



STUDENT REPRESENTATION IN SCOTTISH FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES

AN ASPECT REPORT FOR SFC BY HMIE

January 2006

CONTENTS

	Page
1. Introduction	1
2. Methodology	2
3. Summary of findings	3
4. How students in Scottish colleges are represented	5
5. How students contribute to improving the quality of their experience in college	6
5.1 Representation on boards of management	6
5.2 Cross-college committee membership	8
5.3 Programme committees	8
5.4 Other channels for representation	11
5.5 Communications and support	12
5.6 Student contribution to HMIE reviews since October 2004	14
6. Methods used to collect and analyse information about students' perceptions of their experience in college	15
6.1 Questionnaires	15
6.2 Focus groups and other consultations	16
7. Students' contributions to college self-evaluation and decision-making processes.	17
7.1 Self-evaluation arrangements	17
7.2 Evaluation of learning and teaching	18
7.3 Decision making	18
8. The overall impact of student contributions on the quality of their experience.	19
9. Progress since 2002	20
10. Recommendations for improvement	22
Appendix 1 Colleges visited and consulted	23
Appendix 2 Bibliography	24
Appendix 3 Glossary	25

1 Introduction

All further education colleges in Scotland have arrangements that enable students¹ to contribute to the improvement of the quality of their educational experience. These range from the informal contacts between staff and students to student membership of each college's² board of management, which was provided for in legislation. Over the years colleges have adopted systems that have provided them with information about students' views and have given students opportunities to be represented at various levels in their organisations. The HMIE report *Learner Representation in Quality Assurance Arrangements in Scottish Further Education Colleges* reported on the position in 2002 and made a number of recommendations. Since then, HMIE had introduced a new review model with a more comprehensive approach to engagement with learners. Also, the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC), the Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC) and, latterly, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) had provided funding for Student Participation in Quality Scotland (SPARQS) to assist students and institutions to improve the engagement of students in quality processes. SPARQS had recently carried out a mapping exercise into how students were represented across the FE sector in Scotland.

Given the welcome emphasis on enhancing the contribution of learners to quality improvement in recent years, it is timely to look again at the various arrangements in Scottish colleges that ensure the representation of learners. This report describes and evaluates the ways in which students were represented and the ways in which colleges gathered students' views. Finally, the report makes a number of recommendations for improvement.

¹ The term "student" is used interchangeably in this report with "learner".

² Applies to incorporated colleges

2 Methodology

This report is based on visits to six colleges and structured telephone interviews with staff in a further four colleges. During visits to colleges, meetings with staff involved senior managers and programme leaders. Meetings with learners involved the presidents of the students' associations, course representatives and others from both HN and FE level programmes as well as groups of apprentices, students of English for Speakers of Other Languages, outreach students and students on special programmes. A representative of the National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland joined HMIE on visits to two of the colleges. The report also draws on evidence from 20 HMIE reviews carried out during 2003-2004 and 2004-2005, and other HMIE contacts with colleges. The planning team for the report included a representative from NUS Scotland and there were helpful contributions from SPARQS.

3 Summary of findings

Some student members on college boards of management were able to make very effective contributions to full board meetings and board committee meetings. However, the procedures used in board of management meetings were sometimes intimidating for younger or less experienced students and it was difficult for them to contribute confidently without effective induction, training and support. Lack of experience and confidence could lead to missed opportunities to make important points. Poor continuity in student representation from year to year also reduced its overall effectiveness. More generally, students had a low awareness of the role associated with their membership of the college board of management.

The most significant contribution to quality improvement through college committees was through representatives on programme committees (often called course committees or course teams). With the exception of academic boards, few other college committees in most colleges had student members. The system of course representation was valued by staff and provided useful feedback from students, particularly full-time students. However, it was difficult for colleges to get some groups of students to participate and student attendance at meetings was often erratic. Overall, the system worked less well for part-time students, online learners and those in outreach centres.

Students and staff valued their informal contacts very highly. Many students, including part-time students and apprentices, regarded informal contacts as the most important and effective way of raising issues with the college. Staff and students also regarded guidance time and interviews as a good way for staff to get feedback from students. However, most colleges did not have systems for ensuring that any themes in the issues raised in this way by students were collated at college level.

Colleges provided varying degrees of support for students' associations, including funding for a full-time sabbatical post for the president in a small number of colleges. Support was most effective where there was a nominated staff member to act as a link between the students' association and the college as a whole. Poor communications between staff and students and among students reduced the effectiveness of student representation in more than a few colleges. SPARQS training and other support was starting to have an impact on the effectiveness of learner participation and it was valued by colleges and by the students and staff who had participated.

Questionnaires were used across the FE sector as one of the primary means of getting feedback from students. They were helpful in providing statistics for the college on client satisfaction and in identifying strengths and weaknesses. At other levels in colleges, staff used questionnaires for programme and unit evaluation but, in many colleges, there was not sufficient consistency of approach from year to year or across departments. Staff also used questionnaires for evaluating college services. Questionnaires were useful in reaching groups of students who were less well represented in other ways. While questionnaires could provide useful data and trend information about student satisfaction, the integrity of the results depended on the students' attitude to them. Focus groups gave colleges an effective way of getting a more reflective view from students, often on specific issues.

Learners had influence on college self-evaluation and decision making in a number of ways, but were not usually involved directly in either. They had most impact and influenced developments in practical matters such as timetabling, resources to support their learning and college recreation and canteen facilities. There was little detailed student involvement in discussion or reflection on learning and teaching.

