

WORKING WITH STUDENT MEMBERS ON COLLEGE BOARDS



This self-directed module explores how to approach the effective engagement of the student members on a college board with specific reference to the college governance environment in Scotland.

Its aim is to enable college board members, governance professionals and those involved in supporting student associations to understand the role of the student member and consider how to structure the business of the board to ensure effective engagement of the student voice in college governance.

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1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

A participant will be able to:

- Understand the student engagement framework in Scotland's colleges and the role of the student board members in college governance.
- Understand how to support the student board members to find their voice and play an effective role on the board.
- Reflect on their role as a board member in building partnership between the board, the college staff and the student association and in supporting the student board members.
- Be able to critically assess whether the college is engaging the student voice effectively and understand strategies for improvement.

2. HOW TO USE THIS PACK

Before you start reading this pack, we recommend that you sit down with your Board Secretary/governance professional and look through the exercises. Several of the exercises require you to speak with college staff or fellow board members or to lead a board discussion.



There are six exercises; it is up to you how many you work through but we recommend completing at least three of them including number six. Look at the different topics covered and decide which you will complete. You should then read through all the materials, in readiness for your chosen exercises.

This module does not have an assessment. Instead, you should keep a list alongside the exercises you complete which details any further information you need to gather about your college or the FE sector, actions you will take over the next year as a result of your learning from this module, and reminders that will help your own practice. You should then use these notes to form an action plan, as you will see from Exercise 6.

3. FRAMEWORKS FOR ENGAGING WITH COLLEGE STUDENTS IN SCOTLAND

Colleges exist to deliver education and skills training to support the requirements of the post-16 education system in Scotland.

In doing this they serve the interests of their local communities, employers, government and government agencies and a wide range of other stakeholders.

Their principal stakeholders are their students, and it is essential that those students and their needs are placed at the heart of everything the college does.



Figure 1: The Framework for the Development of Strong & Effective Student Associations

There are three principal documents that board members should have read and understood in relation to engaging students in the effective running of their college:

- The **Framework for the Development of Strong and Effective College Students' Associations**¹ sets out a sector-agreed framework for how colleges and students' associations can work in partnership, with the support of sector agencies and NUS Scotland, to develop strong and effective students' associations.
- The **Student Engagement Framework for Scotland**² was developed by the main education agencies to establish a shared understanding of the practices and approaches for engaging students.
- The **Code of Good Governance for Scotland's Colleges (2016)**³ states (Section B4) that the college board must 'have regard to' the Student Engagement Framework for Scotland and put in place 'robust partnership procedures'.

1 <https://www.saframework.net/home>

2 <https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/uploads/SEFScotland.pdf>

3 <https://www.cdn.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Code-of-Good-Governance-for-Scotlands-Colleges-August-2016.pdf>

The **Student Engagement Framework for Scotland** establishes 5 key **elements** of student engagement:

1. Students feeling part of a supportive institution.
2. Students engaging in their own learning.
3. Students working with their own institution in shaping the direction of learning.
4. Formal mechanisms for quality and governance.
5. Influencing the student experience at national level.

Linked to this, the framework also establishes **6 features** of effective student engagement:

1. A culture of engagement.
2. Students as partners.
3. Responding to diversity.
4. Valuing the student contribution.
5. Focus on enhancement and change.
6. Appropriate resources and support.

