied with the college's response."

When asked what might improve their effectiveness as student governors, seven made recommendations, as follows:

▸ **Further training (2 respondents)**

▸ **Clearer explanation of the college budget and other technical detail (2)**

▸ **Improved communications**

▸ **More active role in committees**

▸ **Greater flexibility in times of meetings**

Figure 19: Perceived effectiveness in contributing to work of Corporation

Perceived effectiveness: 1 = very ineffective; 5 = very effective

With regard to actions taken to try to improve effectiveness, the student governor we interviewed notes:

"I have met my successor and have briefed her on what the role involves and advised her how to "adapt". However, I do feel strongly that the college could do far more to induct student governors and to give them a higher profile."

Other forms of student representation

All but one of the student representatives attend a college with a Students' Union, with the remaining individual indicating that a Students' Union is in the process of being established. However, compared with the responses to the parallel college survey – as outlined in Section 3.1 above – in this case a far smaller proportion of respondents consider their Students' Union to be active, either educationally or socially (Figure 20).

One of the student representatives indicated his desire to become a student governor to ensure the NUS-affiliated Student Union becomes more closely involved in student affairs and with representation in general.

The majority of the student respondents to our questionnaire survey attend colleges which have Class reps (9 respondents) and/or Course reps (7). Only a minority are at colleges which have a Student Parliament or equivalent (4); where there is student membership of course team reviews (4); and/or membership of other self-evaluation groups (2). Other forms of representation quoted include Centre reps, and Student Ambassadors (Figure 21).

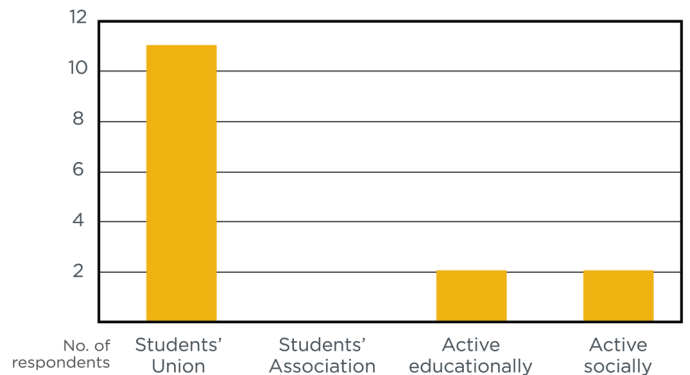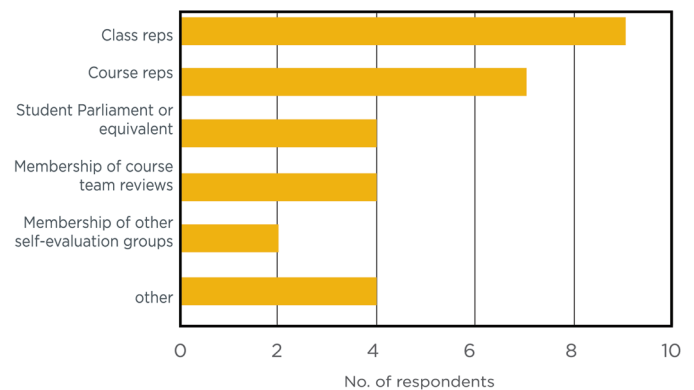## Figure 20: Student organisations at colleges attended

Figure 21: Other forms of student representation at colleges attended

No. of respondents

Given the types of student representation experienced, it is unsurprising that it is only in the case of class reps and course reps that respondents felt able to record an effectiveness rating. As with the college survey detailed in the previous section of the report, course reps are regarded as the most effective mechanism. Opinions about class reps are more divided, with a third of those scoring this form of student representation at the mid-point on the scale or below (Figure 22).

Figure 22: Perceived effectiveness of other forms of student representation
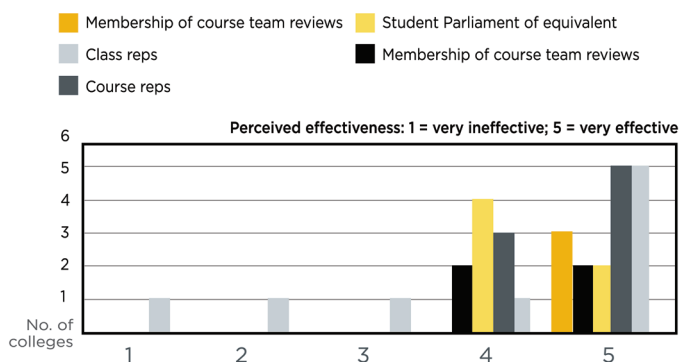
When asked how the effectiveness of these forms of representation might be improved, respondents made the following recommendations:

- ▶ **More consistent meetings with staff (4 respondents)**
- ▶ **Greater efforts at awareness raising amongst the student body to improve participation (4)**
- ▶ **Additional training for student reps**
- ▶ **Accreditation opportunities for student reps**
- ▶ **Additional support from lecturers**
- ▶ **Improved internal communications**

Both of our student interviewees are uncertain or sceptical about the current role of class reps, but are keen to see things improved:

"I'm not exactly sure what the class reps do, but the Student Council (which meets weekly) is a good arrangement to allow students to have a say. It would be helpful, though, if there was more of a staff presence at the Student Council rather than it having to be used as a sort of relay device. Having said this, I think the class reps/Student Council/Student Governor arrangement works as well as can be expected."