There had not been significant changes in the arrangements for student representation in colleges since the HMIE report *Learner Representation in Quality Assurance Arrangements in Scottish Further Education Colleges* was published in 2002. However, colleges were now starting to recognise that learners have a contribution to make in learning and teaching as well as other areas of student life. SPARQS involvement over the past two years had also started to raise awareness among students of the importance of student representation, and the student voice now had a significantly higher profile in HMIE reviews.

The range of approaches adopted for establishing students' views was recognised in a number of recent HMIE reports. For example, the HMIE review report on John Wheatley College in 2005 reported that:

The college used a good range of methods to gather the views of learners and staff on the learning experience and the provision of key support services. Learners expressed their views through class representation on course committees and in focus groups. The college used inclusive strategies to collect views from groups that might otherwise have been excluded, and the quality team provided analyses of survey outcomes for review purposes.

At Angus College in 2005, HMIE reviewers observed that:

Learners made their views well understood through their involvement on programme teams, via regular questionnaire surveys and through good working relationships with staff throughout the college.

At Falkirk College (now Forth Valley College) in 2004, the HMIE report noted that:

A strong feature of the college ethos was the high commitment by all staff to obtaining and analysing regular feedback from students.

Overall, most learners were content with the ways open to them for raising issues of concern and were satisfied that the college and its staff would treat seriously any matter that they raised. However, across the sector apathy and lack of commitment within certain groups of students, and college systems that did not fully involve all sectors of the student population reduced the overall impact of representation.

4 How students in Scottish colleges are represented

Student involvement in decision making at the highest level in incorporated colleges was established in statute in 1992 through representation on college boards of management. A student representative on a college board of management could also be a member of board committees including those that dealt with, for example, student affairs and learning and teaching. The student representative on the board was normally the president of the students' association. Thus the students' association, which brought together student representatives from different parts of a college, could act as a bridge from the student body to senior college managers and the board. In about one in four colleges, the college funded the post of president of the students' association, either on a full-time or part-time basis.³

Systems in Scottish FE colleges enabled students to express their views about their experiences in college. In addition to representation at board of management level, students were able to have their views heard in a number of ways and colleges took a range of approaches to gathering and acting on these views. In some cases, students were members of whole-college committees that had an impact on the student experience, such as academic boards and IT and guidance committees. Colleges normally had arrangements to allow students or their representatives to participate in programme committees or, in a few cases, to convey student views to these committees through student-staff liaison groups at programme or department level. Evaluation by students of their experience was central to college quality improvement arrangements and was an important aspect of any external evaluation, including HMIE reviews. Student evaluation might be based on their perception of: their educational experience at programme or unit level; their wider experience in college including the provision of resources and services; or a specific aspect of college arrangements such as equal opportunities procedures. The most common systematic approach for such evaluations was to use questionnaires, which might be paper-based or online. Many colleges used discussion forums or focus groups to give them more detailed feedback on specific issues.

In addition to the formal structures, colleges obtained students' views from one-to-one and group meetings between students and teaching staff and between students and staff in student services departments. Staff often acted as advocates for their students, either formally or informally, to help them express their views or to convey the students' views to the appropriate staff member or committee.

³ Data from draft SPARQS mapping exercise report

5 How students contribute to improving the quality of their experience in college

5.1 Representation on boards of management

Membership of the college board of management gave the student representative, normally the president of the students' association, the opportunity to be involved in discussions of the major issues facing the college, and to gain a better understanding of college aims and objectives. The board of management was therefore a forum that enabled students to raise issues of importance to the student body at the highest level in the college. Normally, student members of college boards were also members of committees of the board, such as the learning and teaching committee or the student services committees where student affairs were considered, depending on the board structure. In one college, up to eight members of the students' association were able to be members of the board's student affairs committee. This raised significantly the profile of students' views that were passed to the board through committee reports. In another college, it was open to the sabbatical student member to attend all of the board committees. Attendance at board committees gave student representatives opportunities to be involved in the more detailed discussion of issues and contribute to boards' thinking, particularly if these committees' views were represented effectively at the board. Membership of boards also involved students in the consideration of college strategic plans at normal board meetings or specific planning days. Overall, student membership of college boards contributed to transparency in college proceedings.

In general, student representatives on boards of management felt that their fellow board members asked for and listened to their views and treated them with respect. However, normal board of management business procedures did not always help students to contribute confidently unless they had benefited from induction to the system, training and ongoing support. Few students had had any experience that prepared them for their role on a board prior to coming to college. Many students attended college for only one year, particularly in colleges where there was a high proportion of students studying at FE level. A few presidents of students' associations had previously spent a year as vice-presidents but most were in office for one year only, and a few had not had any prior involvement in the work of the students' association. As a result, there was little continuity from year to year and students often found the role of student representative on the board to be challenging, particularly in respect of discussion of financial and estate matters. A few colleges had had difficulties in appointing a student representative to the board or keeping one in post for a whole year, often because of difficulties with the running of the students' association. The result was that there was no student representative on the board or the incumbent changed during the year. Representatives were not always appointed in time to attend meetings early in the academic year. These factors significantly reduced the effectiveness of representation on the board and had a negative effect on student representation at other levels. NUS Scotland favours an arrangement that allows for two student representatives on a college board of management. At least one college has adopted this practice.