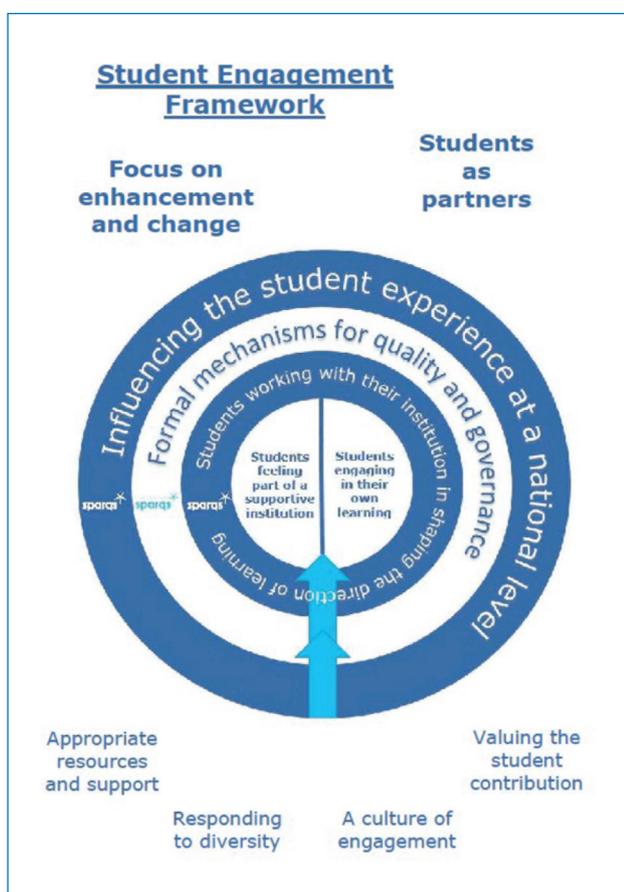


Figure 2: The Student Engagement Framework for Scotland

To plan and deliver effective student engagement with the board of the college all of these areas need to be addressed, but particular attention needs to be given to **Element 4: Formal mechanisms for quality and governance**.

This element refers to ensuring that student representatives can work in **partnership** with their institutions. There are key principles related to this:

- The ability of elected student representatives to deliver a considered student view based on hard evidence needs to be developed.
- There needs to be an independent student voice within the quality assurance and governance mechanisms of the institution to ensure that the student learning experience is central to decision-making, development, and enhancement activities. This differs from simply gathering student opinion.
- The underlying principle is that a representative student voice is needed to take an informed position on issues and have a real involvement in change in partnership with staff.

The college board members need to understand the elements and features of student engagement and understand how these are delivered within their college. They also need to consider how effective student engagement is within their college and how they can play a role in improvement.

One of your main roles as a board member is to ensure that effective partnership with student representatives is in place, characterised by continuous dialogue and mutual learning.

In Scotland, support for the development and facilitation of student engagement in quality and governance is provided by **sparqs** (student partnerships in quality Scotland)⁴. This can include support for college boards seeking to develop student engagement in college governance.

4 <https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/>



EXERCISE 1

Reflecting on student engagement in your college.

As a starting point, read the **Student Engagement Framework for Scotland** and the **Framework for the Development of Strong and Effective College Students' Associations**, paying particular attention to the key elements and features of effective student engagement and the examples given under each of activities and developments that could support them.

Now review the student engagement mechanisms that exist in your college. To do this, you may need to speak to the member of staff responsible for student engagement (the role will vary from college to college so ask your Board Secretary to identify the correct person). You should also, of course, speak to the student board members on your board.

- Which elements of the Framework correspond well with existing practice that takes place within your college? Can you identify three areas of good practice?
- Are there examples of good practice in your college that are not mentioned in the two Frameworks?
- In which aspects of college life and governance are there gaps in student engagement, in which students could be invited to contribute more to dialogue and decision-making?
- Keep a note of your findings and, if you feel it's necessary, consider asking the Chair to schedule a discussion of student engagement at a board meeting or away day.

In carrying out this exercise, keep in mind the fundamental concept of **partnership** as a guiding principle for student engagement and consider what that means for your own practice as a board member.



4. THE ROLE OF THE STUDENT BOARD MEMBERS

As noted in the previous section, The **Code of Good Governance for Scotland's Colleges (2016)** covers student engagement and states (Section B1) that *the board must have close regard to the voice of its students and the quality of the student experience should be central to all board decisions.*

Colleges are required by the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013 to have two student members of the board nominated by the Students' Association. These are generally the student president and vice president (or equivalent) who are appointed to the board for their period of office (one or two years).

The Code states in Section D4 that student board members *are full board members and bring essential and unique skills, knowledge and experience to the board.*

The same section also states that *student board members must not be excluded from board business unless there is a clear conflict of interest, in common with all board members.*

The key point is that a student board member is a full board member and must be treated as such. Of course, this means that they are also required to act as such.

Although the student board members are elected representatives of the student body, they are also as full board members *collectively responsible and accountable for all board decisions and must make decisions in the best interests of the college ... as a whole rather than selectively or in the interests of a particular group (Code Section D3).* Their responsibilities as trustees of a charity (since colleges are charities) are governed by the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005.

So the student board members have to reconcile two separate roles:

- As representatives of the students of the college.
- As board members/trustees of the college.

As with any board member, if these two roles come into conflict they will need to declare a conflict of interest.

Student board members who have been elected to officer positions in the Students' Association are likely to face a range of priorities in their role. Sitting as a board member may be one of several new responsibilities that they carry during their term of office. The next section deals with how to support them in taking on this role.