"Internal communications are a major barrier to effective student representation at the college. Class reps are treated differently across campuses and have their roles defined somewhat differently. I feel they're not generally very effective, partly because not all are sure what they are really supposed to be doing. A job description would be a good start to improving matters."

4.2 Student involvement

Formal consultation

As with the college managers, most of the surveyed student representatives perceive that they receive at least some level of formal consultation across all main areas of college activity. This is especially the case in respect to IAG. A minority feel that little or no formal consultation takes place with regard to financial and resource issues (3 respondents); social activities (2); facilities (2); and/or programme/course design & delivery (2) (Figure 23).

Figure 23: Perceived levels of formal consultation
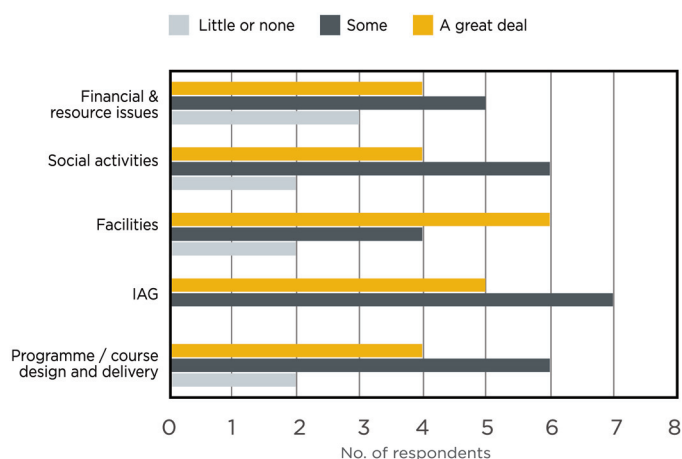
The large majority of the student respondents identify benefits arising from formal consultation. Comments include:

"The information which is received is much clearer and understandable because of the consultation. Information which is received from students can be relayed back to the Student Affairs Committee & Governors Meetings which is then fed into building a stronger Learner Voice within the college."

"It helps to relay information from the top of the ladder downwards - this also works to the opposite effect as I can feed back student concerns to the Principalship as well."

Most of the student respondents felt they have some influence over issues that are important to them. The five respondents who felt they had difficulty influencing change raised issues concerning:

▶ **Changes to the curriculum (2 respondents)**

▶ **Security restrictions on access to learning resources**

▶ **Inflexible meeting times, which have in turn led to the respondent's lack of input to decisions on social events and competitions**

▶ **Inconsistencies in communication strategies across the college**

One student representative notes that students at different levels display varying degrees of confidence about actively engaging in formal consultation. She feels that all students should be encouraged to participate more, but has no easy answers on how this can be best achieved:

"There are inconsistencies of practice from campus to campus. Some staff encourage students to have more say about their courses, but I've no sense of this being systematic – in fact it's all a bit of a dog's breakfast. We know too little about how management works, and it's therefore hard to find out how to have our say. An e-mail system for all class reps would be a huge help."

A significant minority of respondents feel unable to give an opinion on whether some students make a less active contribution to formal consultation than others. Of the remainder, the large majority (6 respondents) believe that this is not the case with respect to students with learning difficulties and disabilities – in line with the pattern in our equivalent survey of college managers. Otherwise opinion is relatively evenly divided (Figure 24).

Two respondents listed adults and two others identified those on ESOL courses with respect to other groups of learners who could be encouraged to more actively contribute their views.

Figure 24: Do some types of student make a less active contribution than others?
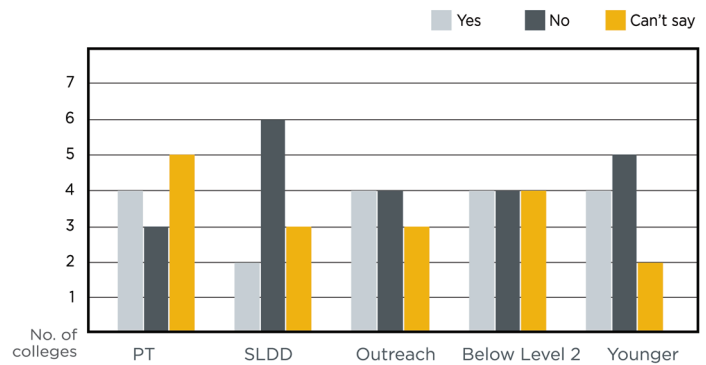
Every respondent made note of active steps that they are taking to try to ensure that all types of students are fully represented, most often involving a wider range of consultation mechanisms and improved communications. Comments made include:

"I am trying to set up easy-to-access suggestion points such as Facebook groups and coffee meetings at all sites to try and get anyone to join in."

"My plan as of now is organise events for different classes of students around college to try and find out about their views."

"I've tried to make all events inclusive and worked with the disabilities department in trying to set up a forum. In addition to this I've helped promote various campaigns such as International Women's Day and LGBT month."

"Will be holding talks with all the new courses at the start of the next academic year to explain the roles of the Student Council and get more people interested in joining / contributing."

Involvement in own learning

Only a minority of respondents believe that ILPs are employed in their own college, though others refer to the review of progress via tutorials. This contrasts with the universal practice reported in our equivalent survey of college management teams. On this issue, our two student interviewees commented as follows:

"I get the impression that involvement in this area is patchy – but my own experience is that staff-student lines of communication are open and effective, especially with personal tutors and subject tutors."

