

Learner voice in context

Richard Atkins, Principal of Exeter College, talks about his college's approach to learner voice and sets it in the context of a learner involvement strategy.

“Exeter College has had something of a tradition of involving and listening to students. I think because we've had a sabbatical elected student union president for over 20 years, who's been a member of the governing body and who's regularly met with me as principal, we've usually had an active student union executive. So the idea of the students having elected representatives who make their views known to governors and management is probably not an alien concept. I think what we've been trying to do over the last two years, and with the launch of the learner involvement strategy, is to make that process more extensive, comprehensive and inclusive. I believe that the process we've now engaged in, which is much more systematic and comprehensive, ought to ensure that we hear the views of all the students and not just some of the students.

What we're now doing, through lead tutors and through having our own learner voice champion as a member of staff, is to ensure that every tutor group does elect a student rep and that, initially, those student reps simply go to a faculty meeting, a much smaller group than the big full college student council. It's easy for them to express their views and our student learner voice champion can encourage them to do that. At faculty level we can capture feedback from the entire tutor group and then, from each faculty, they will each elect one of those representatives to join the college learner voice group. There's a genuine opportunity for every student here to get their views heard more clearly.

What I found with students' views are that some of the very best ideas come from the students and it helps involve students. It helps improve the student experience and, as a result, it helps improve the College image to be honest, as well as the College's reputation.

I think it's really important to listen. Occasionally, clearly there are going to be ideas coming forward that the senior management team and the students aren't necessarily going to agree immediately but, I mean, that's about organisation, that's about growing up on all sides. There's a process of discussion, debate and so on to try and reach a consensus. I have to say in recent years there hasn't been any major issue that's stood between us which may have caused there to be a rift in any way. I must say in my job, and I know my colleagues on the senior team feel the same, I think it's absolutely vital. It's one thing to walk around the College talking to students informally, that's important, but to collect systematic comprehensive views from all students is really important.

I think it is about giving students confidence in the same way that you'd want to do with staff; that putting forward your views, putting forward suggestions for

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improvements, putting forward ideas is something that's welcomed. It certainly isn't frowned upon or discouraged. And even when those views aren't necessarily totally conformist, that doesn't mean that you shouldn't be encouraged to put them forward. I think any education should benefit from lively discussion and debate.

We've looked very much for people who could empathise with students and actively engage with them. We also looked for people who would be credible with staff as well as students.

The focus with the learner involvement strategy is about quality and quality improvement; in the same way that we use advanced practitioners to support and develop our teaching staff, we're using learner involvement champions to improve and develop the way we listen to students' views.

Like lots of colleges we've done the surveys for some years and they're a good thing, so I wouldn't in any way discourage them. We participate in a benchmarked survey operation and we do two major surveys a year; a post-induction survey and an on-course survey later on in the year, and many students take part in that. They're externally conducted and analysed. We then analyse the feedback and publish a students' action plan each year, which talks about the things that they've particularly identified in the survey. We increasingly put posters up around the college saying 'you said...', 'we did...' that sort of thing, to show that we're listening. But that can be mechanistic, even involving external companies to do that, you're relying an awful lot on the person who distributes the questionnaire and asks for it to be done. We're trying to build a more pro-active personalised relationship in terms of their involvement, to complement and support that more mechanistic one. I think there's a place for both; I think questionnaires on their own aren't going to do the trick.

I think this is a job that'll never be completed, isn't it? We've got a lot of students here and to engage all of them, or as many as possible, will be a continuous challenge. I think if we can plant amongst the student body genuine champions, both staff and students who encourage that culture and climate, more and more students will have the confidence to come forward, and I think that can work."