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How is the role of student governor understood in further education colleges in the UK?

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ABSTRACT

The appointment of student governors to the governing board is mandatory in further education (FE) colleges across the UK. There is, however, confusion and lack of clarity over the role of the student governor, and little empirical research, especially involving direct observation, has been undertaken which sheds light on this. This paper examines how the role of the student governor is understood by governing boards and how it is enacted in practice. Over one calendar year, we observed and video/audio-recorded governing board meetings in eight FE colleges across the UK, two in each UK country (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales). In addition, we interviewed key actors and spoke to student governors. Our findings reveal a lack of understanding about the role of the student governor which creates a tension between student governors acting in an advisory capacity as part of the governing body, and student governors representing learner voice. We conclude with recommendations for boards aimed at facilitating meaningful engagement of the student governor in governing processes.

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Introduction

The presence of student governors on the governing board is a legislated requirement for further education colleges across all four nations of the UK, and represented in policy as a key component of effective college governance (Hill 2014). There are, however, a number of misconceptions that 'restrict' the role of the student governor and place limits on their contribution to governance (LSIS, 2009a), and little research has been undertaken to elucidate the role (Meeuwessen et al. 2019). While the idea of student or learner 'voice' has become prominent in all areas of education, there is a dearth of research relating specifically to the role of the student governor in higher or further education governance (Hill 2014). In addition, very little empirical work showing how colleges enact policies pertaining to the role of the student governor has been undertaken. Clearly, this is an important issue for colleges seeking to promote a learner-centred ethos.

In this paper we aim to address this gap through a critical exploration of the role of the student governor, drawing on ethnographic observations and interviews gathered over the period of a year in eight colleges of further education in the UK. The study was conducted as part of an

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ESRC-funded research project that aimed to examine the processes and practices of governing in further education colleges in the four countries of the UK. The research question we set out to examine in this paper is:

> How is the role of the student governor understood by participants in board meetings and what impact does this have on the role of the student governor in practice?

The paper is set out as follows. We first present an outline of FE college governance as it relates to student representation and learner voice,[1] highlighting the policies that regulate the role of the student governor within the four UK nations. Next we set out the parameters of the study and present an analysis of our observations, providing insights into how the role is enacted, and comparing this to how the role is perceived by members of governing boards. We conclude by offering a 'mini case study' of good practice and suggest ways in which the role of the student governor may contribute meaningfully to the development of colleges as learner-centred institutions.

Background

In 1997, calls by the then UK Labour Government to broaden the membership of governing boards influenced the requirement for FE colleges to appoint a student governor elected by their peers (Hill 2014).[2] Parallel with this, colleges were tasked with putting the learner at the centre of policy by consulting students and giving them a voice in the funding, development and evaluation of further education provision. Colleges were 'invited' by Baroness Blackstone in 1999 to appoint a governor with a specific remit for monitoring and raising standards (Davies and Horsfall 1999). These moves, intended to put the learner at the centre, marked a significant shift and were 'seen as a necessary counterbalance to the previous period where finance had driven college governing body priorities' (Hill 2014, 979). Thus, from the outset, policy aimed at making colleges more learner-centred adopted a two-pronged approach: 1) the appointment of student governors; and 2) placing a greater emphasis on learner voice and the student experience; thereby conflating these two distinct elements and sowing confusion between them.

The concept of student governance can be traced back as far as the adoption of the 'student-led' Bologna University model by the four ancient Scottish universities between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Day 2012); however, 'non-university' institutions (polytechnics and colleges) did not benefit from student representation until the late 1960s, when the National Union of Students of England, Wales and Northern Ireland (NUS) began to support its development in the further education/college sector (Day, 2018). Today, while the concept of student governance continues to be bound up with student representation and learner voice, these are two very distinct entities – they are related but at the same time separate. Moreover, the corporate responsibilities expected of governing board members creates a conflict between the ethos of good governance and the assemblage of student voice and representation that is purportedly central to promoting a learner-centred culture within colleges.