Staff in most colleges had taken a range of actions to engage students' interest in college affairs. However, students in general had a low awareness of their college's

board of management or its membership, often because of a perception that it was not important for them or ineffective communications from the board itself. Some students simply wanted to concentrate on their own education and did not wish to be involved in representing others. Few had a clear understanding of their board's responsibilities and activities, their board's involvement in the governance and management of the college or their own representation on it through their association. In some cases, communication in the college was not effective enough in providing readily accessible information for students on the work of the board or its membership. Good support for the students' association by college senior managers was important in making communication with students effective and in informing students about their representation at this level. This support encouraged staff and the students' association to work together using a range of media, including the intranet, to inform students.

Similar representation issues have arisen in further education colleges in England.

Some approaches in England

In England the instrument of governance introduced in 2000 made it compulsory for colleges to have at least one student governor on their governing bodies. One college in England had created the role of *governor emeritus* to maintain continuity of learner representation from year to year and to help preserve "the college collective memory". This person was appointed for an indefinite period and did not have voting powers. The *governor emeritus* was also chair of the student services committee and had regular contact with learners and their representatives through the college student union. The college had introduced a system whereby the *governor emeritus* was accompanied by a student observer to help with succession planning, but also to offer support and advice to the *governor emeritus* where necessary.

The possibility of a parent governor had been suggested in England. The NUS (UK) in its response⁴ to Sir Andrew Foster's review of further education in England⁵ advocated that there should be at least one parent governor as a board member of an FE college. With current levels of activity involving the under-16 age group set to expand in the future, the NUS (UK) felt that this was an appropriate step to take.

A Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) paper⁶ summarised the key findings from a study into student representation across the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA). The paper took the view that student involvement in representational bodies was an entitlement. One section considered how students and colleges could develop effective representation procedures. It defined the roles of principals and senior managers in illustrating how representational systems could work and how the student body could assume the representative roles effectively.

⁴ NUS response to consultation on the "Review of the future role of FE colleges" by Sir Andrew Foster, 2005

⁵ "Realising the Potential – A review of the future role of FE colleges", Sir Andrew Foster, November 2005

⁶ "Student representation in further education and sixth-form colleges", QCA, August 2004

5.2 Cross-college committee membership

Colleges took different approaches to student membership of cross-college committees. Where colleges had an academic board, it was common for a student to be a member. In a few colleges, no whole-college committees had student members. In others, students were involved in a range of committees where they had a contribution to make. Examples included equal opportunities, ICT and guidance. Staff considered that effective representation on college committees depended on the commitment, experience and skills of the individual student members and that these attributes were difficult to sustain from year to year, again because of the relatively short time spent in college by most learners.

Overall, learners were not widely involved in cross-college committees. However, an example of sector-leading and innovative practice was reported in the HMIE review of Dundee College in 2005. This related to student involvement in the financial support committee.

The student financial support committee comprised staff from a variety of support and teaching areas. It oversaw the disbursement of all student hardship and childcare funds available to the college. The committee had built on SFEFC and SAAS guidelines and involved student representatives to develop clear criteria to ensure transparency and consistency in the distribution of funds within an established framework.

The committee operated sensitively and flexibly to ensure that the background and needs of individual students were fully taken into account. Well-considered arrangements for disbursing funds and monitoring the effectiveness of arrangements also contributed to a comprehensive system that provided coherent support, impacted positively on retention, and maximised the benefits accruing to those learners who had serious financial barriers to overcome in their efforts to engage in lifelong learning.

5.3 Programme committees

Programme committees were key elements in college quality improvement systems. They had responsibility for the quality of aspects of planning and delivery of a single programme or a group of related programmes. Colleges normally required programme committees to meet up to three times in a year and to report on the quality of their programmes under a range of headings that were usually aligned closely to the SFEFC/HMIE quality framework for Scottish FE colleges.

Colleges adopted a range of approaches to student representation on programme committees and attendance at programme committee meetings. In most colleges, student representatives (often called course or class representatives) were selected by fellow students, volunteered or were asked by teaching staff to take on the role, usually during the first few months of the academic year. This selection process was often co-ordinated centrally, but in a few colleges it was left entirely to class tutors with the

result that representation was not uniform across the college and the significance of the role was diminished. The course representative might represent a single class group or all the groups undertaking a programme. The former arrangement had the advantage that the representatives were known to their classmates. Also, staff felt that the course representatives' confidence was likely to be higher when more than one representative attended a meeting with a group of teaching staff. Some staff thought it better that student representatives should not be elected early in the year, in order to give students time to get to know each other. For this reason or because of difficulties in finding volunteers it was common for student representatives not to be established in their role until late October. In a few cases, representatives were not appointed at all. In a few colleges, students were invited to express their views at staff-student liaison meetings or at meetings with the programme leader held some time prior to the formal programme team meeting. They did not then attend the programme committee meeting itself. Staff in colleges that used this system felt that this arrangement reduced the barrier to students who might feel inhibited from speaking at a formal programme committee meeting. However, it also reduced the student representatives' direct involvement in programme committee business, self-evaluations and the decision-making process.

Colleges usually had standard agendas for programme team meetings and standard templates for reports. In most cases, learners would be asked to withdraw for some parts of the committee business in order to maintain confidentiality when other students were named. However, in some colleges, students only attended while the report of students' views was under discussion. This significantly reduced their involvement. A few colleges required that students' views were recorded separately in meeting reports and actions monitored clearly. In many other cases, learners who had raised issues through the course representation system were not informed in a systematic and timely way about progress on the points they had raised. Where feedback was left to the course representative, reliable information to students usually depended on the course representative attending the next meeting of the committee and, in turn, reporting back to the class group. The overall effect was to delay and reduce the reliability of feedback and leave students unclear as to the effectiveness of their interventions.

