A new approach to student engagement

A toolkit for delivering a student commission on learning

Part 1
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The Harris Federation is a single charitable legal entity to which all of the Harris Academies belong. Its aim is to operate as a group of collaborating academies for the benefit of young people in London. There are currently nine academies stretching across four local authorities (LAs) and a further four Harris Academies will start in September 2011.

All Harris Academies are in challenging urban areas of London where underachievement has been endemic and the education on offer has failed many young people. But these schools are showing a unique capacity to transform aspiration and academic success. In the last few years Harris Academies have improved at a rate far above the national average. The academies are very popular with parents and students, being typically at least five times oversubscribed for each place.

www.harrisfederation.org.uk

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NESTA does not work alone. Our success depends on the strength of the partnerships we form with innovators, policymakers, community organisations, educators and other investors. We bring the best ideas, new flows of capital and talented people together, and encourage others to develop them further.

www.nesta.org.uk
Section 1

Introduction

1.1 A student commission on learning as an innovative and practical approach to improving student engagement

Schools face a growing challenge: how to provide an education experience that effectively prepares all their young people for success in an uncertain and fast-changing world. For many education professionals it has become increasingly clear that the only way to achieve this is through the active participation and engagement of students in a range of high-quality and flexible learning opportunities.

But how do you achieve this? How do you get students, staff and leaders working together on radically improving the business of learning?

This toolkit is designed to help a school, group of schools or local authority design and implement a powerful and distinctive approach to improving teaching and learning through increased student engagement.

By setting up a student commission on learning, such organisations can create more motivating and engaging learning experiences for students and staff.

This approach has been pioneered across the Harris Federation of South London Schools. Nine Harris Academies have formed the Harris Student Commission on Learning, driven by the firm belief that bringing about radical improvement in young people’s engagement in and commitment to learning is only possible when students lead the way and work in genuine partnership with staff to take more responsibility and control over how they learn.

This toolkit of resources shares the lessons of the Harris Student Commission and aims to encourage and support others to take on the approach. It will be of interest to school leaders and teachers, and to other education professionals, and could be applied successfully in:

- single schools and colleges
- formal groupings of schools, for example federations or trusts
- local authorities.
Launched in October 2008, the Harris Commission was set up to help answer the following key questions:

- What will learning in Harris look like in three years’ time?
- What needs to be done to secure continuous improvement and growth?
- How can students and staff begin to create a new design for learning together?

The aim was to investigate the most powerful teaching and learning practices from the UK and abroad in order to share, adapt and test them across the Harris Federation to secure improved engagement and motivation.

The commission is about empowering young people and adults to work in partnership towards a key goal, to discover and share what it means to make learning both highly engaging and effective.

The focus is on enquiry into learning, with young people leading the way. Over 150 student commissioners have become ‘leaders of learning’, taking on responsibility for this discovery process – which includes testing out new approaches to learning – in their own academies.

Many more students and staff from across the academies are involved through focused enquiry projects, all collaboratively designed and delivered by students and staff.

At the end of two years, the student commission will set out what it has learned. It will make evidence-based recommendations for how learning across Harris should look. All of the federation’s leaders are committed to taking forward whatever recommendations are made.
1.2 Developing your own student commission on learning – how to use this toolkit

This toolkit is designed to help other schools and organisations create their own student commissions.

It sets out why you might want to use this approach and guides you through the first stages of design and implementation. The Harris Student Commission on Learning is used as a case study throughout to draw out lessons learned and give practical ‘how to’ insights.

In the toolkit you will find:

• key questions and issues to consider
• top tips for implementation
• practical examples from the Harris Commission
• views of students and teachers
• links to a wide range of further reading and practical resources produced by the Harris Commission available at www.studentcommission.org.uk

The toolkit isn’t intended as a template for delivery but as a guide and resource for anyone interested in trying out the approach. Hopefully you will be inspired by what is possible, take away the key insights and practical advice and develop your own unique commission based on your specific objectives and local context.

The toolkit comes in two parts. Part 1 covers the design and implementation of the first phase of a student commission:

• set-up and launch
• early engagement and initial in-school enquiry
• initial external enquiry and early classroom enquiry projects.

Part 2 covers the second phase of a student commission:

• consolidating enquiry and sharing early ideas about learning
• design and delivery of significant enquiry projects to test ideas
• continuing external enquiry
• making recommendations for change (and preparing the conditions)
• celebrating achievements.
Overview of a student commission