While each of the UK nations has developed individual approaches to FE governing policy (Watson, Husband, and Young 2020), UK-wide reforms highlighted the need to focus on quality of provision and learner involvement. This shift created a context in which learner voice came to the fore. For example, in response to the Foster (2005) review of the future role of FE colleges in England, all post-16 FE providers across England were required to establish a Learner Involvement Strategy, a student committee, a mechanism for engaging learners collectively, and a Staff Student Liaison Officer, as well as at least one student governor to contribute to college governance (Walker and Logan 2008). In a similar review in Wales, the Webb (2007) report highlighted an urgent need to ensure that the learner voice is heard at every level within FE institutions, including governing

bodies. In Scotland, although the Scottish Government rejected much of the policy recommendations of the UK-wide Leitch (2006) *Review of Skills*, in response, Scotland's *Lifelong Skills Strategy* (2007) positioned individual learners at the centre of skills development.

While these provisions for engaging with learner voice might be regarded as 'a shift in emphasis from governing bodies and councils, senates and academic boards, to role of students in monitoring and influencing institutional processes' (Silver and Silver 1997, 36), there is a lack of consensus about the purpose and value of learner voice and representation in governance practices, which has led to charges of tokenism (Freeman 2016; Hall 2017). In addition, conceptualising 'learner voice' as a homogeneous entity in FE college governance is problematic, particularly when considering how this might be constructed within notions of learner diversity. Indeed, it has been argued that, by limiting those who are heard, learner voice can become a means by which some learners 'may be effectively silenced' (Watson 2014, 27).

The role of the student governor is also problematic. A review of FE governance carried out jointly by the Association of Colleges (AoC) and the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) (LSIS, 2009b, 7) stated that student involvement was essential in order to promote democratic governance as 'the dominant (although not sole) purpose of governance . . . [in organisations] providing educational or social services'. However, LSIS (2012, 9) identifies that one of the main challenges facing college governance is the:

> questionable impact of student governors and the learner voice – many student governors, most of whom are young . . . struggle to make an impact or deal with strategic issues dealt with by boards.

This comment raises an important tension that resides in the role of the student governor: whether this should be one of involvement in an advisory capacity – 'dealing with strategic issues' – with the same responsibilities as any other member of the governing board; or one in which the student governor engages only as a means of feeding back reports of the learner voice and is therefore regarded as representing the interests of the student body. There is thus a conflict concerning the formal expectation of the role and assumptions about learner voice within governance structures. As the LSIS (2011) notes:

> [a]ll governors are appointed as individuals – including those governors who are elected e.g., staff and student governors and *are not representatives* of the organisations from which they come (42, emphasis added).

This is also reiterated by LSIS (2009a, 6): the student governor 'nominated and elected by the students of the college and appointed by the governing body should not be considered as a student representative'. However, in the same document, LSIS (2009a, 9) goes on to say, 'The student governors are not present to bring professional skills to the Corporation, but to provide firsthand insight into the experience of being a student'. This situates the student governor in the difficult position of being expected to participate both as an impartial individual board member and as a representative of the student body, at the 'top of the pyramid' of the learner voice (LSIS, 2009a, 10). The tension between these aspects of the role is brought out neatly by Dunne et al. (2011, 4), who say:

> There is a subtle, but extremely important, difference between an institution that 'listens' to students and responds accordingly, and an institution that gives students the opportunity to explore areas that they believe to be significant, to recommend solutions and to bring about the required changes. The concept of 'listening to the student voice' – implicitly if not deliberately – supports the perspective of student as 'consumer', whereas 'students as change agents' explicitly supports a view of the student as 'active collaborator' and 'co-producer', with the potential for transformation.

Thus, while the concept of learners as active agents within governance continues to be bound up with student representation and learner voice, these roles are, in fact, distinct and indeed may be in conflict. FE colleges across the UK are bound by legislation to include

student governors on their governing boards: in Scotland, by the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013; in England by the Instruments and Articles of Governance (2008) (Further and Higher Education Act 1992); in Wales by the Further and Higher Education (Governance and Information) (Wales) Act 2014 Articles and Instruments of Governance; and in Northern Ireland by The Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 Instruments and Articles of Governance. However, if students are regarded solely as the carrier of learner voice and as 'consumers' of educational provision, there is a danger that the learner as active agent in decision-making processes is negated or downplayed.

These are the tensions we explore in this paper through an ethnographic analysis of enactments and perceptions of the student governor role in FE colleges in the UK.