"I feel that there are inconsistent procedures across courses and campuses. A central system needs to be established and rigorously enforced."

Links between students, staff and management

The large majority of respondents (9) consider their own college has a fairly even combination of formal and informal links between students, staff and college management. Only one respondent feels that links are mainly informal (Figure 25). This pattern of responses is broadly in line with that found in our equivalent survey of college managements.

Figure 25: Nature of links between students, staff and management
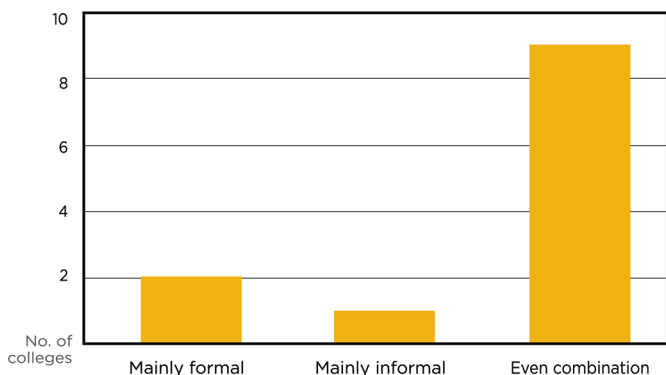
One student is satisfied with the current balance in her own college while the other would like to see greater consistency within the mainly formal links that exist.

All but two of the respondents to the questionnaire survey identified ways in which students could be encouraged to make a more active contribution to maintaining and improving the quality of their experience at college. The most common factors within their recommendations concern improved communications and opportunities for consultation, and greater involvement in decision-making. Two respondents made a plea for the introduction of incentives to students to get more actively involved. Two other specific comments worthy of note are:

"Students could be encouraged to speak with myself or any other rep about course issues if they don't feel like approaching tutors for any reason – to highlight the fact that the Student Council reps can be approached on any college matter, via the VLE or in person."

"At a college with so many campuses, communication of information to all students is difficult to achieve, but is necessary to encourage participation and a sense of being valued. Such improvements would mean that students would be aware of issues that affect them all, and of events and activities that may be of interest at other campuses."

4.3   Student communications and feedback

Ways of informing students about how they can get involved

Almost all of the student respondents (11) mention an induction pack or equivalent, as well as the college intranet, as a way to encourage students to take an active role in communicating. Briefings from the SMT are the only mechanisms that apply to fewer than half of the respondents (5) (Figure 26). This pattern of response is broadly similar to that found in our equivalent survey of college managers.

Other means identified are briefings/meetings by student reps (2 respondents) and posters.

Figure 26: Methods of communicating with students to encourage involvement
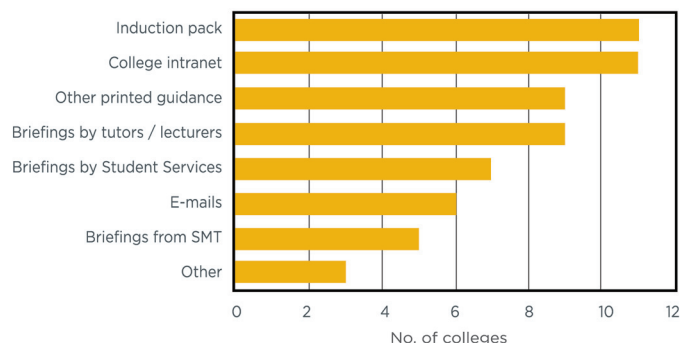
When asked which of these methods is most effective, one respondent indicated that all are important, whilst two feel none work well at present. Otherwise, face-to-face methods

are favoured – in line with the findings from our survey of college management teams. Here, briefings from either Student Services (3 respondents) of from tutors/lecturers (3) are seen as most effective, though one respondent regards peer communication via student reps as having the greatest impact. Three respondents identified the college intranet as the most effective communication mechanism for this purpose.

On this issue, one of the student interviewees also commented:

"The college needs to encourage staff/student communication and facilitate communication between student reps and campuses. The FE/HE divide also needs to be addressed. What we need is "convenient consultation". Very often feedback is requested at short notice and on the spot. It would be helpful to be given time to think about responses to make the exercise more useful."

Canvassing student opinion

Two-thirds of the respondents to our student survey see questionnaires – either online or printed – as being amongst the most regular means of canvassing student opinion in their own college. A majority (7 respondents) also note meetings with tutors/lecturers as being used regularly for this purpose. Only half make note of focus groups in this respect, and only a quarter list complaints procedures (Figure 27). This is in marked contrast to our survey of college managements, where these mechanisms are the ones most commonly identified.

Figure 27: Methods of obtaining student feedback
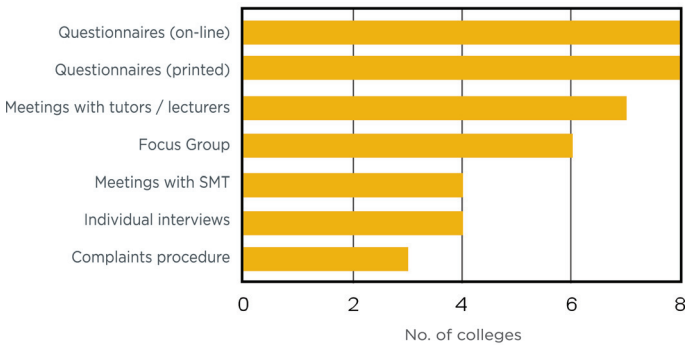
When asked about the most effective means of canvassing student opinion, two respondents feel that all of these mechanisms have a place. Amongst the remainder, face-to-face methods are most favoured – in the form of focus groups (4 respondents); meetings with tutors/lecturers (2), and individual interviews. However, four other respondents indicate a preference for questionnaires.