Few colleges had a written remit for student course representatives. Course representatives attended meetings and might also approach tutors outwith formal meetings to speak about class issues, or to act as supporters for classmates. A few students commented that they had little interaction with their course representative prior to or after programme committee meetings, while others did not know whether they were represented or who represented them. The majority of issues raised by students centred on practicalities such as timetabling, resources for their programme, learning materials or facilities in the college. Often, other matters were raised that were legitimate concerns but not the responsibility of the programme committee, such as canteen prices and availability of parking places. Student representatives were seldom involved in any detailed discussion of learning and teaching.

While these arrangements for student representation provided full-time students with opportunities to contribute to quality improvement, they were often less effective for part-time learners, online or distance learners and those in outreach centres. For a few colleges, this was because there were no systematic arrangements to include these

groups in the process of student representation. More generally, part-time and outreach students were less likely to feel fully engaged in the college community. Teaching staff knowledge of their students was often high in small-scale outreach centres but the links from staff to college managers that enabled the student view to be represented were often less well established. Learners in outreach centres also faced practical difficulties in attending meetings at specific times or locations away from their normal centre. Staff noted that some groups of students were less likely to wish to act as course representatives than others. These less proactive groups included the engineering and craft students who were often in college as apprentices. Students from subject areas such as social sciences and creative arts were more likely to be involved. Lack of involvement did not necessarily indicate that students were apathetic about their experience in college, as many students felt that they could deal with most issues of concern through the teaching staff they knew. In general, students were less likely to be involved if they felt that the college was a secondary aspect of their lives.

The majority of comments on student representation in HMIE review reports were positive.

The HMIE review of mathematics at Cardonald College in 2003 noted that:
Student representatives on full-time programmes and relevant HE partners contributed fully to the programme review process.

Also, at South Lanarkshire College in 2003, HMIE reviewers reporting on the *Quality assurance* element observed that:
Student representatives on programme teams made valuable contributions to the review and evaluation of programmes.

However, at Central College in 2005, HMIE reported under *Quality assurance* that:
More than a few programme teams had not implemented effectively college procedures to enable learners to express their views through representation on programme teams or other means.

Across colleges, the system of student representation on programme committees was weakened in some subject areas and colleges by:

- lack of student interest and irregular participation;
- students' inhibitions about speaking, particularly when there was only one student among a group of college staff;
- the relative infrequency of programme team meetings and delays in staff feeding back decisions and outcomes;
- the concentration of students' comments on practical matters and lack of discussion of learning and teaching; and
- under-representation of part-time students and students in outreach centres.

Overall, the system of course representation in colleges was a well-established part of college quality improvement systems. It was valued by students and welcomed by staff. It provided a direct way for students to speak to staff and the arrangements provided some assurance that their comments would be listened to and followed up if necessary.

Students who acted as course representatives were of the view that staff treated their contributions seriously and tried to meet their needs. Colleges recognised the difficulties in getting students to participate and a number had taken action to encourage students to become course representatives. These actions included promotion during induction days and in college diaries, students' handbooks and websites, as well as work with the students' association to encourage participation. Some colleges had also changed the representation system to allow several students to attend meetings of the programme committee. Another college recognised students' contributions in their role as course representative by giving them a certificate that recorded their involvement. Colleges were starting to recognise that this was one way of developing citizenship skills, sometimes making this explicit in college handbooks.

5.4 Other channels for representation

As noted previously, most students found that the clearest and most immediate way of expressing their views or raising a concern that related to their studies was to talk to a member of the teaching staff or to their programme leader. Almost all students knew whom they would approach about academic or personal matters. In general, students thought that informal arrangements were effective in dealing with issues at the level of their unit or programme, but accepted that they were less likely to be effective where some whole-college matter was involved, for example, the library's opening hours or ICT provision. They cited a number of examples of issues raised by an individual learner or a group of learners directly with teaching staff that had been dealt with to their satisfaction. Almost all felt that college staff were approachable and concerned for learners' academic and personal well-being. One student with additional learning needs contrasted this approachability with her experience of school - "*they (the lecturers) don't ignore what you tell them*". These less formal approaches were of particular importance to part-time students or learners in outreach centres who were less likely to be involved in course representation arrangements, or to have easy access to central student services staff. Staff also found informal methods helpful in gathering students' views and these views contributed to staff perceptions about student satisfaction.

Students frequently referred to involvement of student services staff as being an effective means of dealing with personal matters. One student referred to student services staff in his college as being "*absolutely fantastic*".

Timetabled guidance slots for class groups and one-to-one guidance interviews provided good opportunities for learners to discuss their progress and to raise any matters of concern. Arrangements for guidance time varied significantly between colleges and within some colleges, with most guidance time likely to be given to full-time students on programmes at FE level. Staff and students regarded regular timetabled guidance periods as effective in identifying concerns quickly, in dealing with them directly or in referring them to the appropriate person or group in the college. Similarly, one-to-one guidance interviews linked to personal learning planning were effective in identifying factors affecting the individual learner's progress. Where the outcomes of these guidance interviews were compared and collated, they helped staff to identify whole-college themes for consideration by college managers. In one college a

guidance forum of central specialists and teaching staff with a tutorial role met on a monthly basis. This was an effective way of enabling college staff to discuss and collate the main issues arising from student guidance sessions. However, this form of joined-up arrangement was rare.