The study

Our research observed the practices of the boards of governance in eight colleges of further education; two in each country of the UK.[3] The research involved four teams of researchers at three universities, each team conducted research in two colleges in each of the four UK countries. We observed 48 governing board meetings and 29 committee meetings across eight colleges between January and December 2019. The board meetings were video-recorded in six of the colleges and audio-recorded in the remaining two, at their request. We wrote extensive fieldnotes based on our observations of board meetings and conversations with board members, including student governors, at each board meeting. We also conducted interviews with all chairs, governance professionals[4] and Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) in each college. In one college the chair had instigated a deliberate policy to develop the role of the student governor to facilitate their full engagement. We drew on this to conduct a 'mini case study' and, as part of this, we interviewed the president of the students' union, who sat as one of two student governors on the board and took the lead role.

Here we present the findings that emerged in relation to perceptions and enactments of the student governor role across all of the colleges. Our research adopted an ethnographic sensibility and our analysis reflects this. To understand perceptions we drew on interviews and our fieldnotes, which included notes on conversations with participants. To examine enactments we drew on video and audio data. These data were analysed with the assistance of MultiUserTransana 3.32™ software, which enables multiple transcripts to be developed in conjunction with the video/audio data (Woods and Dempster 2011). Transana supports transcription and navigation of data. Clips of analytically interesting parts of the meeting can be stored in 'collections' for in-depth analysis. We did not pursue a systematic process of coding, agreeing with St Pierre and Jackson (2014, 715) that coding 'has become a fetish, a superficial marker of a positivist scientism'. Instead we have adopted a multi-faceted approach, aimed at shedding light on different aspects of practice, by assembling a set of sociomaterial sensibilities (Law 2004) to illuminate the human and nonhuman entanglements that constitute the processes and practices of governance. We performed this by engaging in repeated viewing/listening and transcription of board and committee meetings and interviews, drawing on documented artefacts (such as board papers and strategy development documents), and observations of planning events excerpts, to become attuned to how the interrelations of the social and the material coalesce to produce the processes and practices of governance (Fenwick 2012). Thus we have drawn on vignettes which preserve the narrative context of data, and in the mini case study we have sought to show how analysis of interaction in boardrooms reveals the ways in which this builds incrementally in the construction of strategy (Watson and Ireland 2020). We were concerned with juxtaposing what participants told us about the role and what we observed in practice, which enabled us to draw out disjuncts and tensions which we here present as a means to support development of the role of the student governor rather than to develop theory around governance.

Findings

How is the role of student governor understood?

Our conversations with student governors revealed a widespread assumption that the role of the student governor, as an elected official, was to *represent* the student body and this was understood to be about bringing the learner voice to the board. As one student governor told us:

> the biggest part of my job is to be a voice for all students, regardless of backgrounds, regardless of what course they are doing, you know, we represent all of them.

There was thus a conflation of representation with learner voice, which LSIS (2009b), in its guidance, seeks to avoid:

> The student governors are positioned at the top of the pyramid of the 'Student Voice' in the College. Other students will have roles at different parts of the pyramid, articulating the needs and wishes of students. Some of these will also be elected, and *unlike the student governors* will be expected to 'represent' students. (10, emphasis added)

This is a subtle but important distinction that adds a degree of ambiguity to the role since student governors, as full members of the board, must act in the interests of the college (LSIS, 2009b), not necessarily the students, accepting 'cabinet responsibility' for board decisions.

This assumption was also revealed in interviews with chairs and principals, most of whom regarded the student governor's role solely as a means by which learner voice is brought to the board. Even when this was not the case, a certain ambiguity between voice and representation was evident. One chair told us:

> We don't regard them as student representatives, *they're just members of the board* . . . So they actively participate in all board meetings as full members and therefore are able to offer insight. They also have a whole series of digital and other ways of finding out what the challenges and issues are for students at a grassroots level and then in a sense *pass that on or make representation* either through direct access to the [senior management team] or to me or to the board in general.

In contrast, governance professionals seemed to have an understanding of the role that aligns more closely with codes of practice. However, as this governance professional reveals, this point is not always understood, even by the student governors:

> most people are surprised . . . when you go out for staff and student governors . . . that the people who are electing you are your peers, your students or your staff, but you're not representing them. You're just bringing your own experience as a staff [or student] governor.

