



**Wise  
Cymru**

**Wise  
Wales**

# **Pathways to Partnership for Further Education Report**

*Wales-wide summary*



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## **Introduction**

### **Background**

The Pathways to Partnership for FE project is funded by Welsh Government and aims to help create a national structure to further support the development of learner involvement within Welsh institutions.

It is being carried out by the Wise Wales project for student partnership, based at National Union of Students Wales. Wise Wales is a cross sector project which aims to achieve meaningful partnership between educators, students' unions and students across Wales within both further and higher education institutions.

The project is focussed on supporting colleges within Wales with self-assessment of learner involvement activities with a sector-wide development toolkit.

In 2015/16, the main project activity consisted of visiting all colleges to support the self-assessment of learner involvement activities, with a focus on identifying areas the college wishes to develop in future years.

The basis for the toolkit used in the diagnostic visit and for the report are formed from Welsh Government guidance on Learner Involvement and consequent reports since the original 2010 guidance, and Estyn reports, guidance and recommendations regarding learner involvement.

### **Purpose of this report**

Following on from the visits to eleven colleges across Wales, this report aims to give a picture of what partnership looks like in these institutions. It is the summary of work that has been carried out for this project, and will bring it to a close.



## **Key lines of enquiry**

The facilitated self-assessment focused on four key lines of enquiry:

### **1) College led engagement**

This area covers student engagement led by colleges to ensure the inclusion of students in the improvement and policy making processes of the college. This includes the collection and use of student views through varying mechanisms such as surveys and focus groups. This area also covers the publication and use of complaints, impact monitoring, and college activity in supporting the development of a democratic, well-resourced students' union and utilisation of a learner involvement strategy.

#### **Outcomes and purpose for development in this area**

- Students are represented by a democratically elected and well-resourced groups of student officers
- The process of learner engagement is seen by staff as an integral and important part of College life if its led effectively by College SMT
- Student views and experiences are used by the college to directly influence the development and improvement of the experiences of students and improve satisfaction.

### **2) Learner led engagement**

Learner led engagement is when students are empowered to initiate, discuss and seek the views of fellow students, allowing them to actively shape their own learning experiences, as well as allowing them to participate in the day to day decision making processes in, and outside of the college.

#### **Outcomes and purpose for development in this area**

(For learners)

- Increased motivation and self-efficacy, leading to greater achievements
- An enriched, more rounded student experience for all students
- Active involvement in designing the curriculum
- Greater sense of ownership over their learning outcomes
- The development of personal, social, organisational and active learning skills which can be used in their future careers
- Improved relationships with peers and educators
- Development of citizenship skills
- Experience of leading an autonomous organisation
- Career pathways into leadership roles and politics



(For provider)

- Increased participation, retention, achievement and progression rates
- Shaping a generation of learners who will actively work with staff to enhance quality assurance, improving the overall quality of learning
- Identify elements for organisational improvement and implementation of policies and initiatives
- Make the college more appealing to prospective students

### **3) Citizenship and Enrichment**

Citizenship activities enable students to develop an understanding of, and take part in, democratic processes and create positive change, empowering them to campaign on issues they care about. Enrichment activities allow students to take part in a wide range of activities they would not usually be able to reach outside of college. This area also covers pastoral support services covering the mental and physical wellbeing of students.

#### **Outcomes and purpose for development in this area**

- College is reactive to the physical and mental needs of members of local community (not just college members) and regarded as a hub for service provision.
- In providing students with the opportunity to engage with the decision making process that affects things around them, college produced active, engaged and informed citizens and community members.
- College is a catalyst for community engagement, an integral part of the makeup of the local community.

### **4) Commitment and Resources**

This area covers the level of resource which the college attributes to learner voice. This can cover aspects such as financial, time and space resources. This includes colleges, from SMT and corporation through to tutors and support staff supporting SU's on all matters relating to their structure, organisation, administration and financial operation.