EXERCISE 2

Acting in the 'best interests of the college'.

Look at Sections D3 to D5 of the Code for Good Governance of Scotland's Colleges (2016).

What challenges do you think there are for a student board member in reconciling their roles as a student representative and a full board member while making a full contribution to all areas of the board's business?

How could you as a fellow board member help them in managing those challenges?

What expertise do student officers bring from their institutional and national activities as officers, or as students with direct and recent experience of learning?

Can you think of any circumstances when a student board member would need to declare a conflict of interest?



5. SUPPORTING THE STUDENT BOARD MEMBERS

As we said in Section 1, a key role you have as a board member is to ensure that effective partnership working exists between students and the college board.

In Section 2 we identified the key role that the student board members play both as student representatives and as full members of the board.

Challenges and Support

Student board members, like any new board member, are likely face several challenges when taking up their role:

- They will often (although not always) be unused to a formal board setting and may possibly feel intimidated.
- They may lack the experience to understand easily some of the board business (particularly financial and legal papers).
- They may lack confidence in speaking in formal board meetings although some will be confident and skilled orators (as evidenced by the fact that many have been elected by their peers).
- Their term of office will be only one or two years, shorter than many other board members.
- They need to understand and deal with the dual aspect of their role as representatives and full board members.

Students' Association staff and colleagues from sparqs and NUS will provide support, training and guidance to student board members. The principal responsibility for supporting the student board members to be an effective voice on the board lies with the board itself. The Chair, Board Secretary and all the individual board members all have a role to play.

While support from the Principal and senior team is also important, the principal responsibility must lie with the board members themselves.

Responsibilities

Under the Code of Good Governance for Scotland's Colleges (2016), the following responsibilities are identified:

- The **Chair** must *encourage the effective contribution of **all** board members* and ensure *positive relations between board members* (Section D1).
- The **Board Secretary** must be accessible to all board members and be responsible for *facilitating good governance and advising board members* on a range of legal and compliance issues as well as ensuring that the board has sufficient information to make decisions (Section D14).
- Each **Board Member** is *collectively responsible and accountable for all board decisions* (Section D3).

Induction and Handover

It is important to ensure that there is a comprehensive induction programme for the new student board members. It will include a greater degree of information about basic governance concepts and practices alongside the specific induction information for the college. Student board members will also receive a wider induction that new student officers all receive, which the board

induction is part of and should dovetail with. For further info on this, please refer to our the sparqs college education officer induction resource.

There should also be a planned handover process from one group of student board members to the next if possible, to allow for some transfer of knowledge and experience. This will also allow the outgoing student board members to reflect on the knowledge and experience gained during their term of office and offer some thoughts on improvements that could be made to support for the student members.

Helping the Student Board Members to be Effective

It is important to provide ongoing support to the Student Board Members for two main reasons:

- They are the principal way in which the student voice can be heard at board level.
- Their time as on the board is a valuable development opportunity for them over and above the contribution they make to the board's business.

In addition to a comprehensive induction process, the following support measures are recommended:

- Appoint one of the independent board members to be a mentor/buddy to each of the Student Board Members throughout their time in office.
- The Board Secretary should arrange to brief the Student Board Members ahead of each board and committee meeting to ensure that they are clear on the key issues and to consider where they want to contribute.
- The Chair should schedule regular time with the Student Board Members to build an understanding of their views and those of the students.

- The Principal should arrange to brief the Student Board Members on key issues affecting the management of the college. Care should be taken that these briefings should be factual and provide the Student Board Members with the information needed to form their own views.
- The Chair and Board Secretary should plan in advance the key areas of board business where the Student Board Members should be encouraged to contribute, and ensure that they are briefed in advance and called upon early in the discussion.

In addition to these measures, the student board members will benefit from the induction, training and development delivered for their students' association roles.⁵



EXERCISE 3

Your role in supporting the Student Board Members.

Review the suggestions for supporting the Student Board Members in Section 3.

Now imagine that you are asked to be the mentor to a new Student Board Member.

How would you go about building a supportive relationship with them?⁵

What are the key pieces of advice/guidance you would give them?

What steps would you take to ensure that they are able to play a full and effective role on the board?

6. EMBEDDING THE STUDENT VOICE IN BOARD BUSINESS

The Context

In Section 1 we considered the key elements and features of effective student engagement as laid out in *A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland*. We identified that ‘formal mechanisms for quality and governance’ together with ‘a culture of engagement’ were key to embedding the student voice within the board.