Phase 1 (see toolkit part 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Set up and launch term 1</th>
<th>Early engagement and initial in-school enquiry term 2</th>
<th>Initial external enquiry and early classroom enquiry projects term 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• define and plan your commission (sections 2 and 3)</td>
<td>• deliver early engagement activity (4.2, 4.3, 4.4)</td>
<td>• learn about learning from external sources (e.g. external expert witness sessions, desk research) (5.3, 5.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• secure senior leadership support (4.1)</td>
<td>• learn about learning within your own school (e.g. online learning survey, video, internal expert witness sessions) (4.4, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4)</td>
<td>• provide further training for student commissioners (involving others) (4.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• identify commission leaders (3.2)</td>
<td>• plan external enquiry (5.3, 5.4)</td>
<td>• share commission work with senior leaders and secure ongoing support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• recruit and train student commissioners (being a leader of learning) (5.1)</td>
<td>• provide further training for student commissioners (understanding enquiry) (5.1)</td>
<td>• process ideas about learning from initial enquiry and agree focuses for early classroom enquiry projects (5.3, 5.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• launch the commission with staff and students (4.2, 4.3, 4.4)</td>
<td>• update students and staff (4.3).</td>
<td>• design and begin initial classroom enquiry projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• design early engagement activity (4.2, 4.3, 4.4).</td>
<td></td>
<td>• update students and staff.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Phase 2 (see toolkit part 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consolidate and share the outcomes of initial enquiry term 4</th>
<th>Design and deliver significant enquiry projects terms 5 and 6</th>
<th>Make recommendations for change and celebrate achievements term 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• set out and share the outcomes of the enquiry into learning from phase 1 – this will form the framework of activity for phase 2 (2.1)</td>
<td>• design and deliver significant enquiry projects that will test, trial and research new approaches that explore the commission’s early findings further (3.1, 3.2)</td>
<td>• consolidate and share learning from significant enquiry projects (4.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• design and deliver ways to communicate your early findings with students, staff and leaders (2.2)</td>
<td>• train student commissioners in research techniques and approaches (3.3)</td>
<td>• develop outline recommendations for change and test these with students, staff and senior leaders (4.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• recruit and train additional student commissioners and co-leaders</td>
<td>• focus on involving the most disengaged students and the most sceptical teachers</td>
<td>• finalise recommendations and share these at high-profile event that celebrates the work of the commission (4.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• train student commissioners further (3.3)</td>
<td>• maintain a dialogue with senior leaders to ensure you build support for the initial enquiry outcomes and for the projects (3.1)</td>
<td>• plan for implementation of the change and for the next phase of the commission’s work (4.4).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• continue with initial classroom enquiry projects – focusing on involving more teachers and students</td>
<td>• explore models of excellent practice from other schools and undertake further desk research as needed (3.4).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Overview of the Harris Student Commission on Learning Phase 1
(September 08 – September 09)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Set up and launch</th>
<th>Early engagement and initial in-school enquiry</th>
<th>Initial external enquiry and early classroom enquiry projects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Autumn 2008</strong></td>
<td><strong>Spring 2009</strong></td>
<td><strong>Summer 2009</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• commission designed and planned with Harris senior leaders</td>
<td>• ongoing activity to engage students and staff</td>
<td>• focus for initial enquiry projects agreed with co-leaders following survey with commissioners (students as teachers) and relevant desk research undertaken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• co-leaders identified and recruited from each academy</td>
<td>• initial commission update published and distributed to all staff</td>
<td>• early classroom enquiry projects designed and planned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• resources secured from the federation and partnership formed with NESTA</td>
<td>• internal expert witness sessions held in all academies</td>
<td>• 11 external expert witness sessions held</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• lead principal for the commission identified</td>
<td>• cross-academy expert witness sessions held</td>
<td>• learning from expert witness sessions captured by students, on film and in written summaries and shared through commission online space (<a href="http://www.harrisvoice.org.uk">www.harrisvoice.org.uk</a>) and in individual academies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• approximately ten student commissioners recruited in each academy</td>
<td>• external expert witness sessions designed and planned</td>
<td>• senior leaders updated through meetings with commissioners and co-leaders, and reports to federation board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• video enquiry into learning with students and staff from across the federation</td>
<td>• senior leaders updated through meetings with commissioners and co-leaders, and reports to federation board</td>
<td>• initial classroom enquiry projects delivered in each academy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• commission launched at whole-federation staff conference</td>
<td>• student commissioner development day 2 – understanding enquiry (survey with commissioners to identify key areas for commission enquiry)</td>
<td>• student commissioners participate in federation leadership conference and training day for NQTs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• academies raise awareness of the commission through assemblies, meetings with staff and leaders</td>
<td>• further meetings with commission co-leaders (one per half term).</td>
<td>• student commissioner development day 3 – actively engaging other students and staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• initial meetings with all commission co-leaders (one per half term)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• co-leaders contribute to levels of engagement survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• commission featured in federation newsletter distributed to all parents and partners</td>
<td></td>
<td>• student commissioners and staff write update publication that is distributed to all staff in September CPD days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• whole-federation online teaching and learning survey (3000 students and staff)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• student commission film created to secure further involvement from students and staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• student commissioner development day 1 – being a leader of learning.</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Overview of the Harris Student Commission on Learning Phase 2 (October 09 – April 11)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consolidate and share the outcomes of initial enquiry</th>
<th>Design and deliver significant enquiry projects</th>
<th>Make recommendations for change and celebrate achievements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Autumn 2009</strong></td>
<td><strong>Spring and Summer 2010</strong></td>
<td><strong>Autumn 2010 and Spring 2011</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- research and review visits undertaken in each academy</td>
<td>- design and delivery of online tool to capture ideas for new, practical enquiry projects</td>
<td>- insights from practical enquiry projects published and shared through staff INSET</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- early ideas about learning developed with students and staff</td>
<td>- structure and format for practical enquiry projects created and shared with co-leaders from every academy</td>
<td>- practical enquiry projects identify findings and create final reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 12 early ideas about learning published</td>
<td>- potential enquiry projects shortlisted</td>
<td>- recommendations conference held with student commissioners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- new student commission film created as a tool to engage more teachers</td>
<td>- workshop held with all academy principals to gauge interest in and commitment to enquiry projects, and to hear their priorities and suggestions</td>
<td>- workshop held with co-leaders to identify priority recommendations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- high profile launch event delivered (with input from student commissioners)</td>
<td>- research guidance for student commissioners developed</td>
<td>- workshop held with principals to test early recommendations and build commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- new commissioners recruited and trained</td>
<td>- student commissioner development day 4 – developing enquiry projects</td>
<td>- structure and format of final recommendations agreed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 12 early ideas about learning shared with staff through student commissioner-led INSET in every academy, sessions with NQTs and all staff at the annual federation teaching and learning conference</td>
<td>- two international study visits delivered and learning shared across the commission</td>
<td>- draft recommendations discussed and re-drafted by a small team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- planning for ‘learn-over’ and international visits undertaken</td>
<td>- practical enquiry projects designed and delivered in all academies</td>
<td>- final recommendations agreed and ‘new design for learning’ written and published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- first national ‘innovation in education’ event used to test early ideas with experts and school leaders</td>
<td>- enquiry projects forum designed and delivered as a way of sharing findings and leveraging the quality of projects</td>
<td>- plan for implementation developed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 24hr ‘learn-over’ with student commissioners and schools from around the world.</td>
<td>- further desk research commissioned and undertaken</td>
<td>- high profile launch event delivered (with input from student commissioners)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- writing workshop held with student commissioners</td>
<td>- internal celebration event held.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- early insights from the enquiry projects gathered and processed.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A student commission is an effective response for any school or group of schools looking to create a widespread shift in motivation, engagement and partnership between all students and staff.

It is intended to go beyond a basic commitment to student voice and the involvement of students in school decision-making (e.g. student councils). Valuable as they are, these approaches rarely impact on what really counts. They can keep students at the periphery rather than enabling them to take responsibility for and make a difference to learning and how it is designed and delivered.

A student commission, in contrast, provides an opportunity to elevate students to ‘leaders of learning’, who work in partnership with teachers to develop and share their expertise over a sustained period. They are specifically commissioned by leaders to discover how learning can be improved. Critically, leaders commit to implementing changes which the commission recommends.

Whether your school is embarking on student engagement work for the first time, or looking to extend and develop existing activity, setting up a student commission offers a new and exciting approach with potential for real impact.

Student commissions will vary in their scope and scale, but the overarching aims should be:

- significant and lasting changes to teaching and learning
- radical improvement in student engagement, motivation and learning.

In a commission, these aims are achieved through:

- the discovery of what it means to make learning both highly effective and engaging
- the empowerment of young people and adults to work in new roles and new partnerships
- the recommendation of new learning practices which have been researched, tested and evaluated.

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**Harris Commission**

Teacher viewpoint

“This is probably one of the most important things we have ever had the opportunity to do with students – we mustn’t let them down.”

*Vivolyn Walker, Senior Vice Principal, Harris Academy at Peckham*
2.2 Key benefits for those involved in a student commission

Learners:
- are exposed to new ways of learning and ideas about it, and can apply this to their own studies
- are able to understand the role of the teacher and learn how to work alongside teachers as partners in the learning process
- acquire new skills as they work as part of a team, are provided with training, engage in research and enquiry, and share their learning with others
- are challenged and motivated by the responsibility which their new role brings.

Teachers:
- are exposed to new ideas and ways of delivering learning and are motivated to try new practices
- are able to empathise with learners and consider their own responsibilities as life-long learners
- are challenged and motivated by working in partnership with students to improve learning
- are given opportunities to reflect on their own practice at a much deeper level than they might otherwise be able to do
- can reconnect with what inspired them to teach through the process of learning about learning with students.

“The Harris Student Commission on Learning was established to give students a real voice and stake in how learning is organised within the federation. This goes much deeper than traditional student council work, which too often gives very little voice to students on the really important issue of their own learning. Our commission is about students and teachers working side by side to learn about effective learning and then to test out new approaches to see what works best for all of us at Harris.”

Dr Dan Moynihan, Chief Executive, Harris Federation
“The commission has made me think more about what I’m doing. I’ve taken a closer look at what I’m learning in lessons and I’m taking a closer look at what I’m learning in general.”

Matthew Gavin, Student Commissioner, Harris Academy Merton

“We should concentrate on people’s learning and how to make it better by involving them and engaging them. We need to actively listen and act on the things that matter most.”

Indya Phillips, Student Commissioner, Harris Academy South Norwood

“I used to be so negative about school. Before I never saw things from the teachers’ perspective. Now I can see learning with new eyes.”

Elizabeth Komolafe, Student Commissioner, Harris Girls’ Academy East Dulwich

“Seeing the development of partnerships between students and staff has been incredible. There has been a real move from early trepidation, to a situation where everyone is genuinely comfortable working closely with each other to learn about learning.”

Yolande Binks, Co-leader, Harris Academy Bermondsey

“Now when I go into a classroom and sit down I want to concentrate because I know how to connect with the lesson.”

