

Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

Enhancing student representation

Alex Bols, Guild HE

Introduction

Student representatives are an essential part of feeding back student views and engaging students in university decision-making processes. There are many definitions of 'student representative', but this article focuses on students who sit on course, departmental, faculty or institutional committees.

'Hard to reach students' is a complex term, but, for the purposes of this article, the author is referring to students who do not engage in representation activities or do not have their voices heard. This group of 'hard to reach' students will differ across subject disciplines and institutions and it is therefore important to track which students are engaging in order to target those who are 'hard to reach'. In some institutions, there may be significant cross-over between 'hard to reach' students and those whom the institution targets through Access Agreements and widening participation activities. However, as this will not be the case in all institutions and all subjects, it is important not simply to conflate 'hard to reach' with 'widening participation' students, but to identify, through data analysis, those who are not engaged.

When thinking about student representation in the context of 'hard to reach' students, there are two key dimensions to consider: first, the extent to which student representatives are advocating on behalf of the whole diversity of the student cohort and, second, the extent to which the representatives themselves are reflective of the wider student body.

The role and expectations of student representatives have changed significantly, even in the twenty or so years since the author was first a student representative. This article will consider the way in which student representation has changed and developed in recent years and will draw on a series of interviews with academics, university managers and student representatives from three higher education providers – one large, research-intensive university, one smaller, teaching-focused university and one small, private provider. The author will also draw on his own experiences as a student representative at a course, faculty, institution, national and international level as well as on his several years supporting the development of student representative systems whilst working at the National Union of Students (NUS).

Over the years of his involvement in students' unions, the author has seen increased emphasis on representation, which has resulted both in its having become ever more professional and in the investment by students' unions of more resources into supporting student representative systems. Consequently, elections have been better-publicised, encouraging greater numbers of candidates and votes, and training for new and continuing representatives has been put in place, with support (such as staff support for research into key issues and for continuity in following those issues over several years) for them to carry out their roles.

This enhanced emphasis on representation amongst students' unions has also been mirrored by increased prioritising of this area by universities. Several reasons have been suggested for this increased focus by universities - all of which variously emerged in the research - from something as simple as seeking to enhance the ways in which institutions gather student feedback to the wider narrative of using the student voice to counter a consumerist agenda or, indeed, just to support their quality assurance processes. Whatever

Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

the driver, universities have come to regard student feedback and representation as an increasingly important activity.

This article considers the extent to which student representatives are reflective of the wider student cohort and are able to advocate on behalf of all students and offers some suggestions for how student representation might continue to evolve in the future.

Method

The research is based on a series of semi-structured interviews with representatives from three institutions. Since the author wanted to examine different perspectives relating to student representation, he interviewed three people per institution from different parts of the institution - students' union, academic community and institutional management/quality department.

The three institutions are from different parts of the higher education sector: a large, city-based, research-intensive university; a smaller, newer, teaching-focused university and a small, specialist, private institution. This is clearly not a representative sample, but selection of a range of sizes and types of institutions should give an indication of the various challenges faced by different types of institutions. The author also decided to focus on England, in order to limit the scope of the research, given the number of institutions being considered.

Looking at the higher education sector, the author wanted to look at a research-intensive 'pre-1992' institution, which would therefore have a large number of both postgraduate students as well as undergraduates. The institution selected has over 30,000 students, is based in a large city and is therefore not campus-based. At this institution, the author interviewed a students' union manager who had had responsibility for student representatives for several years, a senior university academic quality manager and a head of department.

The second institution was significantly smaller, teaching-focused and 'post 1992'. As a contrast to the first institution, the author selected an institution in a small city and therefore more likely to be campus-based. This institution has fewer than 10,000 students. Here, the author interviewed a former students' union sabbatical, a university academic quality manager and a senior university academic responsible for overseeing several academic departments.

Given the increase in the prominence of 'alternative providers' in the higher education sector in recent years, the third institution selected is a private provider and also a specialist institution; it has fewer than 1,000 students. Here, the author interviewed the current student president, a senior academic quality manager and a head of programme.

Across the three institutions, there is therefore a range of size and complexity of providers, with a range of subject disciplines, student cohort profiles and locations. Throughout the article, the author has used a series of quotes from interviewees which are reflective of the key themes that emerged during the analysis.

