



Learner Conferences: Case Study

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Stratford upon Avon College is a small college with a broad curriculum offer and a diverse student population. In addition to the main 16 – 18 provision the college attracts a large number of students from overseas, particularly on foundation programmes leading to Higher Education. There are over 100 learners on Entry and Pre entry level programmes designed for students with specific learning difficulties and disabilities. The college wanted to revitalise the way in which learner views were recorded and provide an opportunity for all students to meet and discuss a range of issues with Governors and senior staff. The decision to create a regular Learner Conference model was arrived at following analysis of the previous mechanisms designed to collect learner feedback. Capturing the Learner Voice has always been crucial to the strategic planning of the college; however, opportunities for students to meet and discuss issues with Governors were limited. Historically learners had the opportunity to meet curriculum leaders to discuss their programmes of study under the framework of annual Student Forums. Students were encouraged to raise issues surrounding their courses and their experiences of college life in general. In addition to the Student Forums, learners met with Governors biannually, in a formal setting, where their views were recorded and subsequently disseminated to the curriculum teams and other key staff across college. Students welcomed the idea of meeting the Governors, to ensure that their voices were heard at the very highest strategic level. Senior managers identified that developing this format had potential to provide an effective and sustainable interface between Governors and the college’s primary stakeholders. Discussions took place to create an alternative model based on these foundations.

The idea of a Learner Conference was created and the first event was held on the 18th March 2010.



Planning for all Learner Conferences involves the student Governors. Student Governor elections take place annually, following which the Clerk meets with the nominated students to explain their role; this discussion includes stressing the importance of Learner Conferences and selecting potential topics for discussion. The college communicates the dates of future conferences to all Governors, through full Corporation and committee meetings. The Chair of Governors, Clerk and Learner Services all keep these conferences at the top of the agenda. Regular conference reports are provided to the Corporation Standards and Performance Monitoring Committee and the college's Executive team, in addition to this a summary from each Conference is discussed at full Corporation meetings.

This first conference was timetabled to coincide with student review days, when the timetable, across all curriculum areas, was collapsed. This gave all student representatives the opportunity to attend without affecting their study. Representatives were selected via a democratic process from all curriculum areas. The intention was to discuss key aspects of College life and use representative comments for action planning within curriculum teams and at strategic level. To emphasise the importance of these events and to give a clear message to the students that it was taken seriously at very senior level, the event was opened by the Principal. He gave an introduction to the event putting the Learner Voice firmly on the college Executive agenda. This was a half day event and, over the course of the morning, groups of students

met key members of staff and Governors to give feedback on a range of issues, such as teaching and learning, tutorial, enrichment, health and safety and IT. And, of course, the college provided lunch.

The event was a success, bringing together feedback which previously would have come through a range of fora into a single, coherent event. As a result, this model was further developed for the following academic year. Currently each Learner Conference has a different emphasis, reflecting the changing nature of the college's provision over the year. Each conference begins with a 'You said, We did' presentation. By holding at least three conferences each year Governors can provide students with feedback on issues raised in previous conferences. This demonstrates that the college values and takes note of all comments made.

The first conference of each academic year focuses on "first impressions" of college. First year representatives focus on topics surrounding Admissions and Marketing (the process of applying, promotional materials, including the website and prospectus) and Induction (their welcome to the College, enrolment procedures and clarity of information given). Second year representatives have a chance to reflect on their first year, as well as discuss aspects of Teaching and Learning with their Curriculum Area Manager and Tutorial and Enrichment activities with the Learner Services Team. Later conferences facilitate debate around facilities, e-learning, Equality and Diversity, assessment and target setting.

The format of the Learner Conference model has provided a direct, innovative interface between the Governors and learners without which the experience of both would be impoverished. The purpose of the model has been to facilitate robust, open discussion and the Governors have been impressed by the responses of the learners, which are always constructive and never personal. Governor attendance at these events is excellent, demonstrating their commitment to the process of capturing the learner voice. These conferences raise awareness of the diverse nature of the student community and provide a key opportunity to make a positive difference to the learner experience. Feedback from learners is also positive, 'Learner conferences are very impressive because the college listens to us and knows what we want', 'our ideas are acted upon', 'the student representatives' contributions have led to improvements at the college, making the environment we learn in a better place to be.' At an early Learner Conference it became clear that learners had a very inconsistent experience of tutorial across the curriculum. At that time Personal Tutors were members of academic staff and had a dual role at college. Although a generic scheme of work was in place it was apparent that not every Personal Tutor utilised this effectively. Governors agreed to implement a new initiative of Learning Development Mentors, individuals recruited specifically to deliver the tutorial scheme of work and to support and monitor the progress of individual tutees. This mechanism has now been in place for 12 months and has been very successful leading to significant improvements in communication and target setting.

The college intends to further develop the Learner Conference brand by engaging learners on part time and Higher Education courses. Below is an example of learner feedback and subsequent action.

The students said:	We did, or will do:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The consistency of delivery is an issue across college. Students who experienced regular, structured tutorial sessions valued them. However, some Personal Tutors do not deliver the tutorial programme as designed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A Learning Development Mentor scheme was implemented in August 2011.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students wanted a UCAS club to support individuals with a whole range of HE related queries. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A daily UCAS club was established in September 2011.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> International students would like more information about Stratford, the history and cultural heritage of the town. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> International students were well represented at the Shakespeare Birthday Celebrations in April.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The vast majority of students use Facebook. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Marketing department has increased our use of Facebook as a communication tool; it has also been used to advertise the College to potential applicants.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students would like the option to apply on-line. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An on-line application form is now in use.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals are accepted for whom they are, have not experienced racial aggravation or bullying. One student said 'It is a vibrant place to be. Everyone is so diverse and accepting of one another'. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entry level students felt that they covered Equality and Diversity issues very well, for example cultural differences and beliefs, in their programmes of study. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A cash machine on the campus would be very useful. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A cash machine has been established in the Zone and is very well utilised.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students would like lockers to store equipment and belongings while at College. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From September there will be lockers located across the College, in F, K, D and B Blocks.