Chloe Golding, Student Commissioner, Harris Academy Falconwood
Resources

• An overview of the Harris Student Commission on Learning (PowerPoint presentation)
• Harris Federation website – www.harrisfederation.org.uk
• NESTA website – www.nesta.org.uk
• Student voice types presentation/tool used in the Harris Commission (PowerPoint presentation)
• Other relevant websites and articles on student voice
  • Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency: www.qcda.gov.uk/libraryAssets/media/11478_rudduck_pupil_voice_is_here_to_stay.pdf
  • Sound Out: www.soundout.org
  • English Secondary Schools Students Association: www.studentvoice.co.uk
  • Teaching Expertise: www.teachingexpertise.com/e-bulletins/learning-listen-student-voice-6392
  • Teachers TV: www.teachers.tv/video/2773
  • teachernet.gov.uk: www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/Communitycohesion/communitycohesionresourcepack/ethos/voice
  • National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services: www.nationalcollege.org.uk/index/leadershiplibrary/leadingschools/working-in-partnership/ecm/school-families-communities/student-voice.htm
  • National Teacher Research Panel: www.standards.dcsf.co.uk/ntrp/lib/pdf/rogers_frost.pdf

Go to www.studentcommission.org.uk to access these resources

Notes
A student commission on learning isn’t a quick fix solution to a school improvement need. It is a long-term endeavour that requires time not only for the effective planning and delivery of a range of activities, but also for the whole school to prepare to take on the new ideas and approaches the commission will recommend. This kind of change can’t be achieved in less than 18 months to two years.

For a student commission to be successful, you need to have the following in place:

- senior level commitment to moving or developing existing student involvement activity to addressing the core business of schools – learning and teaching (see 4.1)
- a strategic intent to moving the learning agenda for the organisation in a new direction as a result of the student commission
- a cadre of teachers who demonstrate a deep commitment to widespread student engagement and involvement in the future direction of the school (see 3.2)
- dedicated resources to take the commission forward (see 3.3).

The Harris Student Commission evolved from a number of student voice and professional development programmes that were focused on improving teaching and learning across the federation. The commission was a way of bringing together existing successes and building from them with a more formal, cross-academy approach.

Framing the commission in the context of what had already been achieved in terms of student engagement was key. This was a way of securing further improvement through the engagement of young people in learning about learning. By working closely with external consultants who had a longstanding relationship with the federation, leaders at Harris were able to design an approach which was ambitious, but that felt like a natural progression.
3.2 Establishing the commission leadership

Whether your commission is running in one school or across a group of schools, getting the right adult leaders in place will be critical to success. The leadership model you choose will depend on your specific circumstances, but there are some key things to consider when identifying your approach:

- Your commission leaders need to believe in and be committed to what the commission is trying to achieve and have the motivation and energy to make it happen.
- They need to be willing and able to work with students in genuine partnership – to learn with and alongside students – and to be role model learners.
- Commission leaders will need the time to undertake the role and especially to meet regularly with student commissioners.
- You must ensure there is a connection into the leadership of the organisation so that decisions can be made easily and there is an obvious route to share learning.
- Ideally your leaders will have good peer networks and be respected teachers, which will help when it comes to engaging a broader group of staff in commission activity.
- You should consider including someone with research experience, as this will come in useful when designing and delivering commission enquiry projects.
- You must be confident that commission leaders will be good ambassadors as they are likely to be called upon to talk about and represent the commission beyond your organisation.

Top tip

Don’t underestimate the amount of time it takes just to get the basics in place. This includes releasing students and organising meetings, rooms and cover, etc. If you can, put in place some dedicated administrative support for the commission (see 3.3).

A co-leadership model allows for two or three members of staff to share the leadership responsibility for the commission. This creates a good structure for mutual support, dialogue around improvement issues, discipline for planning and cover for absence.

One of the earliest activities of the Harris Student Commission was the recruitment of 20 co-leaders from across the federation – in most cases two per academy. The best leadership arrangements combine experience and enthusiasm, for example a deputy principal and a talented young teacher. Potential co-leaders were identified and approached directly by the school leadership. Co-leaders spend on average 4–6 hours per week on the commission.
Fatima Rodrigues
Harris Academy Peckham
A languages teacher for 20 years and senior leader with responsibility for teaching and learning

Why did you join the student commission as a co-leader?
I think it’s really important that student voice occurs where students have real control over school issues that go way beyond what they’d be discussing in a student council.

How would you describe your role?
I see myself as a facilitator, a halfway house, a communicator and link between students and teachers, as well as teachers and teachers. There is a lot of administration work to do, and I spend a lot of time making sure other teachers know what’s going on.

What have you found most rewarding about the role?
Finding out that the students are really interested in what they’re doing. They’ve really come on board and have really developed – perhaps most noticeably in confidence.

What would you do differently in the early stages?
As for doing something differently, I think I would let the student commissioners off the reins a bit more from the beginning. At first I was very anxious to supervise everything that was happening from very close up but I think students should have been able to pursue their own curiosities and research from the earliest stages, with me overseeing, supporting and ensuring quality.

What commission activity have you been involved in that has really made a positive impact, for a student, for yourself, for another member of staff, or for your academy?
The staff training days have been incredible. Where students have taken a lead in training staff, the response has been incredible and the impact on changing learning massive.

Kurt O’Brien
Harris Academy Falconwood
Australian-qualified physical education and science teacher of seven years

How did you join the student commission as a co-leader?
I was recruited by the vice-principal – I think a co-leader was wanted who was fairly new but also experienced enough to deal with the pressures of the role.

How would you describe your role?
Co-ordinating projects, helping to formulate students’ ideas, checking knowledge and encouraging constant reflection. There is a lot of administration but I see my main role as helping students relate to the commission properly.

What have you found most rewarding about the role?
Seeing students start to think deeply and thoughtfully about learning, and in particular collaborate with adults on the subject. It’s inspiring to see them get their opinions across and talk about what needs to be done in a way that is mature and insightful.

What would you do differently in the early stages?
I would definitely recommend that more time is spent early on trying to get student commissioners into the mindset of the role. The role of student commissioner is a demanding one which requires focused leadership training and guidance.

What commission activity have you been involved in that has really made a positive impact?
For me, the New York trip* was the most impacting. It was fantastic for students, and me, to see a different education system in action. It helped everyone realise what a unique place our own academy is and how we have the power to use ideas from elsewhere in our own context.

* The study visit to New York took place during Phase 2 of the Harris Commission.
Co-leaders benefit from having a good status in the school; it really helps to get things done quickly. Book in a regular time to get together with your student commissioners and stick to it. Things will run a lot smoother!

Being a co-leader certainly becomes easier when other teachers begin to get involved. Student commissioners can then have various points of contact and get on directly with enquiry projects. Work on building a network of teachers who are willing to work with the commission.

One of the biggest challenges is building the capacity for the commission to introduce sustainable change. It’s something that’s really difficult to do when you’re working alongside the pressures of being a teacher.

It can be difficult to get staff engaged, but they are more receptive when they see things happening that make a positive difference. Getting them working with the students is the best way to engage them.

Work carefully to identify the needs in your own school and ensure the commission responds to these. This means that action becomes real and not a gimmick.

Make it manageable. Sometimes this means working with staff in your department or that you have a good relationship with. Also, try to stick to things you have an interest in.

One of the biggest responsibilities you’ll have is being on hand to rectify things when they go wrong, as they easily can!

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**Top tips from Harris co-leaders**

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**Resources**

- Top tips from Harris co-leaders (PDF)

Go to www.studentcommission.org.uk to access this resource

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**Notes**
The key resources needed for any student commission to be successful will be the time and energy of commission co-leaders and student commissioners, plus the commitment and support of senior leaders. Some dedicated financial support will be needed, but a student commission can be a relatively efficient way of bringing about innovation in school and need not be a significant financial burden.

If you are carrying out a student commission within a single institution the costs can be kept to a minimum and if your commission involves a large number of institutions you will need to budget some time for project coordination and administration.

Those adults leading the commission must be able to commit sufficient time to the design, planning and delivery of commission activity for the duration of the project, and also be prepared to draw in additional capacity from other teachers as the work develops and especially in support of in-school enquiry projects. Depending on the scale of your commission and whether there is dedicated admin support, this is likely to be around 3–4 hours per week for a co-leader. Student commissioners should also be clear about the amount of their own time, both during and after the school day, they will need to commit. Meetings before or after school are likely to take place once per week.