These different understandings of the role create ambiguity, with some board members assuming that the student governor is a fully contributing member of the board, acting in the interests of the college, while others, including the student governors themselves, perceive the role as one of representation. This is not just a question of academic nicety; rather, there is the potential for conflict between consumerism and collaboration in promoting student engagement, as noted by Dunne et al. (2011, 4). While it may be the case that the 'customer is king', consumerism has a tendency towards passivity and carries the danger that educational institutions might 'assume the role of panderers, devoted more to immediate satisfaction than to offering the challenge of intellectual independence' Schwartzman (1995, 222). Thus, while FE colleges across the UK are bound by legislation to include student governors on their governing boards, if they are regarded solely as the carrier of learner voice and as 'consumers' of educational provision, there is a danger that the student governor as active agent in decision-making processes is negated or downplayed.

As well as differing understandings of the role, interviews with chairs, principals, and governance professionals evinced varying degrees of support for student governors. Some boards went out of their way to ensure that student governors were inducted fully, recognising that their youth and inexperience meant that they required ongoing support in order to contribute fully. In one college,

for example, the chair regularly sought the views of student governors on a range of issues, not necessarily related to teaching and learning. In other cases, however, a degree of tokenism was displayed. For example, when asked about the role of the student governors, the principal and governance professional of one college both spoke about the importance of the annual planning day at Christmas as an occasion when the board and students got together so they can 'hear what it is like to be a student at [the college]'. In this way, the ongoing role played by the student governors was downplayed and subsumed within a generalised picture of learner voice gathered as a kind of parlour game.

The enthusiasm for student governors also varied. Although some respondents seemed to be critical of the student governors themselves, talking, for example, of a 'bad year', others saw the role itself as problematic. One principal told us:

> they're on for a year and . . . so therefore they change and they're usually late coming on and so they're . . . yeah, we've had students on and we currently have a student on, but their engagement and their involvement isn't huge just by necessity, you know.

Another principal said,

> I'm not a major fan of student reps, if I were very, very honest, the whole concept of them, I'm not sure whether they add a lot of value. I'm not sure quite how much they get out of it either, if I was very honest. I think there's a tendency for the student members especially to be strictly lip service, and I think that there should be far better ways of getting the learner voice to the board than through the student rep.

The governance professional at this college concurred, saying 'the board room isn't really the vehicle that is best served by a student member', noting also a tendency for 'lip service' to be paid, rendering the role tokenistic. This was certainly our strong impression from the board meetings we observed in which the almost universal format was for the student governor to present their report followed by expressions of support from the board which, in some cases, gave an air of being self-congratulatory. Student governors we talked to in the main felt that they were successful in getting their voice heard at the board meeting, though whether this was acted on was less clear. We take this up in the next section.

How is the role of student governor enacted?

We observed great variation in the presence of student governors in board meetings, both physically, and in terms of their engagement. Student governors were present at most of the 48 board meetings we observed and participated by providing reports of student council activities and feedback from the student representative system. However, they were rarely called upon to participate beyond this, and certainly not on issues unrelated to teaching and learning. Though this was the norm, there was variation. At one college, the student governors never made an appearance. At another, the student governors attended only their first meeting, and, although they were introduced to the board on that occasion, they otherwise did not engage in any way. At one college, however, student governors were full and active members of the board and engaged in discussions around all aspects of college life including the development of strategy.

These absences and silences of some student governors meant that enactments of learner voice were sometimes obscured. Often, much of the governance relating to the student experience was undertaken within the committee structure, with a distilled version of decisions relating to the learner being presented at the board meeting. Although colleges did include student governors in consulting roles within the various committees that included issues relating to 'student engagement', 'student voice', and 'student partnerships', often the reports of the decisions made during committee meetings were presented to the governing board by either the committee chair or a member of the college executive.

Although student governors who were present were given space within the agenda to report on the Students' Association/Union update, or on student engagement activities, there were differences in the ways in which these student governors performed their role. Here we present two vignettes that act as exemplars for subtly distinct modes of engaging the student governor in governing processes and practices.