#### **Outcomes and purpose for development in this area**

- Well-resourced Students' Union fosters a student-led culture in which the college co-produces the college experience with students across all areas (curriculum, enrichment, teaching and learning etc.)
- Students are empowered to make change within their college community and feel a sense of ownership over their learning.
- Student have the capacity to engage more widely in representation and increase the college and students' union profile locally, regionally and nationally.



## Summary

### College Led

College Led activity in FE institutions is generally good. Most colleges have some form of course representatives, governors, and feedback mechanisms. More details on these areas can be found below. Some areas for improvement include ensuring that the impact of learner voice is formally monitored, and involving learner feedback in development plans.

### Course Reps

Most colleges have course representative (rep) systems within their structures. Promotion tends to involve introducing the system during tutorials, or during induction. One college hosts a Freshers' Fayre and information on the reps can be found there. It is recommended that all reps should be democratically elected, but this does not always happen. Quite often, it is inconsistent even within each college, as different tutors choose to select their reps in different ways.

While some colleges have already provided job descriptions for the role, others have not. Wise has developed a resource aimed to help with this, outlining the benefits of job descriptions and what they might want to include.

The same resource also covers training for reps. Most colleges have introductory training, but Wise suggests that training can be a tool to develop reps throughout the year. This can be a way of ensuring retention, as this has been highlighted as an issue – course reps tend to drop off after Christmas or Easter time, but if training opportunities were taking place throughout the year, it would provide an incentive to stay.

Incentives are important to show reps how they are valued. This can be as simple as providing them with certificates to demonstrate what they have achieved throughout the year. Wise has templates for certificates which can be used in this way.

Reps should also be supported financially. All colleges do this, by paying for travel to events (eg NUS/Wise Wales training events) and reimbursing for childcare responsibilities. This is not often communicated in the Learner Involvement strategy, however, or is not stated specifically.

Monitoring the demographics of learners who are reps is an area which needs development. This is important because without knowing who you are already engaging, you cannot work to engage with those being left out. Some colleges have the capacity to monitor demographics but do not look at the data, while others only monitor attendance. For the rep system to be truly representative, this is something which needs to be addressed.

Reps have been invited to meetings in some colleges, such as Equality and Diversity meetings, Council, or Course Team meetings. Learner input is a standing agenda item in most cases, which is good practice, and learners are always encouraged to feed in any ideas or concerns they have. In some instances, meetings happen when students cannot attend. Most institutions will mark learners as present or as an authorised absence during meetings to avoid having an impact on their EMA.

### Governors

Student Governors can be found in most colleges, often supported by the Clerk. Governors are promoted differently to reps, with the positions being advertised on



the college website, through emails, social media, and in some cases in face-to-face meetings and talks. Most have job descriptions and are able to feed back into the learner voice structures in an official capacity.

One area which could be improved is a handover period. Some colleges invite newly elected governors to shadow the outgoing learner to the last meeting of the year. This is an effective way to show the incoming learner what to expect from their role, and gives them an opportunity to talk to the outgoing governor and ask any questions they may have. This can be complimented by a formal mentoring process as well.

### **Engagement**

Similarly to monitoring the demographics of reps, it is important to monitor the demographics of all learners. Some colleges do this effectively, and can identify which learners are not being reached. Feedback can then be collected from these learners to establish what more can be done to support them. Some colleges have already put in strategies to reach part-time learners, who are highlighted as being 'hard-to-reach', such as inviting them to learner panels, ensuring they have access to Moodle, and conducting class visits with them.

Different methods are also employed for different learners in some colleges, such as having staff support for ESOL learners. Other colleges do not have a set strategy for this, but are keen to work on this particular area. This can be derived from data found if demographics are monitored, to see how much support is needed for different types of learners.

Future learners are engaged with at Open Days and Evenings, with some colleges utilising their relationship with partner schools to conduct visits. This is an excellent way to get learners involved in learner voice activity when they arrive, by engaging with them before that stage.