3.3 Allocating resources to the commission

The Harris Student Commission on Learning was funded by the Harris Federation. Additional support has been provided by NESTA in order to share learning from the Harris approach and make it visible and accessible to others, and through the Learning Futures programme.

The Harris Student Commission is a two-year project (October 2008 to December 2010) involving nine academies. For this period, the federation has provided a budget of £50,000 over three financial years. This has been used to purchase external strategic leadership and programme management support (including desk research, training and development for student commissioners, and workshops with commission co-leaders), and to create professional communication outputs to share the work of the commission within and beyond the federation (e.g. films and publications).

A grant from NESTA is funding the development of an online space where students and staff participating in the commission could communicate, the creation of a series of high quality publications to share learning from the commission (including this toolkit) and an external evaluation of the commission.

Individual academies covered the cost of staff time spent on the commission, hosting of student development days and transport to events.
Section 4

Getting the foundations right – engagement, energy and expectations

To have a widespread and lasting impact you will need lots of students and staff first to engage with the idea of the commission and to understand its purpose, and then to get involved in commission activity. You must try to avoid the commission coming across as an elite club of students and staff – the commission needs to actively share what it is doing and continually create opportunities for others to contribute to it.

4.1 Securing support and commitment from senior leaders

The idea to set up a student commission on learning may come from a senior leader, in which case there should be high-level commitment from the start. But whoever decides that a commission is a good approach for your organisation, gaining the active and ongoing support of key leaders will help ensure its impact is as profound and far-reaching as possible.

Without the support of key leaders the commission will struggle to live up to its aims, which are to make a significant impact on teaching and learning, and will also put at risk any future moves that seek to give students greater responsibility for and control of their learning.

Getting senior leaders visibly committed to the commission will:

- bring momentum and status
- demonstrate to others that the commission is an important and worthwhile endeavour
- ensure the commission’s work is connected to your school or organisation’s broader improvement strategy
- help secure the right resources
- help ensure those leading the day-to-day work keep on track and are accountable
- significantly increase the chances of the commission’s work having a widespread impact on teaching and learning.
Leaders across the Harris Federation committed to changing the way learning takes place in their academies as a result of the student commission:

The commission has been explicitly designed to influence what learning within the Harris Federation looks like in the future. Once the two years of commission enquiry are over, senior leaders, staff and students are committed to implementing the recommendations that are made.

Dr Dan Moynihan, Chief Executive, Harris Federation

We are constantly striving to provide a relevant, challenging education fit for the twenty-first century and the investigative and developmental work of the commission, particularly in the area of emerging technologies, is extremely important. The recommendations the commission makes will feed directly into our future plans.

Steve Kenning, Principal, Harris City Academy
Crystal Palace

A few months into the Harris Commission, student commissioners were able to secure ongoing support from senior leaders by holding workshop sessions at a whole-federation leadership conference of over 100 participants.

This was an opportunity to share what the commission had been doing and also to get feedback on future plans. In the feedback forms participants were asked, ‘What single thing would you be disappointed by if it didn’t happen as a result of the conference?’ and many of the responses related to the student commission:

- taking the commission’s ideas on board and making it happen
- not taking on the voice of the students
- the federation and individual academies fail to honour their commitment to the student commission
- building and evolving the student commission
- no tangible impact of student commission work in regular teaching and learning in each academy
- student commission’s work not influencing pedagogy and structures across the federation
- the students were not listened to and that they, as a result, felt as though they were not valued
- nothing changes – student findings and their ideas are not used to create change.

Resources

- Key messages from Harris student commissioners to senior leaders (PowerPoint slide used at the leadership conference)

Go to www.studentcommission.org.uk to access this resource
4.2 Giving the commission status

Setting up a student commission will be important and exciting for those leading it, but it also needs to look and feel important and exciting to everyone else who comes across it.

The commission needs to be given status within your organisation to help ensure that students and staff want to engage with it and contribute to it. If they don’t see it as a worthwhile investment of their time, you’ll struggle to have a widespread impact.

Status can be attached to the commission in a number of ways. For example by:

- creating a new kind of language for describing it using powerful terms (e.g. step-change, radical or innovative) to set the commission apart from other activity
- ensuring that senior leaders, teachers and student commissioners talk about the commission at key times and at relevant events, such as staff days, assemblies and conferences
- dedicating resources to the commission, both teacher time and money (see 3.3)
- making a commitment to and delivering really high-quality activity focused on learning
- creating new, visible roles for students and teachers (see 3.2 and 5.1)
- giving it a long enough time-frame in order that high quality, useful and impactful work can be done (see 3.1)
- giving the commission a public profile beyond the school by engaging with local press and securing some good news stories.

Top tip

Use a high profile event to officially launch the student commission to all staff.

The Harris Federation used their first cross-academy teaching and learning conference to ensure that all 700 staff knew about the commission and to get them excited by its potential.

Prior to the conference a film was created which used interviews with students, teachers and leaders from all academies to share what learning was like across the federation. This was used in the conference as a powerful way of framing the commission as being focused on learning, but also bringing the voice of students into the room. The students talked very eloquently on film about their learning and this helped to position them as valuable sources of knowledge and leadership in relation to improving learning through the commission.

The chief executive of the federation used the event to officially launch the commission and share the importance of it within the context of wider Harris work.

A student commission on learning is a great way of introducing a real dialogue about learning into the school between teachers and between students and teachers. Take as many opportunities as possible to emphasise that the commission is about investigating learning in order to make changes for the better. Make it clear that as a result of the commission there will be an impact in classrooms.

Resources

- Film about learning at Harris shown at a conference to launch the commission
- Example letter sent to Harris academies prior to filming for the commission launch film about learning (Word document)

Go to www.studentcommission.org.uk to access these resources
In the initial weeks and months you should be focused on communicating the purpose and nature of the student commission to as many people in your organisation as possible, and also on getting their feedback and ideas.

In this early stage it's important to communicate with both students and staff in ways that create a real buzz about the commission and the positive impact it could have.

Once student commissioners and co-leaders are in place and have undertaken an initial phase of training and enquiry, it is the right time to begin to bring in more staff and students to participate in commission activity. At this point there should be a shift from communication to securing active involvement. Depending on the overall timeframe of your commission, the initial phase of training and enquiry is likely to be between six and nine months in duration.
Top tip

Use school newsletters, letters home and the school website to regularly communicate information about the commission to parents. A great way of involving parents is to send out a request for parents with relevant expertise to contribute to the commission as external expert witnesses.

Top tip

The ultimate aim has to be to engage most of your staff and students in the work of the commission, but in the early stages it’s best to focus on ensuring you have the right group of committed co-leaders and student commissioners on board and appropriately prepared for the journey ahead.

“At first, keep the student commission quite small and limited to a small group of core members – this really helps keep discussions open and ideas flowing from each other.”

Harris Student Commission Co-leader

Top tip

Think up front about your communications plan and make sure you regularly capture information and material that will help you share what the commission is doing. Plan in advance the key times and opportunities for the commission to communicate with staff, students, leaders and the outside world.

- When will you have something interesting to say?
- When will you need to engage others?
- Who do you need to communicate with?
- What is the best form of communication, for example a presentation at a key event or meeting, a written update, a short film or a newsletter article?
- What regular opportunities should you build in to keep senior leaders up to date with progress and to get their ideas for the future?

Notes
Following the launch of the Harris Student Commission at a whole federation staff conference, participants were asked, “Over the next two years, what do you think the commission should aim to achieve?”

Here are some of the responses, which were shared with all staff through a commission update that was distributed via INSET days:

- be a forum for students and teachers to discuss learning and adopt new practices
- ensure that workable ideas are consolidated in schools and learner involvement is encouraged
- produce new, motivating, flexible and effective approaches to teaching and learning that are developed and delivered by students and teachers collaboratively
- support creativity in pedagogic practice
- create a better teaching and learning environment, and students that can think for themselves
- foster excellent relationships between academies so we can work as one
- help students develop personally as well as academically.

At a student commissioner development day six months into the Harris Student Commission on Learning, the co-leader and student commissioners from Harris Academy Peckham reflected on their communication and engagement activity.