Specific comments made include:

"On-line questionnaire, because you can only log in using you student id and password – as a result students are more confident to give their opinion."

"Questionnaire – printed, handed over and later collected. That way, everyone has to hand it in and so will make sure to complete it."

"Meetings with tutors are effective in gaining good one-to-one feedback – also they allow the student to highlight any other issues regarding their personal achievement, or views about the course."

"Focus groups – because students can say what is on their mind and show their main concerns about an issue."

Improvements made in response to student feedback

Two-thirds of the student representatives we surveyed believe their colleges to be effective or very effective at identifying students' expectations and checking the extent to which those expectations are fulfilled. Only two recorded effectiveness ratings in this respect that are below the mid-point on the scale (Figure 28).

Figure 28: Perceived effectiveness in tracking of student expectations/fulfilment

Perceived effectiveness: 1 = very ineffective; 5 = very effective
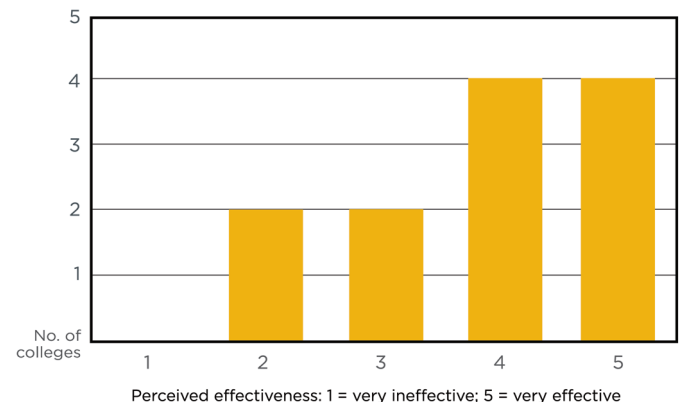
Nine respondents identified a wide range of changes made during their own time at college, as a result of student feedback. The most commonly cited area of improvement is in course organisation and delivery (7 respondents). Improvements to learning resources are also noted (3). We should note, though, that a number of these changes are recorded by the same respondents. Taken overall, there are more examples quoted of improvements to areas that are less directly connected with teaching and learning. These include those to general facilities (3 instances); buildings/environment (3); arrangements for student involvement (2); financial support (2); and catering (1). The other instances quoted involve improvements to safety and security at the college; and changes in college opening hours (Figure 29). This pattern of response is broadly in line with that found in our parallel survey of college management teams.

Figure 29: Improvements made in response to student feedback

No. of examples
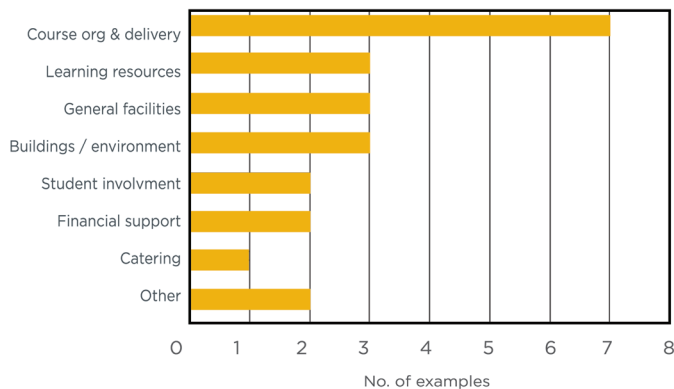
4.4 LEARNER ENGAGEMENT OVERALL

Main points of contact

When survey respondents were asked which member or members of the college they have the most contact in terms of representing the views of their fellow students, they cited the Student Services Manager (7 respondents), and Tutors (6) most often. A significant minority also make mention of the Principal (4); and/or the Chair of the Corporation (3). No respondent identified the Quality Manager amongst their main contacts. Amongst the other points of contact

that were listed are the Student Liaison Officer (2); and the Director of Communications & Marketing (Figure 30).

One of our student interviewees is dissatisfied with the current level of contact with college management and staff, but the other interviewee is very happy with the degree of direct access that she has to the Principal and the Head of Student Services.

Overall effectiveness

A majority of the student representatives who we surveyed rate their own college as effective (3 respondents) or very effective (4) at securing a meaningful student voice. On balance here, perceptions are somewhat less positive than those of the college management teams we surveyed, with three respondents feeling that their college has only middling effectiveness in this respect, with two finding it very ineffective (Figure 31).

