

Taking action in college and community

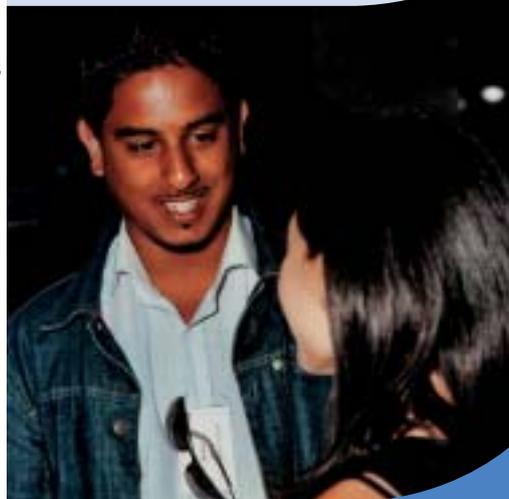
Tower Hamlets Sixth Form College

About the college

Tower Hamlets Sixth Form College offers vocational and academic programmes from entry level to AS/A2 to around 2,000 students. Tower Hamlets is one of the poorest boroughs in London and the majority ethnic group in the college is Bangladeshi (Muslim). Many hold strong personal views on international issues while having little awareness of life outside Tower Hamlets. There is a high drop-out rate among ex-college students who go on to higher education and find it hard to leave their homes in the borough.

The college's mission is 'Removing barriers and raising achievement, for everyone'. It sees citizenship as an important way to open young people's minds and broaden their perspectives and for some time has encouraged students to take part in college affairs (mainly through the students' union). Students, as union officers and tutor group representatives, have been a driving force in getting tutorial groups to experience citizenship and in encouraging their peers to get involved in college issues.

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... identify topics to work on'

Citizenship staffing

The senior tutor for student development is responsible for coordinating citizenship across the college, the enrichment programme and the youth work team. This helps to ensure that the enrichment programme supports citizenship provision (and vice versa).

All 80 tutors in the college are expected to give time to citizenship activities in their tutorials, but provision is inconsistent. Take-up of training sessions organised for tutors was low. Many tutors see citizenship as a bolt-on to the curriculum and are not making the most of opportunities to deliver it through the vocational and academic curriculum. A number of issues for staff development have been identified, including how to deal with sensitive and controversial issues that come up in tutorial discussions. The college is now reviewing its approach to training, recognising that tutors need expert support to give students a real experience of citizenship.

The citizenship programme

The main approaches to citizenship education at Tower Hamlets Sixth Form College are:

- student involvement in college affairs
- open space meetings
- the tutorial programme
- student involvement in community issues.

In principle, all students experience citizenship during tutorials. The college believes that citizenship should be seen in the context of a wider programme of enrichment activities, which includes a peer tutoring programme that encourages AS/A2 students to help entry level students with mathematics, IT and science.

What activities do post-16 students do?

Involvement in the students' union

The college has a very active campaigning students' union. Each of the 80 tutor groups elects one male and one female representative and there is an annual election for a president and senior officers (when all students have the chance to vote). Leading members of the union have acknowledged the importance of having a senior member of staff for support, who acts as an intermediary with the college management.

A small group of Muslim girl students has challenged stereotypes and become key members of the union. Characterised as 'quieter but often more effective than their male counterparts', they have also played a leading part in major college debates.

The college offers tutor group representatives regular training to help them communicate students' views from tutorials to college management. For example, in one training session representatives discussed a checklist of issues that they could use as prompts for future discussions with their tutor groups. Each representative identified three priority issues, which were then taken forward to the next meeting of representatives with the college management.

Open space meetings

As well as meetings of tutor group representatives with senior staff, the college organises open space meetings – chaired by the college director – where union representatives raise issues of their choice within a broad theme. At these meetings, described as 'structured brainstorms', issues such as 'How to make teaching and learning fun' and 'How can we make Tower Hamlets College really exceptional for our students, staff and community?' are explored in small workshops. At the end of the event, all participants are given a copy of a report on the meeting, which states individual responsibilities for future actions.

The principal of Tower Hamlets College gives an account of one open space meeting:

'In open space meetings there is no predetermined set of issues, no speakers, no experts, no sitting in rows facing the platform. Participants start the meeting in a circle with one facilitator. Everyone is invited to identify topics to work on relating to a theme or question. In our case, the theme of the meeting was "How can we make Tower Hamlets College really exceptional for our students, staff and community?". That general theme was all there was by way of a prearranged agenda for the two-day meeting.

'Within 20 minutes of inviting people to identify topics, over 100 were stuck up on the previously blank agenda walls around the room. The walls were arranged to show numbered breakout areas and times so that people could decide how to spend their time by looking at the issues. Everyone then took themselves to the groups that interested them most and got on with discussions, each group producing a report with recommendations. There is only one rule in open space meetings – the "law of two feet". This means that if you find yourself in a group where you are not learning or contributing you should use your two feet and move to another or to a cup of coffee.

'The topics in our meeting were very varied and resulted in hundreds of recommendations for change and improvement. Some of the most eloquent contributions came from students and from people in and out of the organisation who previously had had little opportunity to be part of discussions and decision making.

'The process is obviously not without risk. Some difficult issues were raised and discussed and at times that was hard. Some conflicts and frustrations, which have been simmering below the surface, are now transparent and can't be ignored.