### **Surveys and Feedback**

Surveys are conducted at all colleges, ranging from student satisfaction surveys to module evaluation. The most important part of conducting surveys is what happens with the results, and how they are fed back to learners.

Some examples of good practice in this area include: taking the results to the SMT and then feeding them back down to learners through focus groups; using the results to celebrate successes by sharing them on posters, through social media, and during tutorials; and identifying and addressing issues through the creation of action plans. One particular example of an interesting method for feeding back was to create a flyer with a summary of survey results and include it with certificates which go out to learners upon completion of their courses. This is effective, apart from for learners who are not on accredited courses.

A key part of this process is working with learners to create the changes that are identified from surveys and action plans. This takes place in some colleges through the Reps or focus groups, but it is rarely part of a formal action plan, and sometimes learners are simply told about changes instead of being an integral part of making the change. To achieve a culture of meaningful partnership, learners should be involved in helping to action solutions to the issues that are raised through survey results.

Feedback can be gathered in alternative ways, such as a suggestion box, focus groups, through the institution's website, or direct emails. Another example is learning walks, which are used by a number of institutions. It involves staff (and



sometimes learners) walking around the college and seeking personal feedback from learners face-to-face.

What happens with the results of these alternative forms of feedback mechanisms is usually part of a less formal structure. This means feeding back its impacts to learners is a weakness for many colleges. Some use similar methods to those used for survey feedback, such as sharing the impact through social media or campus TV screens, or reporting through tutorials. Where it is part of a Strategy, there are numerous opportunities for feedback back to learners, which is highly recommended.

A majority of colleges have some mechanism for analysing and reporting on the outcomes of learner consultation and participation. This ranges from involving the Quality Team to SMT. Year-on-year trends are looked at and used as part of benchmarking procedures in some cases. The 'You Said, We Did' campaign is often implemented as a way of monitoring the successes and achievements resulting from learner involvement. Using learner feedback to contribute to self-assessment and quality development is a weakness, however, as it rarely happens at all.

Feedback has been used effectively when linked with retention rates, however, and in some colleges it has even led to the cancellation of certain courses. It can be the biggest marker for learner outcomes and gives feedback on both the quality of courses and of teaching.

Promotion of these feedback mechanisms is generally well-developed. It is often covered during induction, and then followed-up in tutorials, in a handbook / starter pack, on social media, or on the website. Other forms of communication are not as strong, due to a lack of formal communication strategies in most institutions.

### **Promotion and impact of LV**

Very few colleges have a communication strategy, which may be a cause for a lack of effective structures for feeding back to students about what changes have been made because of their input. There is also a lack of training for staff on the importance of learner voice and what is expected of them in terms of feeding back. Some colleges offer calendars for important events and meetings, while others either do not have this function or reserve it exclusively for staff.

The impact of Learner Voice can be seen across many different aspects of the colleges. Examples include improvements to tackling issues on new campuses; increased recognition of learner voice; and an IT overhaul as a direct impact of learner feedback. This is from a staff perspective, however, and there is little data concerning what learners think the impact of learner voice is.

Monitoring any impacts is also a weakness, as it rarely happens. In some cases, objectives and KPIs are set, but in most there is no formal mapping process. This applies especially to reps, who are rarely monitored for the impact being a rep is having on them, on the college, and on other learners. Wise has created a resource to help with this.

### **Complaints**

All colleges have a formal structure for dealing with complaints. There are procedures in place which are generally monitored well, albeit with differing methods. Usually, analysis takes places to identify any overarching themes which feeds in to annual planning and action plans.

There are varying levels of training across institutions – many have little to no training for either learners or staff, while others have trained both to some extent





(for example, Management and Reps). Formalising training in this area should strengthen learner voice as it empowers students to have a voice and not be afraid to come forward with concerns.

Whether or not Reps are involved in the complaints procedure (for example to support appeal panels) is varied. In some colleges they are not involved at all. In others, they have training which covers the complaints procedure and are part of the policy.