What we have achieved so far:
- presented to students in house assemblies
- spoken to individual students
- presented to the senior leadership team
- put up a display in the reception area
- taken part in and presented at whole-staff continuing professional development (CPD) days
- held our own expert witness sessions with our own staff
- spoken to individual teachers upon our return from external expert witness sessions – a minimum of three per commissioner
- worked with the teaching and learning staff group looking at different teaching and learning strategies for use in the classroom.

What we are doing now:
- creating a DVD which will be shown to all students at the beginning of term
- creating a newsletter which will go out to students with regular updates of what we doing
- going to work with the new Year 7 during their induction day.

What we still need to do:
- introduce ourselves to the new Year 7
- re-visit assemblies early next year
- create a shadow commission group of students who can work to influence more students and get them on board.
Section 4

Resources

- Programme for Harris student commissioner development day 3
  – actively engaging students and staff (Word document)
- Presentation used at Harris student commissioner development day (PDF document)
- Example participation strategy created at Harris student commissioner development day 3
  (Word document)
- Harris levels of engagement survey (PDF document)
- Harris commission update to staff January 2009 (PDF document)
- Harris Federation newsletter Winter 2008 (PDF document)
- Example student commissioner assembly presentation – Harris Academy Merton (PDF document)
- Example student commissioner presentation to senior leaders – Harris Girls’ Academy East Dulwich
  (PDF document)

Go to www.studentcommission.org.uk to access these resources
4.4 Making the commission tangible

In order to get the commission up and running you need to make it tangible. This can be achieved through the creation of new roles, relationships and activity – all focused on learning about learning.

New roles
Having clear and accessible roles within the commission allows you to secure the involvement and commitment of key individuals early on and also makes it easier to let others know what the commission is. One of the first tasks in setting up the commission is to identify these specific roles (student commissioner, commission co-leader, etc.) and their associated responsibilities, and to recruit students and staff to them.

New relationships
The way these new roles are defined and talked about should demonstrate that the commission is about students and teachers working together in new ways. A successful student commission creates genuine partnerships of students and teachers where responsibility for enquiry into learning is shared. Students are given permission and space to lead with the support of teachers and this new way of working needs to be nurtured from the beginning, ideally by leaders, staff and students working out together what their respective commission responsibilities will be and undertaking some significant early activity.

For the commission to achieve a shift in engagement, it’s vital that the adult leaders find ways of supporting student commissioners and help to ensure the quality of commission activity but at the same time allow students to lead and make progress. Critically, the adults involved need to be committed to learning about learning with the students.

New activity
The early activity of the commission is a chance for students and teachers to establish their new roles and to show the rest of the organisation what the commission is about. Ideally you’ll have two strands of early activity. The first strand is focused on letting people know what the commission is about and creating a buzz of excitement about what’s to come. The second strand should be some early enquiry into learning within your organisation, for example a whole-school online learning survey, creating a film of interviews with students and staff about effective learning, or internal expert witness sessions with staff. This ensures that the focus is on learning from the start and can begin to create a dialogue about learning with a broader group of staff and students.

Top tip
Ensure that early commission activity highlights the new student role and how student commissioners will be working with teachers, for example through internal expert witness sessions. This activity will set the tone and standard for what follows so it needs to be chosen carefully and be of high quality.

Top tip
Early activity is also an opportunity to recognise and celebrate knowledge and expertise within your own school and ensure that students have opportunities to value what their own teachers know about learning (see 5.4).
Structure of Harris Student Commission on Learning (individual academy phase 1)

- **Lead principal for the commission**
- **Co-leader**
- **Co-leader**

Members of staff who lead and oversee the work of the commission in each academy

- **Student Commissioner**
- **Student Commissioner**
- **Student Commissioner**
- **Student Commissioner**
- **Student Commissioner**
- **Student Commissioner**

Student leaders of learning – represent all year groups

**Notes**
5.1 Design feature 1: The role of the student commissioner as ‘leader of learning’

The student commissioner role as leader of learning is at the heart of the commission approach. Student commissioners take responsibility, with the support of staff, for the discovery and enquiry process.

In practice this means they are at the forefront of all the activities a commission might deliver to learn about learning but not that they take on the burden of project management or administration.

It’s important that student commissioners understand it is their responsibility to investigate what makes learning powerful and that they are doing this on behalf of their peers. They have been given a privileged position and other students and staff are relying on them to show responsibility and commitment.

The potential benefits for those students who undertake the role are significant. Student commissioners:

- are exposed to new ideas about and ways of learning and can apply this to their own studies
- are able to understand the role of the teacher and learn how to work alongside teachers as partners in the learning process
- acquire new skills as they work as part of a team, are provided with training, engage in research and enquiry, and share their learning with others
- are challenged and motivated by the responsibility their new role brings.

Designing an appropriate recruitment process for your student commissioners will be one of the first commission activities. Some of the questions you may want to consider when recruiting student commissioners are:

- What kind of recruitment process is right for your context? Will it be open and accessible to all students or will you ask staff to nominate potential student commissioners? Will you use a combination of both?
- What is your ideal number of student commissioners to start off with? You’ll need enough commissioners to be able to undertake the range of early commission activity, but not so many that it becomes unmanageable. You can always recruit more commissioners later.
- How will you ensure your student commission is representative of the whole student body?
- Do you need to relate the student commissioner role to other pre-existing student leadership roles or will you keep it separate?
- How will you ensure that potential commissioners understand the nature of the role and the level of commitment required?

Top tip

You need the right mix of student commissioners to represent the whole student body. It’s no good only selecting student commissioners who are well behaved and academically bright because these students won’t necessarily be leaders of their peers. The commission can offer a unique opportunity for all kinds of students to take on new responsibilities and develop new skills. The best cohort of commissioners is likely to include a wide range of students who can each offer something unique.
Academies within the Harris Student Commission each designed and delivered their own recruitment processes for commissioners. By the end of the first term each of the academies involved had identified approximately ten student commissioners, making around 70 in total across the whole commission.

Most academies created an open recruitment process, asking students to complete application forms, obtain references and attend interviews. Recommendations were also taken from staff who felt that particular students would benefit from involvement. In some cases academies directly approached students considered to be role models or academically gifted with an offer of a position in the commission. Co-leaders reflected that they should have more carefully targeted popular and talented student leaders from the start.

From the end of the first phase (summer 2009), academies began to recruit more commissioners. In some cases new students were initially called assistant or associate commissioners but it was later agreed that creating two tiers of student commissioners was not a good approach. Existing, experienced student commissioners were able to take an active part in second stage recruitment. The vast majority of new commissioners went through a process of written application and interview, and were selected by both staff and peers. Like the recruitment of the original cohort, individual academies determined the exact nature of the process to suit their own context. Those who interviewed applicants found the process challenging but very useful, particularly in improving self-confidence and reflecting on their own role through evaluating others’ strengths and weaknesses.

Harris student commissioner development days

Harris student commissioners took part in cross-federation ‘development days’ once per term.

These full-day sessions were hosted in different academies and were designed to:

- give commissioners from different academies opportunities to work and learn together, and share what they had been doing and learning in their own schools
- share information about upcoming commission activities with all student commissioners
- provide training and development on key issues, for example being a leader of learning, understanding enquiry and engaging staff and students
- celebrate what had been achieved and set expectations for future activity.

These sessions often featured:

- external, expert facilitation
- cross-academy working and learning
- presentations of commission work by students
- inputs from external experts, including students and teachers from other schools
- sharing of resources and learning materials to support commission activity
- focused time in academy groups to plan and design future activity.
During their first student commissioner development day, Harris Student Commissioners were asked to describe what being a ‘leader of learning’ means to them. Here are some of their responses.