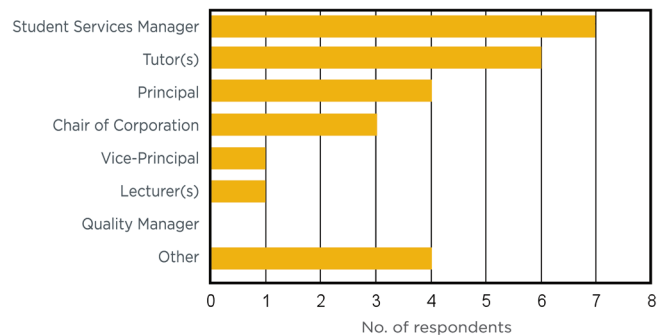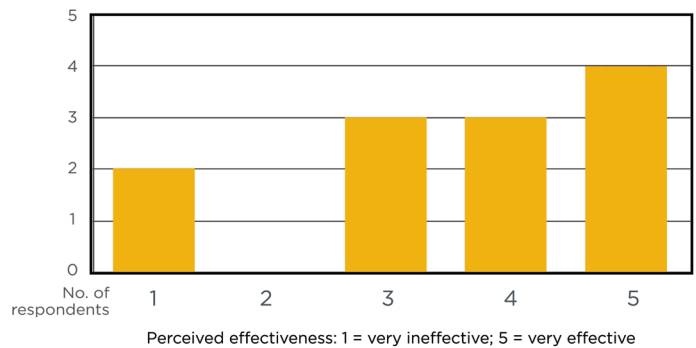## Figure 30: Main contacts when representing fellow students

No. of respondents

Figure 31: Perceived effectiveness in securing an active student voice

Perceived effectiveness: 1 = very ineffective; 5 = very effective

Respondents (5) most commonly mentioned the efforts of student reps and the Student Union as having the greatest effectiveness, when asked their opinion on the most and least cost-effective means to ensure students play an active role in determining the quality of their experience at college. Tutorials were also instanced (2 respondents). One of the student interviewees also commented that:

"I was very happy with the student induction day. I also value group tutorials and the college's use of the intranet to e-mail all students about developments."

Where the least cost-effective means are concerned, the only aspects mentioned by more than one respondent relate to poor communications and the perceived lack of follow-up to student suggestions in the form of action or feedback. One of these respondents also has reservations about the lack of cross-college consistency in the current representational arrangements at his college:

"The fact that there are Student Council representatives is a good starting point, but improvements to communication amongst all reps are a vital necessity. The Student Council as a whole seems ineffective across the whole college, yet on some campuses seems to have small successes; unfortunately there seem to be some common issues across various campuses which could be tackled college-wide for maximum effect and yet which seem to be ignored other than at local campus level."

When asked what changes they would recommend to improve the effectiveness of students' contribution to the quality of their experience at college, all but three of the student respondents made recommendations. Taken overall, these cover a wide area and include:

▶ **A strengthening of student representational mechanisms, including via the Students' Union, and via the establishment of an alumni body with which current students could share their experiences (3 respondents)**

▶ **Improvements in internal communications, including via the college intranet (2)**

▶ **Establishing a suggestions scheme**

▶ **Empowering students to involve themselves in decision-making by asking them to choose from a range of options**

▶ **A simplification of the questions used in surveys**

▶ **Further training of staff concerning the student voice**

Student representatives made these final remarks on our survey concerning student involvement:

"Get the views as students mean them - don't re-interpret them."

"Students love it when they are faced with challenges, so give them the chance to decide for themselves what they want, not what the Student President wants or the college Principal wants."

"There's not enough of it. It doesn't seem to be taken seriously enough and a lot seems to be lip service paid to meet targets."

"Get them involved more."

"Students must be made more aware of changes made by the Student Council, maybe in the form of an e-mail or newsletter. They should be made aware of any instances where members of college staff have been made redundant due to lack of funding."

"Have a Student Council e-mail system set up so that reps can communicate with each other across the college, not just on their own campus."

"Great support from the college."

5   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1   Overall

Central role of the student voice

Taken overall, the findings from our survey are encouraging to those concerned about student involvement in decision-making at educational institutions. Colleges appear to be paying a good deal of attention to the student voice. There are clear signs of a positive response to the associated recommendations in the Foster report, and to the subsequent government initiatives aimed at ensuring that learner satisfaction forms an integral part of self-assessment and development planning. There is general agreement that significant progress has been made in recent years to strengthen the student voice within colleges. Overall responsibility for the student voice usually rests at second tier level, and in a number of cases re-structuring has taken place aimed at strengthening the management of the student voice. There

is also a commitment to continue in this direction, despite a tighter financial regime within the public sector and the corresponding value for money scrutiny of all activities. Active learner engagement is one of the core values which underpin strategic planning and decision-making throughout the colleges we surveyed.

Student consultation and involvement

When considering student consultation and involvement, arrangements for involving learners appear to have become more formalised. This trend reflects a desire to ensure more consistency in delivering effective practice across the whole college, and to achieve greater rigour in "closing the loop" by giving thorough consideration to student input and by regularly reporting back on the college's response. The importance of healthy informal links is still recognised, especially between students and tutors/lecturers. It is especially gratifying to note that both management teams and student representatives generally agree that students with learning difficulties and disabilities are just as active in student consultation and involvement as other students. This can be seen as an acknowledgement of the efforts made in recent years on their behalf.

Many of those who responded emphasise the importance of a wide variety of mechanisms to consult with students, canvass their opinions, and involve them in the decision-making process. They generally favour face-to-face processes because they enable open dialogue and in-depth exploration of important issues. Opinions concerning questionnaire surveys are more mixed, but most believe they still have a place in providing robust overall data. However, in its current form, the NLSS is seen as too general and insufficiently timely to be of great value to colleges – though some form of national benchmarking device for learner opinion is supported in principle. Electronic means of communication are increasingly successful, both in the form of on-line surveys (which are usually said to attract higher response rates via college intranets and VLEs) and through more innovative formats designed to appeal to a generation of students brought up in the age of mobile devices.

