

Supporting college student governors

This guide is an introduction to everything you need to support college student governors. Whether you've been working with college boards and student governors for a while or are just starting out, this guide gives a thorough overview of how to support student governors to make a positive impact on their board and within the wider college.

This guidance covers:

- The role of the student governor
- The wider context
- Responsibilities and expectations of student governors
- Common challenges faced by student governors
- Helping student governors be successful
- Initial and ongoing support
- Identifying student governors
- The ideal governors meeting – from a student governor perspective
- Further information

The role of the student governor

A student governor is a learner elected to represent the interests of the student body on the governing body of an FE college. Student governors provide essential insights into the learner experience, highlighting the views of the college's primary stakeholders – the learners. Their presence ensures that learner voices are heard in decision-making processes at the highest level. They can focus on any topics that are pertinent to learners, including (but not limited to) college policies, campus developments, and curriculum changes.

How student governors are different from other governors: unlike other governors, student governors must be from the student body of the college. They are usually appointed for one year, whereas other governors often have three-year terms.

In terms of voting rights, it's typical that student governors are equal to other governors, except for discussion about senior staff pay and employment matters. They may be asked to leave the room for those agenda items.

These differences are usually outlined in the college's governing documents – key documents are often called the *Instrument and Articles of Government*, *Standing Orders*, and *Scheme of Delegation*. Staff supporting student governors should have access to these and should read them to get the full understanding of what is expected from student governors in the college.

In most other ways, student governors are equal members of the governing board.

The wider context

The Welsh Government's **Strategy for Further Education (2021-2026)** underscores the importance of involving students in governance, noting that their participation enhances college life for all.

The **Code of Good Governance for Colleges in Wales** offers further direction, highlighting the need for student governors at board level. It emphasises that student governors should be appointed through a *formal, open, and transparent process*. Usual practice is for this to be via an election.

Most colleges in Wales have at least two student governors and these positions are usually considered an integral part of the wider learner voice eco-system (along with learner reps, ambassadors, and elected officers).

This guide offers valuable insights for those working with student governors, featuring practical ideas and case studies. It is designed to help staff ensure the success of the role, benefiting both the college and the individuals involved.

Responsibilities and Expectations of Student Governors

1. Representing the Student Body: the primary responsibility of a student governor is to represent the interests of the student body. They serve as a voice for students in decision-making processes at the highest level of the college. This means understanding the concerns, needs, and aspirations of students and conveying these to the governing body.

A student governor is expected to:

- Be accessible to students and gather their views.
- Reflect the diversity of the student body and ensure all students are represented.
- Actively listen and communicate students' feedback to the board.
- Always act in the best interests of the college.

2. Participating in board meetings and decision-making: Student governors are expected to attend governing body meetings regularly and actively participate in discussions. While student governors may not have expertise in all areas of governance, they are expected to understand the governing body's processes and contribute to discussions meaningfully. This involves being familiar with the college's strategic plan, financial matters, and policies.

Student governors are often especially interested in topics such as:

- Student welfare: mental health support, safety, and well-being.
- Academic matters: curricula development, assessment methods, and feedback mechanisms.
- Student services: student support, careers advice, and extracurricular activities.

That said, it is perfectly legitimate for a student governor to engage with any agenda item.

3. Ensuring accountability and transparency: While overall accountability lies with the entire governing body, student governors play an important part in ensuring that student perspectives are considered and that key decisions are communicated effectively. Essentially, helping build a bridge between the board and the study body.

Student governors are expected to:

- Advocate for clear communication between the governing body and the wider student body.
- Support efforts to ensure students are informed about key governance matters, working with student representatives, the student union, or college leadership.
- Ensure that students are aware of the roles of student governors and how to engage with them.

4. Confidentiality and ethical conduct: Student governors are bound by the same confidentiality agreements and ethical standards as other board members. This means maintaining confidentiality regarding sensitive information discussed in board meetings and always acting with integrity and professionalism.

While these principles may be very familiar to someone with a professional career, they will be brand new to many learners (most of whom will have very limited professional experience).