Vignette 1

> The chair ends the agenda item being discussed and invites the student governors to provide their report. The first student governor describes the results of the recent student union elections, reporting great improvements in numbers from the previous year. The second reports on the success of a recent mental health awareness campaign and describes plans to expand this. Their reports are concise, and they speak confidently. Afterwards, several governors smile and nod, and some make encouraging comments. The students seem pleased. At this point there is a sense that the item has concluded to everyone's satisfaction. However, the chair, addressing the student governors directly, tells an anecdote about a tendering process in which the student union has been involved, where the tender was awarded to an overseas company over a local contractor. The company awarded the tender proceeded to sub-contract the tender to the local contractor for the work, 'top-slicing' a considerable fee in the process. This produces a visible shift in the student governors' demeanour and posture, and they lower their heads under the chair's gaze. However, the chair quickly changes tack saying that 'this is not a criticism of those involved', and thanks the student governors for 'doing a spectacular job'. He moves on quickly to the next item on the agenda. The other governors make no further comment and the two student governors exchange bewildered looks. They take no further part in the meeting.

The result of this was to negate the contribution of the student governors. In effect, though they have spoken, they have not been heard. In comparison, while the student governors in the second vignette also deliver their verbal report in a very similar fashion, their contributions are explored further by the other governors, and they are invited to comment on several other elements of governing processes throughout the meeting.

Vignette 2

> In this board meeting, the Students' Association report is positioned second on the agenda, directly following an update on the outcome of a recent strategy development day. Throughout the discussion relating to strategic items, the chair, principal and members of the college executive consult the student governors, asking them to confirm suggestions and plans that relate to the ways in which they align with the expectations of the student body. For some items of discussion, it is evident that the principal and the chair have previously covered these topics with the student governors, who are confident in responding and contribute with further suggestions and in clarifying points. When the chair moves on from the strategic items, the senior student governor presents the report, describing the activities that they have been promoting to increase student engagement in class representation and running for office, and emphasising how these have substantially improved since the previous year. They describe some successful incentives they have developed to recruit students to participate in community involvement activities and events, and recent developments in promoting a mental health campaign. After the report, the chair follows up with questions, and highlights further activities that the students have been undertaking, including engagement with organisations that link industry with learners, noting that the student governor is 'underplaying her role' in establishing the relationship. The chair opens the floor to other governors for questions, and several commend the work the student governors are doing. One board member describes having attended a community event and praises how well it was organised, that there was a 'great buzz', and how well the college was represented, particularly in how they were 'marketing the institution'. The chair thanked the students and several other governors make further commendations. The next item on the agenda is the principal's report, which begins with a report on student recruitment and related challenges, and, throughout, he enlists the backing of the student governor in making eye contact, gesturing towards them. They nod in agreement – it is evident that they are very well informed about these aspects of the principal's report to the board.

While both of these vignettes illustrate how student governors are participating in board practices by engaging in the familiar practices of reporting student engagement activities, the ways in which the chair, principal, college executive and other governors facilitate this are markedly different. Although in both vignettes there was a sense that the student governors were well prepared and that their

reports were well received, the mechanisms for supporting their contributions differed. These supportive practices were exhibited by the board members throughout each of the observations in that particular college, highlighting the importance of establishing and sustaining such supportive relationships to promote the meaningful engagement in governing processes. Notably, these instances were not 'one-offs' at these boards, but represent sustained practice in each institution.

As noted earlier, boards varied and we observed several examples of board practices where the framing of the student governors as enactors of learner voice moved their contribution towards tokenism, even where student governors were present and did engage in governing processes. During one board meeting, governors were discussing how feedback is sought from learners. Ironically, afterwards, one board member asked the student governors directly for their views on the mechanisms that the college had in place, and one replied that he thought the systems for gathering feedback from students – namely surveys – were a bit tokenistic and that most students just wanted to get them done and out of the way, rather than engage with them meaningfully. There followed a short silent pause whilst the answer was digested, then the chair swiftly moved the discussion onto the next agenda item, without any acknowledgement or debate of this view.