Areas of concern

Overall, and on some specific issues, there are a few student representatives who are less than positive concerning the arrangements for learner engagement that exist in their own colleges. In other cases, some student representatives appear unaware of the particular representational, consultation or feedback mechanisms that college management teams claim to have in place and which are operating successfully. Students attending part-time, those located at outreach centres, and those engaged in work-based learning often seem to be less actively involved compared with other students.

We should be careful not make too much of these apparent contradictions because they may simply reflect the different roles and viewpoints of those concerned. We should note, however, that whilst some of our student respondents are somewhat less positive than those from management about the effectiveness of current student voice arrangements, the reverse applies in respect to opinions of the efficacy of student governors (student governors rate themselves more highly in their efficacy than managers rate them). It is also important to recognise that the profile of our two groups of survey respondents varies to some extent in terms of the colleges represented, although there is considerable overlap.

Furthermore, Student Presidents, or those in similar posts, report frustration from time to time in involving their fellow students. The college management respondents make reference to the inherent difficulties of securing an active student presence in colleges when compared with universities.

FE faces a number of challenges in this respect including shorter course lengths but they also must deal with the comparative immaturity and lack of confidence often associated with newly enrolled students. As an example, able student governors may leave the college just as they are catching their stride in terms of making an authoritative contribution to the work of the corporation.

Nonetheless, we feel it important to note those areas where student expectations and experiences may not correlate with management perceptions. In particular, we should take account of student representatives' pleas for more effective internal communications and increased support in their efforts to involve their fellow students.

5.2   Student representation

Student governors

Our survey offers reassuring evidence that students appear to be actively involved in the work of college corporations, and their committees or working groups, especially those concerning Quality, Standards and the Curriculum.

All the colleges we surveyed claim to provide some form of training support or guidance for student governors and/or for other student members of the corporation's committees. Often a combination of sources is used, typically making use of NUS and / or LSIS provision, as well as in-house briefings. Taken together, the key factors in helping ensure that students operate effectively as governors may be summarised as:

- ▶ **Initial briefing and selection**
- ▶ **Induction**
- ▶ **Specific training, in addition to that provided for all governors**
- ▶ **Specific pre-meeting briefing sessions**
- ▶ **Mentoring arrangements**

There appears to be general satisfaction with the external sources of support available to colleges for student governors. The training provided by NUS and LSIS is usually highly regarded, though it needs to be supplemented in-house to provide support that is sufficiently tailored to the circumstances of the individual college.

However, feedback from some of the student representatives causes concern as it suggests that training opportunities for governors are not always available to the extent indicated by college management teams. Despite this issue, it is notable that the student governors in our survey appear to be more convinced of their own effectiveness in that role than are the college managers who responded. Nonetheless, the latter are at pains to emphasise the high level of support necessary to ensure that student governors can hit the ground running. They also reflect on the short length of service of most student governors, which means that they have relatively little time to learn on the job – a major challenge to students who are younger and less mature.

Therefore, it is unsurprising that most of the college management teams we surveyed have plans to strengthen the support for student governors in the future, though many questions remain regarding the viability of further financial support, including that for sabbatical posts. Student respondents also indicate a wish for additional training support and explanatory briefings relating to the detail of agendas.

Other forms of student representation

Where student representation is concerned, opinion differs concerning the extent to which Students' Unions or Students' Associations are active in representing students, either educationally or in organising social activities. Some form of support for these organisations is normally provided, though in some instances financial pressures restrict the number of sabbatical posts. Student Forum or Student Council type organisations are commonplace, meeting regularly – sometimes at campus-level, school-level, or across the college. These bodies seem to be widely regarded as invaluable in bringing together officers of the Students' Union or Students' Association, student governors, and course representatives. It is widely agreed that student governors should aim to represent the entire student body.

We found evidence of considerable support for these student organisations, in the form of training, administrative support, and other forms of financial support, including paid sabbaticals for the Student President and other student officers. The majority of the student respondents are beneficiaries of a paid sabbatical or in receipt of some other form of financial support for the post. It is also noteworthy that in recent years, a number of the colleges in our survey have introduced specific posts that are responsible for student liaison and promoting learner engagement.

The other most common and effective forms of student representation appear to be course reps. That said, there is considerable uncertainty surrounding the efficacy of class reps, with whom the student representatives seem to have little contact. Nonetheless, some college management respondents emphasise the importance of class-level resolution of many of the detailed day-to-day issues raised by students. The student representative respondents also appear less aware than they should be of the mechanisms at their own colleges for student involvement in course team reviews, and in the membership of the other self-evaluation groups.

Notable recent innovations in student representation, and plans to strengthen it in the future, include formal student involvement in lesson observations and its employment at one of the survey colleges of "Student Advocates".

Evidence from the student representative suggests that though they are generally positive about the representative mechanisms that exist in their college, they are frequently frustrated by the difficulty of involving their fellow students as much as they would like. They would therefore welcome further support.

Generally speaking, our survey suggests that, in terms of student representation, colleges have responded well to the recommendations contained in the national guidelines referred to earlier in the report[7]:

▶ **A good and supportive infrastructure needs to be in place to ensure an effective system of active student representative bodies – such as a student parliament, council, committee or senate – to provide and inform successive student governors.**

▶ **Colleges need to develop an effective cycle of recruitment that maximises the amount of time that student governors can offer, and a meeting structure and process that encourages attendance.**

▶ **Providing proactive support from the clerk, principal and others to encourage student governor involvement and participation through the provision of coaching, buddying, training and practical support is essential. In addition, the provision of constructive feedback to enhance student governor performance and overall contribution to the governing board is very beneficial.**

▶ **There needs to be promotion of, and positive attitudes towards, student involvement throughout the college driven from the top – ie governors, principal and the senior management team.**

▶ **Colleges need to develop such strong relationships that students feel free to express their opinions and concerns, and are actively encouraged to take ownership for decisions affecting the institution's plans and activities and for the well-being of staff and students alike.**

Most if not all of the colleges we surveyed appear either to have these features in place, or to be working hard towards their achievement.