### **Learner Led Engagement**

Most colleges already have or are open to developing a formal students' union/association. Those who already have an SU all have a constitution and elected officers/ volunteers, but not a separate strategy for the union.

There is not a correlation between those colleges with formal SUs and those which have societies and student-led events. Some colleges with no SUs have a good range of societies available to their learners and others with SUs have no learner-led events. It is not clear whether all the societies are learner-led, however, as some may be initiated by staff.

Elected officers have job descriptions and in some colleges are able to chair meetings. They are also often allowed to contribute to what is included in the agenda, although are never given full autonomy of this area. In colleges where there is no formal SU, it is less likely that this level of partnership occurs, and sometimes learners are not involved in these processes at all.

There are a range of partnership projects happening between learners and staff across the sector. For example, learners are involved with running fayres at Christmas and Easter, they lead staff training, and are involved in consultation for the strategic plan of the institution.

### **Citizenship and Enrichment**

#### **Citizenship**

A small number of colleges actively encourage their learners to take part in local youth councils. Sometimes the learners take part due to their own initiative.

This is similar in the case for campaigns. Some are learner-led activities aiming to raise money for charity, for example, while others are college-led and simply involve learners where appropriate. In some cases, there is no interest in SU processes and therefore campaigns on that subject do not appeal to the learners and therefore do not take place. Where campaigns are successful, they are often political and reactive rather than policy-based. Learners are also never stopped from campaigning, although there are some barriers such as funding and monitoring guest speakers.

#### **Enrichment**

Enrichment activities usually happen on a Wednesday afternoon, when lectures are not timetabled. This has not been continued in some cases; in others, activities simply happen during lunchtimes.

Teaching and learning opportunities also take place and are usually embedded into already established college structures, such as tutorials. These opportunities include the Welsh Baccalaureate, citizenship lessons, and clubs such as debating. There are also a number of collaborations with external partners to either give talks



on subjects such as mental health and responsible drinking, or local community groups and charities.

There are similar promotion methods for enrichment activities as other aspects of learner voice – social media, tutors, posters, website, etc. Colleges with communication strategies have more developed promotional structures, including dedicated brands for enrichment activities.

Monitoring takes place at most colleges, but only at an attendance level. Demographics are not monitored in any institution, which has already been seen as a weakness in other areas as well. This is something which can be developed and should see benefits in a number of different areas across the entirety of learner voice.

Physical and mental health of learners is clearly valued within colleges, as all institutions have some form of councilor or wellbeing officer staff member or team. All colleges also have signposting to professional services for their learners.

### **Commitment and Resources**

There are varying levels of support in terms of budget and funding across Wales. Colleges that provide a budget for learner voice have some of the most well-developed structures in place, while those with little to no budget struggle due to a lack of staffing and dedicated resources. For example, colleges with budgets have office space for staff and social spaces for learners in most cases. Many colleges rely partly on NUS cards for funding SU activities.

Very few colleges have full-time staff dedicated solely to learner voice activity. Usually there are no allocated hours for this work and it is just part of other job roles. Where this split happens, it is not usually formalised, making it challenging to monitor.

Where staff are expected to engage with learner voice activities, they are always trained, and take part in the LVPN.

### **Overall good practice and barriers**

We also asked colleges which aspect of their learner voice they were most proud of, and what barriers they were facing.

#### **Good Practice**

Some examples of what colleges thought they were excelling in include: rep structures and support; seeing changes made on campus due to learner voice; setting learners on their career paths; improved handling of complaints; increased dedication by staff to learner voice; and an overall improved culture and ethos surrounding learner voice, by putting it at the heart of everything the college does.

#### **Barriers**

Colleges are still facing barriers and examples of these include: getting learners involved in the bigger decisions; formally monitoring engagement; formalising staff structures; engaging learners in the first instance; finance; getting the timing of events right within the student calendar; lack of staff; and trying to embed learner voice into fundamental college structures, rather than being seen as an 'add-on'.