As a student leader of learning we should:

- Be able to help others when they need our help. Respecting others is a vital part of becoming a leader of learning because if you don’t respect someone or something, others will not respect you.
- Take time to think about the ideas that have been given to you. Being a leader doesn’t mean you boss everyone around, being a leader means that you listen to people’s ideas and problems and give them solutions.
- Concentrate on people’s learning and how to make it better by involving them and engaging them – doing something to help. Actively listen to advice or peers, focusing on the things that matter most.
- Use other students to put forward ideas, getting them involved and giving them confidence. As leaders we need confidence in ourselves as well. We need to listen, take opinions and combine ideas. Leading is when you participate, listen and most importantly have commitment!
- Motivate the students that need motivating – it is important to have enough time to listen. Any ideas we have must be thoroughly thought through.
- Identify what learning is and how the Federation can continue to captivate young minds and train them for the twenty-first century. We as student leaders of learning must have a key vision in extending and developing learning, not only for us but for future Harris students.
- Aim to improve the way that students learn and ways in which we can strengthen the relationship between students and teachers, as I see this as a very important aspect of learning.
- Make sure everybody is participating. We also need to be proud of everything we do whether it be success or failure and motivate others in their education just like we are motivated.

Resources

- Pack of resources to support the induction of Harris student commissioners including:
  - Overview of induction pack (Word document)
  - Overview presentation (PowerPoint document)
  - Features of learning cards (Word document)
  - Being a leader of learning statements (Word document)
  - Notes and reflections templates for expert witness sessions as part of induction (Word document)
- Example student commissioner application form – Harris City Academy Crystal Palace (PowerPoint presentation)
- Example letter to parents about becoming a student commissioner – Harris Girls’ Academy East Dulwich (Word document)
- Example interview questions for student commissioners – Harris Academy Merton (Word document)

Top tip

Invest in skilling-up your student commissioners to effectively carry out their role. The Harris Student Commissioners came together for development days once every term in order to undertake training, plan and share their work. These sessions are crucial as a way of supporting and developing an expert student group that can actively lead and contribute to the commission. They can also be an opportunity to celebrate what is going well and energise students for the next phase of activity.

Top tip

Make sure you develop a core group of committed student commissioners to begin with and only when initial activity and relationships with staff have been established begin to think about recruiting more. Ideally you will have a high proportion of commissioners who remain through the whole project and can work alongside new commissioners as they come on board.
5.2 Design feature 2: Genuine partnerships between students and teachers

In the process of delivering a student commission there is real potential to create new relationships that will form the basis of a different learning dynamic between students and teachers.

One where young people take on greater responsibility for learning and teachers open themselves up to input and challenge from students. These new relationships are characterised by high levels of trust, understanding and empathy. Such relationships emerge as the commission creates widespread opportunities for students to work with staff on the design, delivery and assessment of curriculum and pedagogy.

The focus should be on moving existing relationships between learners and teachers from co-existence to collaboration and on to genuine partnership.

Key ways to ensure your commission supports the creation of genuine learning partnerships:

- Recruit adult commission leaders who not only have a good rapport with students but who are open to working side by side with student commissioners to learn about effective learning and then test out new approaches to see what works.

- Make clear in the process of recruiting and selecting student commissioners that they will be expected to work with their teachers in new ways to learn about and to improve learning.

- Take opportunities to show to other students and staff that the commission is positively changing how students and teachers work together, for example by inviting student commissioners to take part in CPD or by undertaking joint teacher/student commissioner presentations to assemblies.

- Get students working with teachers to design and deliver some key early activities that will help build these genuine learning partnerships. For example, set up some internal ‘expert witness sessions’ where students can begin to respect and value the expertise of teachers, and teachers can see students in their roles as researchers and enquirers.

- Introduce concepts of ‘co-design’, ‘co-planning’ and ‘co-delivery’ to help create a language around collaboration and partnership that is used by both students and staff through the commission.

Top tip

Undertake an early activity at a student commissioner development day to come up with ‘principles of genuine partnerships’ that both staff and students working through the commission can sign up to.

Developing genuine partnerships

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Section 5
Learning partnerships – the student perspective

Chloe Golding, Kieran Simpson and Sharon Uwaibi, Student Commissioners,
Harris Academy Falconwood

As students and teachers are working together within lessons and at all times within schools, we feel teachers and students could use this partnership more effectively.

We would like staff and students to become more involved in the commission together – everyone should be taking part. We think staff not currently involved in the commission can help us move forward in the future, by giving us fresh ideas on what we can do.

If more staff and students work together on understanding learning within lessons, lessons could be more enjoyable and effective. Teachers will be able to use their knowledge and experience and students will be able to give their opinions on what they think will work best.

We feel more ‘learning partnerships’ will improve learning. Some teachers find giving students responsibility for their learning a very hard task and this will challenge students to take ownership of their own and others' learning and hopefully move it forward.

The impact of partnership

The following articles show the impact of partnership working between students and teachers through the Harris Student Commission. They were included in a commission update publication that was shared with all staff at Harris.

A learning adventure

Written by Yolande Binks, Commission Co-leader,
Harris Academy Bermondsey

Working with the students has been an inspiration for me. In particular, I have observed that:

- students are taking the leader of learning role seriously
- they are very motivated to make a real difference to learning and teaching
- students have a deepening understanding of learning
- students are now confident to take risks in their own development and are more independent learners.

Through the Commission, teams of committed staff and students have been established. They too feel part of a learning adventure and they have convinced me that the way to success in teaching is through a genuine student-teacher learning partnership.

Students as teachers: an experience of a lifetime

Extract from article written by Vincent Nimoh,
Student Commissioner, Harris City Academy
Crystal Palace

The Students as Teachers project has given me a newfound respect for the hard work teachers put in 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Teachers face a mammoth task everyday and the only way the commission is ever going to start getting across ideas is to co-design learning in association with teachers. Co-design is how we get the best from the experience of teachers and the enthusiasm of students to create learning that is both educational and exciting.

Co-design needs to be the key theme throughout the student commission. Without it we are never going to do anything fundamental to revolutionise learning within the federation.
“I firmly believe that the success of this project rests with us working in partnership; students and staff together having new and different conversations.”

Jane Fletcher, Lead Principal for the Harris Student Commission, Harris Girls’ Academy East Dulwich

“Working with students in lesson planning, teaching and evaluating gave me a greater understanding of students’ views on good learning and how it can take place in a lesson more effectively. My lesson planning has been positively affected through this process, and I will continue involving students in the future.”

Kurt O’Brien, Commission Co-leader, Harris Academy Falconwood

“I don’t feel threatened anymore. I can have adult conversations with teachers and it’s helping my learning.”

Sumon Miah, Student Commissioner, Harris Academy at Peckham

“Students and teachers need to be able to respond positively to criticism and advice. Only that way will they learn how to improve and discover the best ways of learning together.”

Jake Sherwood, Student Commissioner, Harris City Academy Crystal Palace

“The most important thing is you know that teachers trust you.”

Tia Henry, Student Commissioner, Harris Academy Bermondsey

“We helped Miss Aderanti teach her Science lesson. I now have more understanding of how important planning is and making sure students are focused on the lesson.”

Alex Smith and Kieran Simpson, Student Commissioners, Harris Academy Falconwood
Resources

- Harris Student Commission update September 2009 (includes many articles about partnership working between students and teachers) (PDF document)
- Harris commission film September 2009

Go to www.studentcommission.org.uk to access these resources
5.3 Design feature 3: A focus on learning about learning

A student commission is all about learning. Student commissioners are leaders of learning in their schools and their role is to actively enquire into when and how learning is most powerful. At the same time opportunities are created for teachers to learn through collaboration with students, from expert sources and from research.

In the first instance, get as many students and staff as possible thinking and talking about learning as this will lay the foundations for later activity. A good way of doing this is to undertake an online learning survey with students and teachers from across your school(s) taking part. Doing this will also enable the commission to capture a snapshot of the opinions, aims and hopes for teaching and learning within your organisation that can be used to guide and inform the commission’s early activities and to develop a baseline against which to measure progress.