The nature of the links between the senior staff and the students' association or students in general varied significantly between colleges. Links were sometimes formalised by regular meetings between officers of the students' association and college senior managers. One college introduced a *Principal's Question Time* at which students put questions directly to the college principal. The session took place each month with minutes and action points recorded. This session provided learners with direct access to the principal with action points recorded to ensure progress on issues. However, in another college, there had in the past been a degree of suspicion between managers and the students' association that had taken time to resolve. Most students were very positive about their engagements with college staff at all levels.

5.5 Communications and support

Students were often informed about colleges' systems of student representation during induction, from college diaries or students' handbooks, or by class tutors. In addition, some college websites stressed the importance of the students' association and the role of course representatives and provided information about them. One college had found that providing lunch for students' association meetings had helped to improve attendance. Some students felt that the induction period was too early for the college to try to involve students in college representation systems as students had too many other things to think about at that stage. Others felt that their college should do more to raise awareness - "*the college needs to raise the profile of class representatives.*"

Recent work by SPARQS had helped to raise awareness of representation issues, and had helped students to engage more effectively and conduct their affairs in a more business-like way. SPARQS had provided learners with a better understanding of their role in the college and how they could contribute as student representatives. Those students who had participated in SPARQS training had thought it helpful. SPARQS had written a helpful handbook for course representatives, and other training materials were made available on its website⁷. In addition, NUS Scotland and SPARQS jointly provided training for student board members at a residential event. Colleges generally supported SPARQS in making arrangements to train students to play their part in college quality improvement systems. However, many students had no knowledge of SPARQS and take-up of its training by student representatives was erratic, sometimes due to poor communication within the college. Staff who had attended SPARQS training on working with the course representatives had also found it beneficial.

⁷ <http://www.sparqs.org.uk>

The National Union of Students-Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI) provided support materials for student representation in Northern Ireland.

Student support in Northern Ireland

The NUS-USI in Northern Ireland had produced a pack⁸ for student representatives. The pack set out to highlight the distinction between student representation and student feedback and made clear the avenues which should be explored by student representatives. The pack explained the nature of the committee structure prevalent in colleges and the role that student representatives can play. There was detailed information on how to make the best of student representative structures. The pack was split into sections that dealt explicitly with student representation including the course representation system, the role of a course representative and quality assurance. The pack also contained pro-forma documentation on questionnaires, elections and publicity.

Most colleges supported their students' associations to enable them to communicate with their student body effectively, and a few colleges had set up a student section on their intranet to provide a resource for use by the students' association. However, ineffective communication with students, particularly with part-time students, reduced the effectiveness of student representation in more than a few colleges. Many students, particularly part-time and outreach students, were not aware of the range of channels open to them for communicating their views.

Colleges provided varying degrees of financial and other support for their students' association. A small number of colleges had a full-time sabbatical post for the president of the students' association. Others provided a part-time salary for the president to allow him or her to spend more time on this work while continuing to study. These full-time or part-time posts raised the status of the president of the students' association and released time to make the association more effective in terms of communication with students and representation on college committees. Most colleges provided some form of additional support in the form of financial assistance, office space, support with administration or by nominating a link person to act in a liaison role. Where a member of staff acted in a link role, or as a student advocate, they were able to help maintain continuity in the operation of the students' association from year to year, initiate elections and provide advice on contacts, college procedures and financial management. However, it was rare for colleges to provide significant training for students to enable them to carry out their duties as representatives.

A strength of many course representation systems was the link between course representatives and the students' association. Where there were good links between course representatives and the students' association executive team, and the students' association executive team was effective, there was likely to be better central support for course representatives, a more coherent approach by the association to college-wide issues and stronger links with staff.

⁸ "FE Development: Student Rep Pack", NUS-USI

5.6 Student contribution to HMIE reviews since October 2004

HMIE introduced its revised review model and framework in January 2005. Among a number of other changes to the review model were improvements to the method and extent of engagement with learners. Following the completion of the previous four-year cycle of reviews in 2004, HMIE worked with SFEFC to re-examine how students should be involved in college reviews. Valuable contributions from SPARQS, NUS Scotland and a small group of colleges informed this reflection on the most effective way to capture learners' views. As a result, HMIE revised arrangements for interactions between reviewers and learners. The schedule for the briefing visit to a college in advance of a review was revised to include a meeting between the managing inspector and the students' association to inform students about the process prior to the review. HMIE also revised the student briefing leaflet that it made available to colleges. During the first phase of the review, the review model required subject reviewers to meet a group of course representatives and a group of students who were not course representatives. Subject reviewers also had discussions with several class groups after they had observed lessons. The review model required most college reviewers to meet different groups of learners to discuss issues such as guidance and support, resources, quality improvement and the work of the board of management. These arrangements helped to provide reviewers with a better insight into students' views and to raise the profile of the student voice during reviews significantly.

6 Methods used to collect and analyse information about students' perceptions of their experience in college

6.1 Questionnaires

Colleges used questionnaires as a means of collecting client satisfaction data and for getting more detailed feedback on particular topics. This process was well established in all colleges, although different approaches to collecting and analysing the information were in place. Some colleges favoured online questionnaires as a more efficient way of collecting the data and as a way of encouraging more students to participate. Others encouraged students to complete questionnaires by issuing and collecting them during class time. In some cases, samples of students were selected while in other cases questionnaires were given to all students.