In Section 2 we noted that The Code of Good Governance for Scotland’s Colleges (2016) states that *the quality of the student experience should be central to all board decisions*.

In Section 3 we looked at the measures that should be taken to help the Student Board Members to be effective.

Making the student experience central to all board decisions requires more than ensuring the effectiveness of the Student Board Members. We also need to consider how the business of the board is structured to place the student voice firmly at the centre.

Conduct of Board Meetings

In the board meeting itself, the agenda can be structured to ensure the primacy of the student voice.

The Students’ Association Report

The report from the students’ association is often the main formal student input to the board meeting.

It should be placed early in the meeting, ideally before reports from the Chair and Principal, to set the tone and context for the meeting.

Students’ Association reports are often very operational, outlining events, activities and support provided by the association to students.

There should be an encouragement to include within the report more strategic issues, highlighting challenges faced by students, critically examining the responses to those challenges and making constructive suggestions for improvement or new actions.

The board should welcome and embrace the constructive challenge provided by the students’ association report.

In their pre-meeting engagement with the Student Board Members (see Section 3) the Chair and Board Secretary should discuss the issues raised and agree with the Student Board Members how the discussion will be managed and what the desired outcome should be.

The Importance of Preparation

The Chair and Board Secretary should also have planned in advance the key points at which the student voice needs to be heard, and worked with the Student Board Members to plan when and how they will be called upon to contribute.

This is not to preclude the Student Board Members from contributing at other points in the meeting (as full board members they can and should contribute throughout) but to ensure that they are prepared and able to make an effective contribution when called upon.

Of course, it's very important that the preparation process does not in any way seek to influence the Student Board Members to take any particular view of an issue. They should also be taking responsibility for consulting with their fellow students and seeking support from students' association staff in preparing their contribution.

Creative Time

The board should have creative time allocated throughout the year, and in particular at the annual strategy event, to consider key issues and future plans. It is important to give the Student Board Members a full role in these discussions and again to ensure that they are prepared for their contribution in advance.

The fundamental point is that board meetings need to be carefully planned and managed by the Chair, supported by the Board Secretary, to ensure that there is purposeful engagement of the student voice in every meeting.

Governance requirements

As we've previously noted, the Code for Good Governance of Scotland's Colleges (2016) in Section B identifies a range of areas where student engagement is required. This is expanded on in A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland. In considering the place of the student voice in board business the following requirements of the Code should be kept in mind:

- Ensuring that there is *meaningful and ongoing engagement and dialogue with students*.
- Considering *the outcome of student surveys and other student engagements*.
- Encouraging *a strong and autonomous students' association that is adequately resourced*.

There is also a specific requirement in Sections C and D of the Code that students should be involved in gathering and submitting evidence on the recruitment, objectives, and remuneration of the Principal.

All of these engagements should feed into board papers and discussions. As a board member you should always be reviewing board papers with a view to understanding how the student voice has been heard in their preparation.



EXERCISE 4

Hearing the student voice.

- Review the most recent set of board papers you have received.
- Now make a list of what you think the key issues or themes in the papers are. The same theme may come through in more than one paper.
- In thinking about the papers and the board meeting itself, consider whether you feel that the student voice was heard in the discussions around each of the key themes you have identified.
- Against each theme, write down what you think the student voice was telling you in each case.
- Finally, consider whether what the student voice was saying was reflected in the final decision that was made.
- Discuss your findings with your Chair or Board Secretary. What implications are there for the management of board business and your role as a board member?
- Volunteer to lead a discussion of the board's engagement with the student voice at a board meeting or away day. This could be done jointly with the Student Board Members and feed into the board's annual effectiveness review.

7. PARTNERSHIP WITH THE STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION

The key partnership areas

In colleges, there must be a strong partnership between students and their institution. This can be broken down into three key partnerships:

- Between students and the college management.
- Between students and the academic staff in their subject area.
- Between students and the college board.

These partnerships depend on student representatives engaging at a number of levels, from course reps talking to subject staff all the way to the student president and other officers who function as Student Board Members.

The Students' Association

As we have seen already, the Code of Good Governance for Scotland's Colleges (2016) requires a college to have a *strong and autonomous students' association*. The college is also required to ensure that the students' association is adequately resourced and operates in a fair and democratic manner.