'At the end of each day everyone was invited to say anything they wanted. The comments were overwhelmingly positive, with many people expressing surprise. Some said they had come feeling pretty cynical but were leaving feeling very good about what had happened and their part in it.

'The reports of the discussions and recommendations were distributed to everyone just before they left. This record gives us all an indication of some of the things that need to change and who is prepared to be part of that change. It's a powerful piece of work created in 48 hours by 400 participants. Subsequently we have sorted the recommendations into themes and posted this on our internet.'

After an open space meeting, chosen issues are taken forward in small meetings between management and students. As long as proposals have no major budgetary impacts, they are agreed and implemented at these meetings. Those with cost implications are considered by the management, which is committed to giving the union a reason why changes can or cannot be implemented.

An example of student participation is the perennial issue of canteen prices, which is regularly raised at tutor group representative and student executive meetings. To prepare a case, the students' union put together a detailed comparison of prices and was able to show that the college was not getting the best deal from its current contractor. As a result, the college did not renew its contract.

The tutorial programme

All students are expected to attend both individual and group tutorial sessions. The content of these is very much up to the individual tutor, who is expected to encourage debate and discussion on college and other citizenship issues proposed by the students. Some tutors bring in people from outside the college and youth workers to enrich and enliven their sessions and the colleges recognises the value of this. The citizenship coordinator believes strongly that the methodologies youth workers can bring to students will lead to a change in their attitudes and encourage a greater involvement in college affairs.

All tutor groups have to elect representatives to convey their views to the students' union and college management. To prepare would-be representatives, the college has developed a role-play exercise.

To encourage greater participation in union affairs and elections, members of the union executive are given the opportunity to use group tutorial time to promote the union to students. One of the students who has done this felt that it was particularly important to talk to entry level students. He found that they often feel isolated and don't voice their views, believing that they are there simply to make up the numbers on courses.

Involvement in community issues

Student engagement with the local Tower Hamlets community and council has been an outstanding feature of the citizenship programme. Some students' family and community backgrounds have encouraged them to engage with community issues and political processes. Other students have been drawn into campaigning on community issues through their experience as tutor group representatives.

Although the basis for their involvement has been through volunteering activities, students recognise that citizenship involves more than volunteering. One student, who had been president of the students' union, expressed frustration that good works in themselves were not enough to effect real change.

Many of the students at the college are Muslim and there has been an intense and emotional interest in recent international events, stimulated further by the college's active Islamic Society. The college has encouraged debates on sensitive subjects, such as the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center, and these have proved both manageable and responsible. Students showed equal maturity when a government minister visited the college to discuss the international situation.

Community action

A small group of students played an active part in an east London community action group, with the help of a support worker. They had the opportunity to lead workshops and to campaign on local issues, such as the inadequacy of the minimum wage for low-paid workers in the borough. Students felt that their contribution was welcomed and that they had far more than token opportunities to set and influence the group's agenda. For example, they wanted to focus on the problem of drug abuse in Tower Hamlets and organised a research project, involving 2,000 of their peers, through discussions and questionnaires. Their work was supported by the local drugs action team, which was keen to hear young people's views. The students made a video to highlight the issue of drugs and presented their findings to local councillors.

Local politics

To help students prepare for local elections, a group undertook training in leadership, presentational and negotiating skills. Candidates in local elections were invited to the college to give their views and set out their policies. They addressed an invited audience of 200 students on a five-point agenda drawn up by students, including issues of homelessness and the minimum wage for council contractors. On each item the councillors were pressed to give unambiguous answers. The last item on the agenda was to get the council to commit to a meeting with the students to report on progress.

Students interviewed after the event felt that they definitely had an influence on local politicians. They also believed that they had gained confidence and skills. One of the chairpersons at the event was a young Muslim woman who showed 'enormous confidence and presence' despite being inwardly terrified. The outgoing president of the students' union observed how the group had blossomed during the year, stating that confidence is 'not God-given but a skill that young people can develop'. Also at the event was Sir Bernard Crick, who paid tribute to the community action organisation that 'did not flinch from the need to encourage and train young people to act politically at every level'.

To explore ways of strengthening the youth voice in borough affairs, Tower Hamlets Council organised a youth participation seminar and invited a group of college students. The agenda for the day was set without consulting young people and the organisers decided that much of the event should be a celebration of youth culture in the borough. In the opinion of some students, this meant that there was too little time to put forward their ideas for greater participation and they were rather demoralised by the lost opportunity. The outcomes of the seminar were circulated to all tutor group representatives so that the views of all college students could be canvassed.

The steering group will continue to investigate the best model for youth representation in Tower Hamlets. The senior tutor for student development hopes to be able to appoint a part-time member of staff to help the group work on this issue.

Recognising and assessing achievement

The senior tutor for student development, who manages the citizenship programme, believes that ongoing assessment is best addressed through informal conversations with students rather than more formal methods. Opportunities are being developed within tutorials for reflection and review of learning.

Future developments

In the future, all students will be expected to take part in enrichment activities, which will include college societies, the students' union and the community. These will lead to a college certificate. There will be more scope for assessing students' participation in these activities during tutorial sessions, and clear obligations for tutors will be set out in the staff handbook.