Common challenges faced by student governors

Student governors face several key challenges, including balancing academic and governance responsibilities, navigating power dynamics, and representing diverse student interests. To be effective in their roles, they need strong support through training, mentorship, and information resources. By addressing these challenges, colleges can ensure that student governors remain empowered to advocate for the student body and contribute meaningfully to the governance of their institutions.

Balancing academic work and governance responsibilities: One of the most significant challenges student governors face is managing their academic workload while fulfilling the demands of their governance role, plus also balancing potential other responsibilities like part-time work or care. Attending meetings, preparing for

discussions, and representing student interests takes time and energy, leading to stress or difficulty in managing both roles effectively.

Limited experience and knowledge of governance: Student governors often come into their roles without prior experience in governance or the decision-making processes of the college. Understanding how a governing body functions, interpreting financial documents, or navigating policy discussions can be overwhelming for students without a background in these areas. This lack of experience can impact their confidence and effectiveness in the role.

Navigating power dynamics: Student governors are part of a broader governance structure that includes senior management and other staff members, many of whom hold more experience and authority. Societal power dynamics can also be at play here – for a young person studying a vocational course, the idea of disagreeing with a confident, middle-aged man in a leadership position may seem hugely daunting. This can create challenges in terms of how student governors are perceived and their ability to influence decision-making. Often, student governors must learn how to assert their views effectively, while other members of the board work collaboratively to create an inclusive environment that is understanding of dynamics at play.

Representing a diverse student body: Student governors must represent the views and interests of a wide variety of students, including those with differing academic needs, cultural backgrounds, and personal circumstances. This responsibility can be challenging, especially when there are conflicting interests within the student body. Effectively balancing these competing needs and ensuring all students feel represented can be difficult, particularly when student governors are in the minority.

Dealing with sensitive issues: student governors may have to tackle sensitive and difficult topics, such as mental health support, tuition fees, or student welfare, which can be emotionally charged or contentious. Addressing these issues requires a great deal of diplomacy, tact, and emotional intelligence. They may also face resistance from senior management or other governors, especially if proposed changes are financially or logistically challenging for the institution.

Limited authority in decision-making: In many governance structures, student governors do not have equal voting rights compared to other members of the board. Or they may have particularly different views to other members of the board. This can lead to feelings of frustration, particularly if they feel their input is not fully valued or considered. They may find it difficult to effect change or influence key decisions on significant issues such as budgets, college policies, or long-term strategic goals.

Mental health and wellbeing: The emotional toll of being a student governor can sometimes affect mental health. The pressures of governance, dealing with challenging issues, and balancing responsibilities can cause stress. Moreover, student governors

are often the first point of contact for students seeking support on sensitive matters, such as mental health, and they must be equipped to manage these discussions while maintaining their own wellbeing.

Helping student governors to be successful: key knowledge, information and skills

Being an impactful student governor requires a broad set of knowledge and skills. More often than not, students will not possess these when they are first confirmed into their role, usually due to their limited professional experience.

It is essential that the college supports governors in understanding their roles and what they need to do them well. Although every learner is different, it's best to assume no knowledge.

Knowledge and information – student governors need to know:

- what board governance is, how it operates, their specific role, the role of others.
- how committees operate – the norms, expectations, terminology e.g. the use of terms such as AOB, calling the chair “chair”, the importance of minutes, the necessity of reading the paperwork, etc.
- the college’s key documents, such as the college’s strategic plan, financial reports, and policies
- their legal and ethical responsibilities, including confidentiality and accountability.

Skills – training on the following skills areas would benefit any newly appointed student governor:

Communication skills: clear and effective communication is essential. Student governors need to be able to:

- Represent student views clearly in board meetings.
- Facilitate discussions between students and the governing body.
- Convey complex information from board meetings back to the student body in an understandable way.
- Listen actively to the concerns and opinions of fellow students.

Leadership Skills: Student governors are leaders of their peers, and as such, they should possess:

- Decision-making skills to make informed choices on behalf of the student body.
- Confidence to speak up in meetings, even on challenging topics.
- Influence and persuasion to advocate for student interests within the governing body.
- The ability to motivate and engage other students in college activities and governance.