A typical college student satisfaction questionnaire designed to evaluate the student experience dealt with facilities and resources, guidance, aspects of learning and teaching, equal opportunities and assessment. Where several questionnaires were issued during the year, staff might concentrate their questions on different aspects of college provision at different times of the year. For example, the quality of induction and initial guidance would be covered in the autumn, with other topics dealt with later in the year.

Results of college-level questionnaires were usually collected centrally, analysed and then distributed to departments and programme committees for consideration. Comments that were specific to one aspect of provision were usually given to the responsible individuals but not shared more widely. Data collected on the same basis over a period of time could provide trend information that was helpful in evaluating the impact of quality improvement activities and in highlighting any causes for concern. Overall results were often published in college annual reviews. One college, with a very comprehensive website, made available its student satisfaction data online. Some colleges used this data well. The HMIE college review report on Aberdeen College in 2004 observed that:

It (the college) produced a comprehensive set of quantitative data from student and client surveys and used this information effectively to inform quality improvement in teaching sections and support services.

Teaching departments in colleges sometimes used questionnaires for their own programmes. A few teaching staff, in turn, used questionnaires to get feedback on the units they were teaching. These unit evaluations, where these were used, were found by staff to be more useful for evaluating learning and teaching. However, questionnaires at unit level were not used consistently across the sector or used to the same extent by different teaching departments within the majority of colleges. Few staff used these evaluations to initiate detailed discussions on learning and teaching with their students. College support staff also used questionnaires widely to get feedback on specific aspects of provision, for example, guidance and library services.

Students' views on questionnaires were mixed. They valued the fact that their views were sought, but sometimes found the questions too superficial and were doubtful that fellow students always answered the questions in a thoughtful way.

While all questionnaires were recognised as having shortcomings, they gave an overview of student attitudes to college provision, allowed trend information to be captured and provided the means to find out the views of students who might not normally be able or wish to participate in other arrangements for representation.

Student feedback based on questionnaires was an essential part of college quality systems and, in their various forms, questionnaires provided college managers and staff with valuable information on the strengths and weaknesses of the student experience. However, the effectiveness of any method of evaluating the student experience depended on the attitude of students. If they regarded questionnaires as inconvenient and superficial tick-lists that they had to complete, they were unlikely to give informed and reflective answers to the questions.

6.2 Focus groups and other consultations

More than a few colleges used focus groups to get students' views on a range of issues. They were valuable in providing a more detailed, although narrowly-based, insight into student views than could be gained from questionnaires. Colleges arranged thematic focus groups to discuss issues as diverse as induction, cultural awareness and childcare provision. In one college, focus group discussion on progression to higher education had led the college to reconsider its approach to learner independence and learning styles. In addition to thematic focus groups, one college had arrangements for regular discussion group sessions between students and senior managers and similar meetings between students and department heads. Topics for these discussion groups covered general student experience issues. A number of colleges involved in new campus developments had made special arrangements for collecting students' views on these developments. For example, one college had had extensive consultations with student representatives that resulted in a "shopping list" for the new campus. Students and college managers valued this consultation. In a few colleges, students were involved in some of the colleges' audit processes to help evaluate aspects of the colleges' provision.

The HMIE review report on Cumbernauld College in 2004 reported under the *Quality improvement* element that:

Staff used a variety of approaches to evaluate learning and teaching. These approaches included peer observation and sharing of practice through team teaching, and student focus groups where students assessed critically their learning experiences.

7 Learners' contributions to college self-evaluation and decision-making processes.

7.1 Self-evaluation arrangements

Self-evaluation of students' educational experience was an essential part of college quality improvement systems. Colleges carried out self-evaluation at subject level and college level in a number of ways. At subject level, it was common for self-evaluation to be based on review of the individual programmes that were offered within that subject area. HMIE reviews found that colleges used a wide range of mechanisms that allowed learners to contribute indirectly to self-evaluation by expressing their views on their experience in college. These included questionnaires, focus groups, contributions at programme committee meetings and staff-student liaison meetings at various levels.

The HMIE review of care at Aberdeen College in 2004 noted that:

They (staff) used feedback from students gathered from questionnaires, focus groups and student representatives to contribute to self-evaluation.

At West Lothian College the HMIE review of sport and leisure in 2004 observed that:

Twice yearly the section organised an innovative self-evaluation event, which involved all staff and student representatives. Staff provided students with a variety of opportunities to feed back on the quality of provision and used student questionnaires to evaluate units. Students were encouraged to feed back views on the quality of learning and teaching.

However, learners were not often directly involved in self-evaluation at subject or section level because there was not usually a forum that involved students and staff at this level. Learners' most evident contribution to self-evaluation at subject level was through the system of course representation and attendance at programme committee meetings. The extent of these contributions depended on the extent to which students participated in programme committee meetings and were able to work with staff to identify strengths and weaknesses. It also depended on whether students were given the opportunity to see and comment on annual programme reports or their equivalent. College approaches to student involvement in reporting varied, but the schedule for completion of annual reports, with reports being completed in late summer or early autumn in most colleges, worked against any real involvement by learners. As a result, the influence of students on self-evaluation of subject areas was almost always indirect, being mediated through staff.