5.3   Student involvement

Formal consultation

Our findings suggest that at least some level of formal consultation with students appears to take place across all the main areas of college activity, most commonly in respect of facilities and social activities – the latter particularly prominent in respect of colleges with new build projects. We also note the efforts made by some colleges to directly involve students in strategic planning processes. It may be a cause for concern, though, that a minority of colleges still appear to have little or no formal consultation on financial and resource issues; programme/course design and delivery; and/or information, advice and guidance.

There also appears to be some concern that student meetings pay insufficient attention to teaching and learning, but we also note that, in many cases, steps are being taken to address this issue. Along these lines, one survey respondent indicated successful initiatives such as involving students in procedures for lecturer recruitment, appointing a new Clerk to the Corporation, and the re-tendering of their catering contract.

College management teams appear to share a consensus that formal consultation with students contributes significantly to quality improvement by improving the college's understanding of learners' expectations and needs, and via involving them in decision-making. Active participation by learners promotes feelings of ownership and belonging. Self-assessment and improvement processes are also strengthened when staff listen to learners and act on their views. The feedback we received from the student representatives is broadly supportive of these views. It is gratifying to note that only a minority identify issues where they lack the influence they desire.

Nonetheless, the relatively less active contribution to formal consultation reported from those attending part-time, those based at outreach centres, and those involved in work-based learning may give cause for concern. It is reassuring, though, that there seems to be general agreement that contributions in this respect from younger students, and those with lower levels of attainment, or those with learning difficulties and disabilities are in line with those from other groups. Our survey provides evidence of the

significant efforts made in recent years at a number of colleges to ensure that students with learning difficulties and disabilities and other vulnerable groups are fully engaged.

We can be reassured by the fact that every student respondent made note of active steps involving a range of consultation mechanisms and improvements in communications, in an attempt to ensure that every student is fully represented. We should also note the common goal flagged by college management teams to be more systematic and consistent in closing the feedback loop via more thorough communication to inform of the actions taken to incorporate student input into decision-making and future developments.

Involvement in own learning

As we have seen, all the colleges involved in our survey claim to involve most or all of their students in planning and reviewing their own learning using ILPs, and also typically via regular tutorials and assessment activities. Increasing use of e-portfolios is also reported. Students are said to value ILPs greatly, and colleges are responding to their demand for continuous on-line and interactive access to targets, including from home.

It is therefore disturbing that only a minority of the student representative respondents appear to be aware that ILPs are employed in their own college.

Links between students, staff and management

It is notable that the substantial majority of both management and student representative respondents agree that there is an even combination of formal and informal links between students, staff and college management. They also agree this is a generally desirable state of affairs.

Almost invariably, systems seem to have become more formalised over time, in order to achieve greater rigour and consistency in ensuring that student concerns are properly addressed across the college. This appears to be confirmed by concerns about the inconsistent practice expressed by a minority of the student representative respondents. There is also a wish to demonstrate to students that it is worth their while to become actively involved. Nevertheless, informal links still appear to be seen as extremely important, especially at class level.

College management teams recommended a nationally organised and funded scheme for training student governors and other student reps (along the lines of the Scottish sparqs initiative), and a greater emphasis on the student voice within schools so that students arrive at college better equipped to participate. These recommendations will assist college management teams in ensuring that students make a more active contribution.

Student representatives recommended improved communications, greater opportunities for consultation and further involvement in decision-making.

5.4   Student communications and feedback

Informing students about how they can become involved

The findings from our survey suggest that an effective induction pack is a common element amongst the methods used to regularly communicate with students. The induction pack encourages them to take an active role in their learning and gives them the means to do so. Other printed materials, the college intranet and e-mail communications also appear to be commonly employed for this purpose, as are face-to-face briefings.

Experience is that a combination of methods are necessary for communication to be effective, but both college managements and student representatives seem to prefer face-to-face contact, as it allows for clear follow-up and understanding. Briefings from Student Services, tutors, or lecturers seem to be particularly valuable by students. We should also note the increasing use of electronic means using formats that have appeal to younger students.

Canvassing student opinion

A combination of questionnaire surveys and focus groups, plus other face-to-face methods, appear to be seen as the most effective means of canvassing student opinion. The role of the former is to provide robust and reliable data; the latter then enable issues to be explored in greater depth. Most college management teams believe focus groups are the source of the richest data. In this respect our findings raise some concerns that, from the viewpoint of the student

representatives, focus groups seem to play a rather less prominent role. Equally, student representatives' awareness levels of college complaints procedures appear worryingly low when compared to their pervasiveness amongst the tools listed by college management teams.

There seems to be a good deal of common practice regarding the structure of surveys, with most colleges employing standard surveys that apply to all students shortly after enrollment, mid-course, and near to or at completion. We note that on-line formats are becoming increasingly common, as they usually lead to improved response rates.