As we saw in Section 1, the Framework for the Development of Strong and Effective College Students' Associations sets out a sector-agreed framework for how colleges and students' associations can work in partnership.

Most colleges will appoint at least one permanent member of staff to support the students' association. It will also have its own board, which in most cases will be an advisory board unless the students' association is a legal entity in its own right, in which case it will have its own board of management.

The students' association will have one or more elected officers, some of whom may well be 'sabbatical' posts, meaning that they are paid roles which the student takes time out from studying to undertake.

The varied demographic of college students means that sabbatical officers can bring a range of skills and experience to their roles. You should bear in mind that while they may need support in the governance role, they will bring a lot of wider experience that will enable them to contribute considerable expertise to the work of the board.

The board is also responsible for reviewing the constitution of the students' association at least every five years.

Involving students

A close reading of A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland will give you a good insight into the different ways in which a strong partnership between the college and its students' association can support the successful delivery of quality teaching and learning.

As a board member, there are a number of key areas of partnership that are worth considering in more detail (examples are given in the Framework):

- Involving students in shaping the direction of learning and teaching development and innovation.
- Provision of study and learning support and help with personal development planning.

- Support for course representatives, staff-student liaison committees and student conferences that deliver partnership working.
- Involving students in programme monitoring and review, new course developments and learning and teaching policy, including membership of appropriate committees.
- Making performance information available to students and ensuring that key performance indicators are informed by appropriate student surveys and consultation.

Summary

So we can see that the board needs to pay close attention to:

- The effective oversight of the governance of the students' association.
- The effective engagement of students in the work of the college.
- The effective involvement of students in the monitoring of performance.



EXERCISE 5

Engaging with your Students' Association.

Activity 1

- Arrange to speak to the member of staff who supports the students' association at your college.
- Ask them to describe the ways in which the students are supported to be involved in shaping the direction of learning at the college.
- Does their answer give you confidence that the college is following A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland?
- Consider what you as a board member can do to support this work.

Activity 2

- Ask to attend a meeting of the advisory board of your college's student association as an observer.
- Do the issues discussed align with the issues that are being discussed at college board meetings?
- Is there any learning from the discussions that you could take back to the college board meetings?
- Did the meeting provide evidence and give you comfort that the students' association is strong, autonomous and democratic?
- Report back to the next full college board meeting on your observations.

8. SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- There are three principal documents covering student engagement in Scottish Colleges that identify the role of the board in student engagement, the role of the student representatives, and the ways in which the student voice should be embedded in the work of the college:
 - The Code of Good Governance for Scotland's Colleges (2016).
 - A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland.
 - Framework for the Development of Strong and Effective College Students' Associations.
- It is important that the college has a strong, autonomous and democratic students' association working in partnership with the staff and board members of the college.
- The Student Board Members are normally appointed by virtue of their election as students' association officers. Once appointed they are required to act as full board members of the college, and this may provide a challenge for them in reconciling the two aspects of their role.
- The board should have a formal process for inducting, training and supporting the Student Board Members. This process should be ongoing throughout their time on the board and should include having an independent board member as mentor, effective briefing and preparation before each meeting and regular contact with the Chair.
- The board's agenda and business should be structured to place the student voice at the heart of all discussions. There should be active engagement with the Student Board Members to ensure that they are able to make an effective contribution.
- The board should ensure that effective student representation is embedded throughout the work of the college, giving students input into teaching and learning developments at all levels.
- The board should also ensure that students are fully involved in the monitoring of performance.



EXERCISE 6

Your role as a board member in embedding the student voice in the governance of your college.

Consider your learning points against each of the summary points above. Consider the opportunities for you as a board member to support the Student Board Members in their role and the embedding of the student voice in the governance of your college. How effective is your board's student engagement at present? How could you help to improve it? What further reflection or preparation do you need to enable you to do this?

You should now have enough material to form your action plan. You may find it easier to develop a table. You could list your planned actions under the sections of this module using the table below. You should plan when you intend to complete each action and note down how each action will help you carry out your role. You should also consider discussing your action plan with your Board Secretary/governance professional and/or Board Chair.

Topic	e.g. How do I ensure the student voice is heard at board meetings?
Planned action	e.g. Review the student engagement framework and discuss ideas with the Chair and Board Secretary.
Intended impact	e.g. Student board members have more opportunities to contribute to meetings.
Timescale	e.g. Over next 2 full board meetings (6 months).
Use of learning	e.g. To reflect on the impact of improvements in this area in the annual board effectiveness review.

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