On occasion, students were involved in self-evaluation exercises as members of college committees working on specific aspects of college operations. For example, one college had carried out a self-evaluation exercise on race relations and this had involved the student member of the equal opportunities group. Student members of college boards of management had access to all self-evaluation papers that were presented to their boards but, overall, students did not normally have significant opportunities to participate in or comment on self-evaluation at subject or college level.

7.2 Evaluation of learning and teaching

Learners had a number of opportunities to give their views on learning and teaching, including programme committee meetings and in responses to questionnaires. Over the past few years, programme teams have given greater attention to the discussion of learning and teaching and contributions from students could inform those discussions. In one college where peer observation of lessons was a normal part of the quality improvement arrangements, the member of staff observing the lesson asked for the views of learners after the lesson. As noted earlier, another college used focus groups to help evaluate learning and teaching. However, the lack of fully informed and evaluative discussion of learning and teaching was reported in a number of recent HMIE reviews. Most students had not been involved in any detailed discussion of learning and teaching with their tutors. In part, this was because they lacked the experience to participate well in such a discussion or were too diffident to engage directly with their tutors. However, staff did not give sufficient encouragement to students to engage in this area of discussion. The whole-college questionnaires used by colleges covered a number of themes that related to learning and teaching but the information gained from these was not very informative for staff evaluating this aspect of their own provision in programme committees or individually. End-of-unit questionnaires by individual teaching staff, which were more helpful in this regard, were not used consistently across colleges.

7.3 Decision making

Students were represented on college boards of management and often on academic boards, but they were not widely involved directly in decision making, except in matters that were regarded as the responsibility of the students' association. However, students did have indirect influence over decisions that were reached by college staff, for example, through their comments at programme committee meetings, focus groups or responses to questionnaires. The student representatives on college boards of management were able to be present when major decisions on finance, estates and planning were made by the board and this helped to inform students about the background to decisions. However, most students did not think student members of boards exerted much influence at this level.

8 The overall impact of student contributions on the quality of their experience.

The value of student contributions at board level was very dependent on the individual students and their interaction with the board. Some were reticent and did not contribute much to the meetings. Few students felt that they had made a significant difference to board thinking. However, a student's presence at meetings served to help focus attention on the student experience as one of the key priorities for the college. Students had greater impact when they were members of committees of the board, where they were more confident in expressing views during in-depth discussion of issues.

Learners and staff were able to exemplify improvements that had resulted from student representation. These were often relatively specific to their programme or arrangements in the department. For example, one class of apprentices had been able to change the timetabled hours to fit better with the students' normal hours of employment. In other colleges, feedback from students had resulted in improvements to learning materials, the sequencing and timing of units and the amount of practical work in programmes. Students had had influence on the contract for catering in one college. Directly or indirectly, students had also influenced decisions on the use of social or recreational facilities, colleges' approaches to provision of smoking areas and the opening hours for college facilities such as libraries.

Individual learners and class groups had been able to influence developments that affected them directly and students' perception was that their views were mostly acted on where possible. The HMIE college review report on Aberdeen College in 2004 noted that:

There were many examples of improvements and developments having taken place in direct response to the feedback from students through class tutors, student surveys and programme review meetings.

The HMIE college review report on Stevenson College, Edinburgh also commented that:

Staff actively sought feedback from learners through a variety of methods, analysed the results and implemented actions for improvement. Where learners had occasion to comment about any aspect of their programme, they felt that staff listened seriously to their comment and took action promptly.

Overall, effective student involvement enabled learners to be active participants and showed them that their participation could bring about change, while helping to develop their citizenship skills.

9 Progress since 2002

The HMIE report *Learner Representation in Quality Assurance Arrangements in Scottish Further Education Colleges*, written in 2002, contained four recommendations.

1 SFEFC should review the continued use of the standard student questionnaire to generate national data on student perceptions and consider alternative methods of capturing the evidence, including the issue of externally devised and administered questionnaires timed to coincide with the four-yearly reviews of colleges.

SFEFC took a decision to end the requirement for colleges to use a standard student questionnaire as a basis for national data, on the grounds that this approach was inflexible, did not meet colleges' needs for student feedback, and did not general useful national measures of quality. Instead, SFEFC now expects all colleges to develop and deploy appropriate questionnaires or other feedback mechanisms as part of their internal self-evaluation processes. Colleges' use of such feedback mechanisms forms part of the evidence base for HMIE college review. In addition, SFEFC and now SFC have commissioned national student satisfaction surveys, and a longitudinal study of 2004 leavers, which provide more helpful data on national trends.

2 Colleges should provide guidance to course committees on the systematic review of student evaluation data and existing good practice in the sector should be disseminated more widely.

During the period since 2002 colleges generally made further progress in using the HMIE framework for review and evaluation by course or programme committees. Across colleges, there were different approaches to programme committee use of the framework, depending on the priority in each college. In 2004, colleges started to adapt their guidance to programme committees to take account of the revised framework that HMIE introduced in May 2004. The revised framework provided a good basis for programme committees to report on student evaluation data, with clear references to the learner's contribution as well as a greater emphasis on engagement with the learner in quality elements A5 *Learning and teaching process* and A7 *Learner progress and outcomes*. The college review quality elements A8 *Quality assurance and improvement*, B6 *Quality assurance* and B7 *Quality improvement* also provided guidance to colleges on areas where students' contributions were important. Most programme committees gave due attention to student input at programme committee meetings, and a few recorded and acted on student contributions in a systematic way. In general, programme committees and staff also noted and acted where appropriate on specific comments that students made in questionnaires about programmes or units. However, there was not sufficient in-depth analysis of the data from student evaluations at this level, often because the raw data was not available at programme or unit level or because college guidance on the approach to its use was not available.