Other early commission activities that can help create a dialogue about learning include:

- developing a simple card exercise that can be used with groups of students in tutor time as a tool for discussing and prioritising different learning approaches (this can also be used with student commissioners in an early development day)
- getting student commissioners to capture students on film talking about what makes good learning and edit the material together to share more widely
- the student commission hosting a workshop session with teachers and school leaders to get their views on what good learning looks like
- setting up graffiti walls as an informal and fun way of getting large numbers of students thinking about and recording some of their thoughts about good learning and how it can be improved
- learning cafés hosted by the student commission where students and staff can come and have refreshments whilst they talk about learning in an informal way with student commissioners
- student commissioners running part of an INSET day and gathering views at parents’ evenings
- setting up learning clinics where students can drop in and discuss their learning with student commissioners one-to-one
- establishing a social network for the commission, either as part of an existing school site or on another social networking platform, to enable large numbers of students to exchange ideas about learning and their hopes for the commission.

Top tip

There are lots of activities that will help create a dialogue about learning and generate lots of ideas for how it could be improved. What the commission must also do is collate, process and share this information as well as use it to formulate plans for focused in-school enquiry.
At the start of the Harris Student Commission on Learning an online teaching and learning survey was undertaken across the whole federation.

Respondents were asked to put statements about learning in order of importance as a way of generating priorities for the commission. Most academies included a link to the survey on the homepage on all computers in their ICT suites to encourage students to take part. In many cases the completion of the survey was included at the start of ICT lessons. Over 2600 students and 300 teachers took part.

Sample statements used in the survey:
- learning in groups
- lessons where we use computers and other technology
- learning in different places to school
- learning from people outside the academy
- learning through homework tasks
- lessons where there is opportunity for active learning
- students learning independently
- lessons that focus on individuals’ needs
- well-organised and planned lessons
- lessons when students get to be creative
- students learning from other students
- lessons where students solve problems
- lessons that really challenge students.

There are lots of free internet-based survey generators you can use to create your online survey, for example www.surveygizmo.com or www.surveymonkey.com.

Resources

- Questions used in the first Harris commission online learning survey (Word document)
- Features of learning card exercise for students (Word document)
- Film about learning at Harris used to launch the commission
- Film about learning at Harris Academy Crystal Palace

Go to www.studentcommission.org.uk to access these resources
5.4 Design feature 4: Knowledge sources

A student commission should draw its knowledge about learning both from within the school or group of schools and from experts beyond the school. In addition, students and staff work together in the commission to create new knowledge about how to improve learning by testing ideas through practical enquiry projects.

Using the ‘three fields of knowledge’ framework to underpin the design of a commission’s enquiry activity can bring rigour and focus, ensuring that not too much time is spent on one at the expense of the other. For example, when delivering in-school enquiry projects some early desk research may highlight exemplar approaches from schools that have undertaken similar work. The commission can then use these insights in the design of its work.

Three fields of knowledge

- **What is known**
  Knowledge from theory, research and practice

- **What we know**
  The knowledge of those involved – from within

- **New knowledge**
  Knowledge we create through the commission

**Top tip**

What is known (external expertise) and what we know (internal expertise) are perhaps the easiest knowledge bases to access but it is through practical enquiry in your own context, with students and teachers co-designing and delivering enquiry projects, that the most compelling knowledge is created.

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1 Based on a model for networked learning issued by the National College for School Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services
Through a range of expert witness sessions, student commissioners were given the opportunity to hear about innovative education practices and to consider how they might apply to their own academies.

Two full-day events were held at NESTA (but could easily be delivered in a local venue or at your own school) and ten expert witnesses took part.

The sessions were intended to:

• provide real opportunities for student commissioners to actively enquire into key areas of learning
• give student commissioners new insights into what is known about the most powerful and innovative approaches to learning and teaching
• contribute to the development of the young people involved as student leaders of learning, i.e. more knowledgeable, skilled, confident, motivated and participative learners who understand excellent educational practice
• enable the students who take part to reflect on what they have learnt, to share their knowledge with peers and adults, and to incorporate it into new activities and projects within their academies.

Format of the sessions

The sessions were led by students. A group of between five and ten student commissioners from across the Harris Federation formed a panel to which the experts presented evidence on a specific topic. One or two members of staff were present and acted in a facilitative role if needed. One student and one member of staff guided a Q&A session between the panel and the expert, and took responsibility for supporting the students in their reflections and capturing the learning after the session.

Expert witnesses:

Professor Guy Claxton, Professor of the Real World Sciences and Co-Director of the Centre for Real-World Learning at the University of Winchester

Professor Charles Desforges OBE, Emeritus Professor at the University of Exeter

Sue Hackman, Chief Advisor for School Standards at the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)

Valerie Hannon, Managing Partner of The Innovation Unit

Professor Stephen Heppell, CEO of Heppell.net

Professor David Lambert, Chief Executive of the Geographical Association (GA), Professor of Geography Education at the Institute of Education

Charlie Leadbeater, leading thinker and writer

Professor David Leat, Executive Director of the Research Centre for Learning and Teaching (CfLaT)

Ian McGimpsey, Senior Manager – Education at the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA)

David Price OBE, consultant, adviser and speaker working in arts and education

Professor Gilly Salmon, Professor of E-learning and Learning Technologies at the University of Leicester

What is known – knowledge from theory, research and practice

By looking beyond the school for knowledge about learning, students and staff are introduced to entirely new ideas, approaches and practices. External expertise can come from a range of sources, including:

• Hearing from external experts on education – these could be academics from universities or leading thinkers and writers, or education professionals from other schools in the UK or beyond. Student commissioners should have the opportunity to hear evidence from a range of experts and to question them on their views.

• Engaging with sites of excellent practice in the UK and abroad. Looking at how other schools approach learning can introduce the commission to a whole range of new ideas, techniques and practices. Seeing these approaches in action can have a profound impact on the way students and staff view the potential for change in their own school.

• Undertaking desk research, gathering information and evidence from external publications and accessing data on the internet, etc. Carrying out initial desk research helps give background knowledge of a subject as well as providing useful leads that will help to get the maximum from primary research.

External expert witness sessions in the first year of the Harris Student Commission
Top tips

Top tips for setting up and getting the most out of your own external expert witness sessions

• If you don’t ask you won’t get – don’t be afraid to ask important or high-profile people to come and speak to your student commission. They are likely to relish the opportunity to engage directly with young people.

• You shouldn’t expect to pay any experts to take part in witness sessions, but you may need to cover travel expenses.

• Write to parents and local contacts at universities to get nominations for potential expert witnesses.

• If you’ve identified an expert who can’t come and talk to the commission in person, set up a conference call with students using a service like Skype or ichat.

• Make sure students are prepared to take part – give them background information on the expert and the topic and get them thinking in advance about possible questions they might ask.

• Use notes and reflection templates to ensure that student commissioners capture learning from the sessions.

• Film the sessions and create short videos that can be shared with the rest of the school.

Resources

• Harris invitation letter to external expert witnesses (Word document)

• Harris briefing for student commissioners about external expert witness sessions (Word document)

• Harris briefing for expert witnesses (PDF document)

• Films and learning summaries from Harris external witness sessions (films and PDF documents)

• Article from Harris commission update September 2009 summarising expert witness sessions – Pages 6 and 7 (PDF document)

• Initial Harris Commission desk research into Students as Teachers (PDF document)

Go to www.studentcommission.org.uk to access these resources
What we know – the knowledge of those involved (from within)

It’s really important not to underestimate the amount and quality of expertise about learning that will exist in your own organisation(s). Finding ways to identify and share existing excellent practice should be a starting point for the commission’s work. In this way you can engage a range of teachers in the school and take important early steps in the process of building genuine learning partnerships between students and staff. Early exploration of the views and expertise of your own leaders and teachers also helps locate the work of the commission firmly within your specific learning context and is a mechanism for ensuring the commission stays relevant and authentic.

The expert witness session model can be applied within your own schools.

Internal expert witness sessions in the Harris student commission

Every academy held its own internal expert witness sessions with student commissioners and teachers. Following this, student commissioners also took part in a range of sessions in one or more other academies in order to share knowledge across the federation.