Productive engagement with student governors – a mini case study

The above examples suggest that the role of student governor was not well understood and that there was a tendency towards tokenism, though this was certainly not always the case. This suggests that the role is often problematic and not being used in a way that benefits the board, the student governor, or the college. We were therefore particularly struck by the efforts of one college to develop the role of student governor productively. In this case we saw active involvement of the student governors in the work of the college, including in the development of strategy, and we therefore decided to undertake a 'mini case study' to examine this further and to provide guidance for other colleges to follow. In this case we additionally interviewed the lead student governor, at that time the Student Union President, and analysed the interview in conjunction with our video observations.

In our interview with the chair of this college it was clear that the chair had taken an active role in engaging students in governance and this was pursued beyond the confines of the board room:

> quite a bit of my role will be outside that [the boardroom], so you know meeting the student president and actually one of the things that's been my personal goal is to actually get the student voice really heard and that's been something that hadn't been there before either. And again, it depends who's voted in, you know it can be a bit tricky. But I really want the student voice and the students' association at the heart of what we are doing. And so that's taken me a little while to move that forward but we're there.

This was endorsed by the senior vice-principal who said that what was important was the culture of engagement throughout the college, and, if this was not authentic, students would 'quickly see through it'. The involvement of the student governors in board meetings was therefore only one part of a raft of measures aimed at engaging students in what might be thought of as the wider governance of the college. A major way in which this was managed was through joint engagements undertaken by the governing board and the students' union, alongside regular events aimed at breaking down barriers between board, management and students such as 'pizza with the principal' and 'cake with the chair'. In talking about the board involvement, the student governor told us:

> It's not just the case of they set this board up and they just talk about what they want, they want to do the best for their students and they show that by getting involved with them in different events that we run.

In interviewing this student governor, what struck us was how comfortable she was with the chair of the board and the senior management of the college, referring to all by their first names and expressing surprise that other student governors she meets do not have the same access to these senior figures:

> We literally, if I wanted to phone [first name of principal], he is very open for you just to call him and ask a question, you know, so we've got that really good relationship with him which is excellent.

The college also provided ongoing support for the role, with a full-time member of staff appointed as 'development officer' for student engagement. There was clearly a close relationship between the development officer and the student governors, who shared an office.

Involvement beyond the board room was also a notable feature. The student governors sat on other committees, such as the learning and teaching committee. Our interviewee also sat on a committee involved in implementing government policy around articulation with schools in skills development.

What was notable in this college was the involvement of the student governors in board meetings, which was not limited to the report of student activities but went much further. We observed all board meetings over the course of a year (four in total). During board meetings, both student governors contributed, though it was evident that one, as president of the students' union, took a lead role. During the time that we were undertaking our observations, the board at this college was actively engaged in developing a new 5-year strategy for the college and this was discussed at every board meeting. On two occasions, the board broke into smaller groups to discuss particular aspects of the future strategy and the student governors were clearly very engaged in this. On the occasion we report on here, small groups had been tasked with considering metrics and key performance indicators for the strategy. The two student governors formed a group with three other board members and the senior vice principal.

The new strategy was focused on student success and the group started off by considering what a successful student would look like. Student Governor 2 suggests that this may be more than just attainment, and the following exchange takes place[5]:

> Student governor 1: yeah, I think as well it might just be that their personal skills might be things like that might have rather than [tails off] [student governor 1 looks at student governor 2 closely and nods]
>
> Board member 1: [removes glasses and looks closely at student governor 2]: is there a way of measuring how that enhancement helps them achieve something more?
>
> Senior vice principal: post destination tracking will do that for all students and areas like employment might not be the route but maybe there's independent living, y'know, maybe that type of thing
>
> [section of transcript deleted]
>
> Board member 2: so it's a learning journey isn't it? Not about getting A's if you were failing and [now] you're getting Cs that's great progress and it's the same around the soft skills, the social, y'know
>
> Board member 1: one of the measures is the students who've become actively involved in the students association, the whole, because that is an indication of engagement not necessarily [unclear] everybody's going to get something
>
> Student governor 1: exactly it's not just, personally coming from a student's point of view I think the biggest thing to being a successful student is that getting involved, is that putting on more for them to be involved and for someone who maybe wouldn't speak to anyone when they first come here to then being student ambassadors running a club y'know. That to me is hugely successful for a student. Like you say [to Board member 2] it's not all about the grades it doesn't have to be all about the grades if they're making those improvements then the college can openly say 'we did that', y'know. That's, that's huge right there.