There had not been effective sharing of good practice across the sector on ways of improving student representation.

3 SFEFC should consider commissioning further investigation and research into learner representation issues in further education to encourage and facilitate greater student involvement in boards of management and college self-evaluation.

SHEFC, SFEFC and, recently, SFC provided funding for SPARQS to help students and institutions to improve the engagement of students in quality processes. Through its training courses for students and staff and its published materials, SPARQS helped to raise awareness of representation issues in colleges, and helped students to engage more effectively in representation issues. SPARQS had enabled learners who had taken part in their training to understand better their role in the college and how they could contribute as student representatives. Colleges generally supported SPARQS in making arrangements to train students to play their part in college quality improvement systems.

4 HMIE and SFEFC should review the reporting of learner representation issues in published review reports.

Following the completion of the previous four-year cycle of reviews in 2004, HMIE worked with SFEFC to re-examine how students should be involved in reviews of Scotland's colleges. HMIE introduced its revised review model in January 2005. The new model included improvements to the method and extent of engagement with learners so that subject and college review reports would be informed by more systematic and structured discussion with learners. As a result, subject reports written in 2005 put strong emphasis on the key issues of *Learning and teaching process* and *Learner progress and outcomes* and were based on much more input from learners than hitherto. The revised review model also provided scope for reviewers to report on learner representation issues under quality elements B1 *Educational leadership, direction and management*, B6 *Quality assurance* and B7 *Quality improvement*. These arrangements helped to provide reviewers with a better insight into students' views and raised the profile of learners during reviews.

10 Recommendations for improvement

SFC should continue to work with colleges and others to help:

- colleges to work with students' associations so that students in all sectors of the student body are well informed on student representation issues;
- colleges to ensure that student representatives on college committees receive sufficient and timely training to enable them to participate fully; and
- boards of management to ensure that sufficient training and support is available to student members to enable them to participate fully and effectively.

Colleges should:

- ensure that they have consistent guidance for staff on procedures for electing student representatives to programme committees;
- with their students' associations, develop systems of student representation that maximise learner participation for all modes of attendance, including outreach and remote learners;
- work with their students' associations to improve continuity from year to year in the operation of students' associations;
- review their college committee memberships so that student representation is included where it would be effective;
- consider how students could make a more effective and direct contribution to self-evaluation including the evaluation of learning and teaching; and
- work with their students' associations to consider how they might use existing ICT resources to improve communications between students and their representatives, especially for part-time and outreach students.

Appendix 1 Colleges visited and consulted

Aberdeen College
Banff and Buchan College
Barony College
Clydebank College
Cumbernauld College
Edinburgh's Telford College
James Watt College
Langside College
North Glasgow College
West Lothian College

Other organisations involved

NUS Scotland
SPARQS

Appendix 2 Bibliography

1. "Student services: Effective approaches to retaining students in Higher Education", Liz Thomas, Jocey Quinn, Kim Slack, Lorraine Casey, Institute for Access Studies, Staffordshire University, ISBN 1-904133-14-2
2. "Survey of the Student Experience", September 2005, Scottish Funding Councils for Further and Higher Education, prepared by Douglas Dalziel, TNS Social, 121967.
3. "Learner Representation in Quality Assurance Arrangements in Scottish Further Education colleges", Report by HMIE for the Scottish Further Education Funding Council, March 2002.
4. "Increasing student participation in self-governance: A comparison of graduate and undergraduate student perceptions." Robin Love and Michael Miller, 2003, College Student Journal 37, No 4.
5. "Collecting and responding to post-graduate student feedback: The experience of the University of Bristol", Sophie Pearn, July 2004, Policy and practice in higher education, vol 8, No 3.
6. "Guide for Members of Higher Education Governing Bodies in the UK", 2004, http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2004/04_40/
7. NUS response to consultation on the "Review of the future role of FE colleges" by Sir Andrew Foster, 2005, <http://resource.nusonline.co.uk/media/resource/Review%20of%20the%20future%20role%20of%20FE%20Colleges.pdf>.
8. "Realising the Potential – A review of the future role of FE colleges", Sir Andrew Foster, November 2005, <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/furthereducation/fereview/downloads/REALISING06.pdf>
9. "FE Development: Student Rep Pack" , http://www.nistudents.org/sections/students_union/000456.php
10. "Student participation in shared governance: A means of advancing democratic values", J. Boland, September 2005, Tertiary Education and Management, Vol 11, No 3.
11. "Student representation in further education and sixth-form colleges", August 2004, The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), http://www.qca.org.uk/downloads/11531_qca-05-1507-studentrep3.pdf
12. HMIE Sector-leading and innovative practice examples, HMIE review of Dundee College, 2005, <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/inspection/DundeeCollRep.html>

Appendix 3 Glossary

ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
FE	Further Education
HN	Higher National
LSDA	Learning and Skills Development Agency
NUS	National Union of Students
NUS-USI	National Union of Students-Union of Students in Ireland
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
SFEFC	Scottish Further Education Funding Council
SHEFC	Scottish Higher Education Funding Council
SPARQS	Student Participation in Quality Scotland