Organisational and time management skills: governors often juggle multiple responsibilities, so good organisational and time management skills are crucial. Student governors should be able to:

- Balance their academic workload with the demands of the governing role.
- Manage schedules, agendas, and deadlines for meetings and tasks.
- Prioritise tasks based on their importance to the student body.

Critical thinking and problem-solving: Student governors need to be able to think critically and analytically, especially when engaging in decision-making processes. This includes:

- Assessing situations objectively and considering various perspectives.
- Analysing policies, strategies, and budgets from a student-centred viewpoint.
- Developing solutions for challenges that affect the student body, such as resource allocation, welfare concerns, or academic support.

Interpersonal skills: building strong relationships with other governors, staff members, and students is essential. Key interpersonal skills include:

- Building rapport with a range of individuals (e.g., college management, other students, external stakeholders).
- Working well in a team environment, especially in a collaborative governance structure.
- Demonstrating empathy and understanding when addressing concerns of other students.

Diplomacy and negotiation skills: a student governor must often balance competing interests. Diplomacy and negotiation skills are important for:

- Mediating discussions between students and staff or between different groups of students.
- Ensuring that all voices are heard, while negotiating outcomes that benefit the broader student body.
- Maintaining professionalism, especially in challenging or conflictual situations.

It may be useful to go through a skills audit-style document to identify areas of strength and areas of development for student governors where support can be provided in the areas it is needed most. NUS Charity have an [Officer Skills Audit](#), which covers many of the same areas identified above, and can be used as a helpful tool for discussion and prioritisation with your student governors. This process can also be repeated near the end of their terms to support governors to understand the progress they've made, and to be able to highlight and talk about the skills they have learnt and the knowledge they have gained as part of the role for their future employability.

Initial and ongoing support

In addition to the training needs outlined above, there are several other ways to support student governors before and during their term on the board.

This includes:

A thorough induction: while they may have stood for election and feel they understand the college, it's important that new governors are introduced to all key aspects of the institution.

Some colleges use the clerk to the board to deliver this, others use learner voice staff. It's important that this is a joint effort, so for example, if the bulk of the learner's activity sits under learner voice, those staff are aware of the training being given by the clerk to the board. It ensures that messages are in sync, and resources are not duplicated.

Having a 'go-to person: having a staff member that the student governor can go to for "there's-no-such-thing-as-a-silly-question" questions is vital. This is often the clerk, but it is sometimes someone working in learner voice. It is important that this person is linked to the workings of the board so they can answer specific questions about agendas, dynamics, and logistics. Student governors may need support to understand the content of board papers to make informed decisions at board level. There should be a trusted staff member to fulfil this function, to ensure that the board gets the most out of their student governors.

Neath Port Talbot Group of Colleges: the learner voice manager can attend board meetings with the student governors. They are only there in a support capacity but are able to see the papers and help the student governors prepare in advance and engage on the day.

Informing fellow board members: it can be helpful to inform other board members of the role of the student governor and prompt them to consider how intimidating a board meeting might be for a student governor. A warm welcome at the start of a meeting, and some friendly small talk during any breaks can make the processes much more comfortable for them. It is important that the chair is also mindful of this dynamic and actively canvasses for student input during the meeting, as they may be nervous to speak up themselves, especially at first.

Mentoring and peer support: student governors can be paired with an experienced mentor, either from the governing body or college leadership. This mentor can:

- Offer guidance on decision-making and governance practices.
- Help student governors navigate complex issues and provide insight into the governing process.
- Act as a sounding board for ideas and concerns that the student governor may have.
- Have pre-meetings before main boards to discuss issues and papers.

If there is more than one student governor, encouraging them to get together for peer support can also be useful. They may not know each other so it should not be assumed that this will happen organically.

Support for wellbeing: serving as a student governor can sometimes be stressful, and it is important for colleges to provide well-being support. This includes:

- Offering stress management resources and support for student governors.
- Encouraging work-life balance by providing guidance on how to manage their academic workload alongside governance responsibilities.
- Access to mental health services if needed, as well as support networks that provide emotional and practical help.
- A single point of contact, usually the chair or governance staff member, who they can talk to if they are feeling unsure about any aspect of their role.