Preparation

Our event was held over one lunchtime and afternoon. We thought that going on for much longer than that might be counter-productive – there’s only so much that student commissioners would have been able to take in at this early stage! Student commissioners heard from three teachers altogether in slots of half an hour. In setting up these time slots, we tried to keep the sessions short and punchy with about ten minutes at the end for questions. Teachers let me know beforehand what they’d be talking about and I made sure the students knew what to expect, so no one was going in cold. Before the session I had spent some time with student commissioners discussing what were the most important questions they had. We found this to be really helpful in helping us learn the most from the sessions.

Preparing the day was mainly a question of administration. I approached three teachers and asked if they would be prepared to offer their expertise and time to the commission. Then it was a matter of booking rooms, ensuring equipment was available and making sure all staff knew what was going on. At this early stage letting staff know about the event, so that student commissioners could be excused, was one of the most time consuming (if important) tasks.

The day

Mr. Morgan, 12:35 – 1:05pm

Mr Morgan spoke about the computer program Mymaths and the general improvement in motivation of students working in mathematics lessons.

Student commissioners’ questions were related to developing this across the federation, the effect this had on personalising learning, the impact Mymaths had on homework tasks being completed and how it helped teachers to plan lessons.

Ms Richter, 1:15 – 1:45pm

Ms Richter spoke about engaging all students in her lessons by incorporating all learning styles and taking into consideration the emotional needs of all students in her planning and delivery of lessons. Ms Richter did a presentation and gave students a handout of examples.

Student commissioners’ questions were related to how learning styles are important to engage students, how the teacher deals with specific emotions, the most effective styles in lessons, the effects of group work on students’ achievements and where Ms Richter gets all her ideas from.

Ms Walsh, 1:55 – 2:25pm

Ms Walsh spoke about different methods used to engage all students through drama activities. She presented using a PowerPoint presentation and gave students a handout of types of activities she incorporates to teach Macbeth.

Student commissioner’s questions were related to how students achieve when disruptive students are present, the emotional aspects of dealing with difficult students, the most successful ways of engaging all students and how students learn best together.

Evaluation

The day worked really well. Student commissioners showed their maturity and managed their questioning really well. They were able to hear about some of the hard ‘behind the scenes’ work that goes into being a teacher. This was their first opportunity to demonstrate real commitment to the commission and they passed with flying colours!
Resources

- Example presentation used at a Harris Commission internal expert witness session (PowerPoint presentation) and supporting materials (PDF documents)

Go to www.studentcommission.org.uk to access this resource

Notes
New knowledge – knowledge created through the commission

In the early phase of the commission you need to focus on drawing in knowledge from outside and building up a bank of powerful ideas about and approaches to designing and delivering good learning. You also want the commission to take this information and begin to form its own early ideas about what good learning is and how it can be improved.

But it isn’t sufficient for the commissions’ investigations into good learning to only be about listening to experts or finding out about how other schools work. The commission must also be about trying out new approaches in your own context and seeing the impact of different interventions. Although your detailed enquiry projects shouldn’t start until the second phase of the commission, it is good to get some initial classroom projects started whereby student commissioners and teachers can start to apply what they are learning about learning. The process of co-designing and co-delivering these early projects will make a real contribution to the way partnerships between staff and students are created.

After the first six months of enquiry into learning, student commissioners identified the following key areas of focus for initial academy-based projects:

- more practical work so students actually experience their learning
- looking at what creates more effective ‘out of lesson’ learning
- having students teach students
- students and teachers planning lessons together
- finding out how communication between teachers and students can affect the students’ learning
- students observing lessons
- how widening choice in the curriculum impacts on motivation
- using technology, such as computer games, to help make learning exciting
- how enthusiasm and encouragement from the teachers can improve the learning of students
- applying more of the class work to real-life situations to see how effective learning becomes.

This set of ideas was used to develop an initial set of small-scale enquiry projects in all academies focused on the concept of students as teachers. To inform these projects the commission used a researcher to undertake desk research, looking at practice in the area of students as teachers under the following headings:

- planning and designing learning
- delivering learning
- providing and delivering professional development.

The research set out UK and international examples of what has been done, what has been achieved and key learning points.

Resources

- Initial Harris Commission desk research into students as teachers (PDF document)
- Range of articles on early enquiry projects from Harris Commission update September 2009 (PDF document)
- Example update presentation on students as teachers enquiry – Harris Academy Falconwood (PowerPoint presentation)

Go to www.studentcommission.org.uk to access these resources.
My Year 10 French GCSE group were set the task of teaching the rest of the class a set of phrases. Most chose to do this by preparing a PowerPoint with memorable visuals – they seem to find better ones than I do! Students reported that they remember the vocabulary much more when they teach others.

One student, Amina, said she would like to teach pronunciation rules, as some of the group were new to learning French and were still not confident in pronouncing new words and phrases. Together we identified some of the most useful letter strings and pronunciation rules and found examples in the vocabulary sets the rest of the class were working on. Amina prepared her plan and then went through how she would present it to the class. We discussed it and modified it slightly. It went very well and students said they found it very helpful. What was most impressive was the way it engaged the two least-committed students in the group.

Debbie Peel, Teacher

I found it stimulating to lead and when other students led, I got a much better understanding myself and found the students in my class interacted better and asked more questions. It was more informal, there was less pressure and the whole class got involved.

Reyss Wheeler, Student Commissioner

As a commissioner I have had the opportunity to plan and deliver lessons in maths and RS. I planned what I would do with the teacher and got feedback from the students and from my teacher, who observed the lesson. Students enjoyed the lesson and said it was easier to learn from another student because you’re more on a level. I noticed, and other students have told me, that when a student leads all or part of a lesson everyone gets more involved.

Lizzie Komolafe, Student Commissioner

Insights from early classroom enquiry projects on students as teachers carried out at Harris Girls’ Academy East Dulwich.
The second phase of a student commission is perhaps harder to deliver than the first. It involves taking the outcomes of all the phase 1 internal and external enquiry and consolidating these into a framework of key ideas or propositions about learning that your commission will investigate further in phase 2. This investigation takes place through significant enquiry projects within your own school, and also by looking beyond the school at examples of excellent practice from the UK and around the world. These enquiry projects will test and trial learning models and approaches that the commission believes have potential to positively transform learning in your school. Towards the end of phase 2 the commission will bring together the learning from these enquiry projects and begin to develop the core recommendations for changes to learning design and delivery.

### Overview of a student commission phase 2 (1 year)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consolidating and sharing the outcomes of initial enquiry term 4</th>
<th>Design and deliver significant enquiry projects terms 5 and 6</th>
<th>Making recommendations for change and celebrating achievements term 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• set out and share the outcomes of the enquiry into learning from phase 1 – this will form the framework of activity for phase 2</td>
<td>• design and deliver significant enquiry projects that will test, trial and research new approaches that explore the commission’s early findings further</td>
<td>• consolidate and share learning from significant enquiry projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• design and deliver ways to communicate your early findings with students, staff and leaders</td>
<td>• train student commissioners in research techniques and approaches</td>
<td>• develop outline recommendations for change and test these with students, staff and senior leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• recruit and train additional student commissioners and co-leaders</td>
<td>• focus on involving the most disengaged students and the most sceptical teachers</td>
<td>• finalise recommendations and share these at high-profile event that celebrates the work of the commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• train student commissioners further</td>
<td>• maintain a dialogue with senior leaders to ensure you build support for the initial enquiry outcomes and for the projects</td>
<td>• plan for implementation of the change and for the next phase of the commission’s work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• continue with initial classroom enquiry projects – focusing on involving more teachers and students</td>
<td>• explore models of excellent practice from other schools and undertake further desk research as needed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• engage with ‘sites of excellent practice’ from whom you can learn (e.g. via video conferencing or visiting other schools)</td>
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</table>
6.2 Feedback on this toolkit

The second part of this toolkit will be made available in December 2010. In the meantime, we would like to add to and develop this part of the toolkit with the experiences of other schools, colleges, groups of schools or LAs which decide to create their own student commissions on learning.

If you would like to give feedback on this toolkit or add your own views on how to design and deliver a commission effectively, visit www.studentcommission.org.uk