What was most striking here was the way in which the student governors were fully involved as members of the board. Through their contributions and their involvement, including gaze and gesture, they enrolled others to their point of view. It was evident they were not participating merely to provide 'learner voice', but were seeking to influence. In this case, the concerns of the student governors that metrics recognise the wider achievement of students was acknowledged by other board members. This was reported back at the plenary and subsequently became part of the future strategy. Interestingly, when we raised the question of strategy development with the student

governor in our interview, she denied that she was involved. This perhaps indicates a lack of understanding about the nature of strategy development, in which the student governor was not alone, which could be addressed in governor training.

Conclusions

Our analysis has illustrated diversity in the student governor role, and this varies between colleges, rather than nations. This diversity is evident in the different levels of engagement of the student governors, and also in terms of how governance processes facilitate student governors to purposefully engage in governing. How student governors are positioned, and how they position themselves, as able contributors, also varies. It is evident, however, that, in colleges that support student governors to contribute meaningfully, it is the strength of the relations between the participants that facilitate this – the space they are given in formal governance processes, the mediation of key governors in preparing them to allow them to perform the student experience into being for the board, and the value that other governors place on hearing what the student governors have to say.

The role of students in college governance has been identified as being key in promoting a learner-centred ethos (Ofsted 2012), and to 'regularly collect and act on learner and employer feedback' has been identified as 'a priority focus for the Board of Governors' (Foster 2005, 3). However, the rhetoric that surrounds the discourse often seems to be at odds with the processes and practices relating to the role of student governor that we observed. While the AoC (and other regulatory bodies in FE) stress that 'student governors have the same responsibilities as other governors' (AoC, 2021, n.p.), the value that they are perceived to bring to the governing process is placed firmly in their position as learners. It is therefore evident that the regulatory discourse relating to the purpose of the student governor creates ambiguity in the ways in which boards of governance understand the role and how they seek to enrol the student governor in governing practices. We found evidence of a tension between students as expert members of the board and how student governors are expected to represent student voice in the practices of governing. Despite a desire for FE colleges to be seen as being 'more learner-centred', this does not automatically make student governors 'experts' on the student experience.

While including the role of student governor in FE college boards is mandated across all four nations of the UK, there are great variations in the ways in which individual colleges facilitate this role. The elision and ambiguity that persists about the expectations of the role, particularly by other key board members, perpetuates an assumption that student governors are only valued as a mouthpiece in being positioned at 'the top of the pyramid' of the 'Student Voice' for colleges (LSIS, 2009a, 10). Positioning 'learner voice' and engagement at the centre of college governance is conceptualised and accepted as an effective way to ensure that governing processes remain focused on promoting a high quality learning experience. However, confining student governors to this role creates a tension, where those who are assumed to hold a central position in influencing board processes are instead void of meaningful agency, pushed to the periphery and othered by the very governing practices that should serve their own best interests.

Our research has shown that, despite the problems that accompany the relatively short duration of their appointment, and the perceived limitations in the value of their engagement in governing, the student governor can contribute meaningfully to the processes and practices of governing in FE colleges. The differences that we observed between colleges in the ways in which this engagement was facilitated indicate that moving beyond the assumption that student governors merely enact ventriloquist practices of 'learner voice', towards the facilitation of their active participation as experts, and involving them as consultants in governing processes, requires concerted action on the part of the wider governing body. This would enable and facilitate the same productive and meaningful engagement of student governors in FE college governance as we observed in the mini-case study presented here.

Notes

1. In the academic literature and in FE policy documents and reviews, the terms 'learner voice' and 'student voice' are used interchangeably and usually relate to student/learner engagement; hence, we also use both terms here to refer to the commonly-held notion in the UK education context that: 'Any person participating in the process of learning has a voice that should be engaged and heard. Students have a right to participate in the development and design of their own learning.' (British Council 2021, n.p.).
2. The number of student governors required varies across the four UK nations. In Wales and Scotland two are required. In England and Northern Ireland it is one.
3. See https://fe-governing.stir.ac.uk/project-details/.
4. This is the term we use for clerks (England and Wales) and secretaries (Scotland and Northern Ireland) to the board.
5. The transcript has been simplified to aid reading, with conventional punctuation inserted.

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