Here too, though, it is important to register the major concerns that we found regarding student "survey fatigue", linked in part to the external demands of the NLSS, which a number regard as being over-generic and untimely for college-level needs. Here we should note, though, that the principle of some form of national benchmarking device for learner satisfaction continues to be widely supported. The use of the NLSS within the context of *Framework for Excellence* is a relatively recent development. Evidence from our survey suggests that colleges welcome the announcement by the Coalition government of a commitment to simplify the associated requirements in the future. We hope, therefore, that in the reallocation of the contract for the NLSS[8], further attention can be given to practicable ways of improving its utility to colleges, and thereby reducing the duplication that currently exists with their own systems.

Improvements made in response to student feedback

The identification of student expectations, and the tracking of the extent to which they are fulfilled, appears to be an integral element of the student survey mechanisms within most colleges. We are reassured to note that student representatives appear generally satisfied that these mechanisms work effectively, though there is some minority dissent on this issue.

The large majority of respondents identified a wide range of improvements that have been made over the past five years, in response to student feedback. It is also notable that the pattern of such improvements identified by college

managements and student representatives is broadly similar. There is widespread agreement, too, that colleges have become much more responsive to student feedback in more recent times. Some of our evidence suggests that teaching and learning is by no means neglected amongst the improvements that have been made – a large proportion of the instances quoted relating to course organisation, delivery and learning resources. On the other hand, a number of these examples are quoted by the same respondents and, taken overall, there are even more instances of improvements in areas less directly related to teaching and learning, including general facilities; catering; buildings; and costs/prices. This data may indicate that some colleges still need to ensure that students feel confident in discussing curriculum matters and the way that they learn, as opposed to "hygiene" issues. This is not to say that the latter are unimportant to students' experience of college. The data also indicates student involvement in matters such as sustainability, health and safety, and equality and diversity.

5.5   Recommendations

Given the generally reassuring picture that has emerged from the findings, our recommendations are primarily concerned with a continuation in the current direction, rather than any need for radical change. In some or even most cases, the recommendations listed below may not apply. Nevertheless, we feel that these are the areas worthy of review, according to our findings. We also believe that whilst for the foreseeable future there are likely to be many pressures to reduce costs, doing so at the expense of a reduction in student involvement is a false economy that poses real threats to quality of delivery.

For college management teams, we recommend that:

▸ **Student representatives are issued clear specifications as to what their respective roles involve, together with guidance on how they can discharge their responsibilities effectively**

▸ **Student representatives receive checks at all levels to ensure that they are fully aware of all mechanisms for student involvement that are in place, and regular reminders are provided to all students**

- **Student representatives become involved in regular reviews to ensure that they are aware of the training opportunities that are open to them regarding their role, and that they are able to use the opportunities as appropriate**

- **Student governors receive continued support to ensure that they can make an effective contribution to the college corporation during their period of service, and further attention is given to succession planning so that the momentum can be maintained over time**

- **Continued efforts to raise the levels of active involvement amongst students attending part-time; those based in outreach centres; and those engaged in work-based learning**

- **Consideration to holding formal consultations with students specifically devoted to teaching and learning issues**

- **Further efforts to ensure that students are consulted sufficiently regarding programme/course design and delivery; Information Advice and Guidance; and finance and resource issues**

- **Continued and rigorous attention to closing the feedback loop, so that students are kept fully informed of decisions taken in response to their own views and recommendations**

- **The availability of on-line and interactive ILPs**

- **Identifying further user-friendly ways of enabling students to make an active contribution, both face-to-face and via the use of interactive electronic media**

To help realise the desired improvements associated with the above recommendations, we further recommend that colleges exploit their investment in learning technologies to a much greater extent than just for learning and teaching. VLEs and other collaborative technologies have a lot of potential to help improve support for the student voice, through for example, improved information flow, better targeting of information, and more effective consultation, collaboration and feedback mechanisms among students and staff.

Furthermore, recent innovations surrounding the use of such technologies on mobile devices mean that all students can be reached regardless of their location or length of time spent at the college, thereby overcoming challenges experienced by students who are part-time, or in outreach centres or work placements.

For government, the Learning and Skills Improvement Service and the Skills Funding Agency, we recommend that:

- **Support is maintained for citizenship education in schools, including the introduction of pupils to representational roles and responsibilities**

- **They continue to provide support and guidance for the training of student governors and other student representatives**

- **In the awarding of the contract for the Framework for Excellence Learner Views Survey 2010/11, and in the oversight of its operation thereafter, every effort is made to ensure maximum compatibility with colleges' own survey needs, commensurate with SFA's requirement to calculate the Learner Views PI (Performance Indicator)**

If you have any comments or suggestions concerning this report, we would be interested to hear from you via e-mail to: info@157group.co.uk

Glossary

CEL   Centre for Excellence in Leadership

EMA   Education Maintenance Allowance

ESOL   English for Speakers of Other Languages

FE   Further Education

FT   Full Time

HE   Higher Education

IAG   Advice, Information and Guidance

ILP   Individual Learning Plan

IT   Information Technology

LGBT   Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender

LLDD   Learners with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities

LMI   Labour Market Information

LSIS   Learning and Skills Improvement Service

NLS   National Learner Satisfaction

NLSS   National Learner Satisfaction Survey

NUS   National Union of Students

PI   Performance Indicator

PT   Part Time

SFA   Skills Funding Agency

SFC   Scottish Funding Council

SMT   Senior Manager Team

sparqs   Student participation in Quality Scotland

VLE   Virtual Learning Environment