Networking opportunities: student governors should be encouraged to engage with other student representatives at regional or national levels. This could involve:

- Attending student governance conferences or forums to learn from other institutions and share best practices
- Networking with student governors from other colleges in Wales or across the UK, enhancing their ability to represent students more effectively.

Identifying student governors

Identifying student governors involves a blend of legislative compliance, good governance practices, and inclusivity. It's expected that colleges will have a process that is transparent and accessible.

Selection process and good practice: The identification of student governors is typically carried out through a democratic process, ensuring transparency and fairness. That's considered good practise.

Sometimes these elections are linked to the election of officers, whereas sometimes this is a separate role and separate election. For example:

- Cardiff and Vale College: they have four elected officers, the two officers that receive the most votes also become the college's student governors.
- Neath Port Talbot Group of Colleges: they have two elected officers, and these two also then become the student governors.
- Coleg Gwent have split the officer roles and student governor roles so they are completely separate, with two different elections held.

There's no right or wrong in these different approaches. The roles can be quite different – one being more activist and the other having a legal, committee focus, but this also depends on your college and the culture surrounding learner voice. If you ask a learner

to wear these two different hats, it's important this is covered in any training and induction.

Inclusivity and diversity: Whatever method you choose, you should centre thinking about equality and access. Some groups of learners, just like within society may be more confident at putting themselves forward for an election. Take steps to engage all groups and communities, and discuss what potential barriers might be with a wide range of students to ensure wide representation.

Pembrokeshire College: *in 2022/23 the college refreshed its approach to student governor elections. With the aim of increasing the engagement of learners in the Student Governor election and raising the profile of the role overall, the Student Governor elections were programmed to coincide with Politics and Activism Tutorial Week. Each candidate was given a small budget to aid their campaign and encouraged to campaign.*

Aligning to the curriculum, plus the small resource allocation, resulted in the election creating a real 'buzz' on campus and learner engagement increased.

Another aim was to provide all nominees, including those who were unsuccessful, with a positive experience. Most of those who were unsuccessful went on to apply for other roles in the Learner Executive.

The ideal governors meeting – from a student governor perspective

The ingredients of a positive, meaningful governor meeting, from a student governors' perspective would include:

1. They know what their role is and what is expected of them.
2. They know how the college works and the role of governance within that.
3. They've had some staff or peer-board support, helping them understand the agenda and big issues ahead of the meeting.
4. They know the chair and others will give them a warm welcome.
5. They've read the papers and have an idea of what they want to raise.
6. They feel confident to make spontaneous contributions on any topic.
7. They know when and where the meeting is, and can get there and get home.
8. They feel their contributions are sought and valued.

Further information

Supporting student governors is a valuable investment that benefits colleges, learners, and the governors themselves. By fostering strong student representation, colleges ensure robust governance and a thriving community for all stakeholders. This guide aims to help you achieve these goals effectively.

For further information:

1. **The Learner Voice Framework:** this [self-assessment exercise](#) helps colleges reflect on their own practices and learn about foundational principles and excellence in practice.
2. **Colleges Wales:** Colleges Wales publish a range of guidance and information on good governance, their website provides information on the legal frameworks, governance structures, and the role of governing bodies within the sector. The [Code of Good Governance for Colleges in Wales](#) outlines best practices for governance in Welsh FE colleges, detailing the responsibilities of governors, including student governors, and emphasising the importance of effective governance in achieving educational objectives.
3. **Further and Higher Education (Governance and Information) (Wales) Act 2014:** This [Act](#) provides legislative context on the governance of institutions within the further education sector in Wales, offering insights into the statutory responsibilities and frameworks governing FE colleges.
4. **Advance HE:** Advance HE published this [guide](#) to student governors.
5. **"How is the role of student governor understood in further education?":** This [academic paper](#) examines the understanding and enactment of the student governor role within FE colleges, providing research-based insights into the challenges and expectations associated with the position.
6. And keep a look out on **NUS Wales & NUS Charity's** website and social channels for more information and training on all things student governors.