Student representation as part of a wider jigsaw

During the research, it became apparent that it was not possible just to look in at the effectiveness of student representation in isolation: there are other pieces to the puzzle that need to be considered as well.

Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

One of the key themes that came out time and again was the way in which academic staff are engaged with student representation processes and the extent to which they saw the benefits of representation and therefore invested time in the process. For example, whilst many institutions run training for student representatives, there is often little training available for staff about how to get the most out of student engagement. One students' union interviewee mentioned that:

“we’ve not really focused on is the staff development side, and actually that will be a focus that we’ll want to look at in the next few years because this thing about the interaction being of poor quality...but what we can do is ensure that the staff interacting at that level are geared up and prepared and that they understand why we’re doing this, rather just that we have to do this”.

The question of training for staff was raised in the particular context of there being the perception of a power-imbalance between student representatives and staff within institutions. Training was seen as the means by which staff might be made aware of this perception, so that they would take steps to mitigate its influence and thus enable better engagement by representatives.

One emerging theme concerned the overall effectiveness of the committee structure itself and was perhaps best articulated by the head of department in a research-intensive university, who said that *“There is a question mark I think about their effectiveness, in ways that are beyond our control”* before going on to comment that *“committees don't give thinking space, they deal with agenda items, so if that's the case we don't currently have perhaps a very good way of having a conversation about big things with our students”*.

It therefore became apparent that, in order to ensure that student representatives are best able to engage with the university committee structure, it is necessary to consider student representation within a wider framework. Improving the effectiveness of student representation is just one element of a wider picture including both the staff involved in the committee and the committee structure itself.

Considering this as a Venn diagram, as in Diagram 1 below, could provide a helpful way to structure analysis of the effectiveness of representation in the future. It is perhaps easy, when considering the effectiveness of student representation, to focus on the top circle, however the author would argue that it is necessary to look at all three areas, including staff engagement and the effectiveness of the committee system itself.

It will be only by focusing on all three dimensions, as represented by the centre of the Venn diagram, where all three dimensions are at their most inter-related, that we shall truly be able to make student engagement more effective. It is likely to be at the centre of the Venn diagram that students will be seen as real partners and there will be an environment where students are genuinely able to influence education change and student representation will be at its optimum. This diagram might provide a useful framework for future exploration of improving student representation.

Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

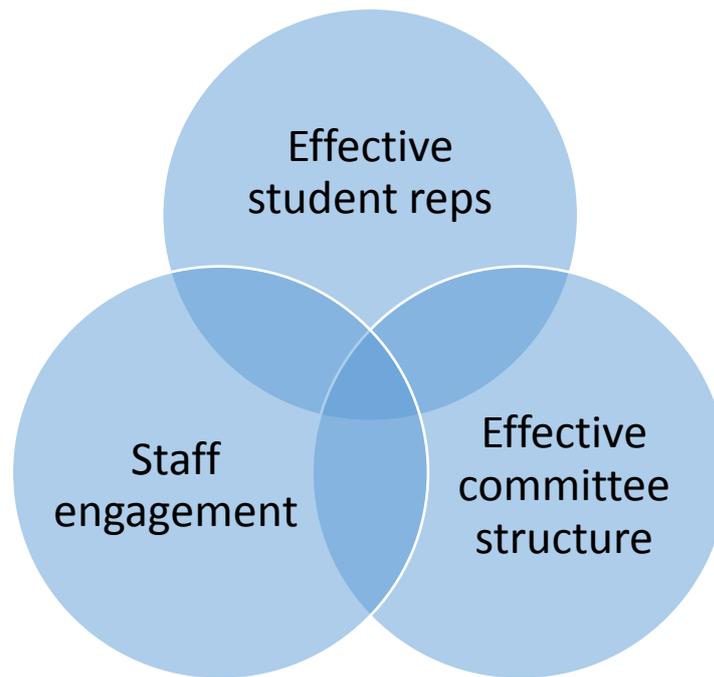


Diagram 1: Enhancing student representation

It is worth noting that, given the focus that universities have placed on enhancing student representation, there was less evidence in the research that this has translated into increased emphasis on the other elements in the diagram. Several interviewees referred to focus on staff engagement, although this was generally regarded as being at a relatively early stage and no-one referred to a focus on enhancing the wider committee structure.

It would be interesting to explore in future research the extent to which there has been systematic enhancement by universities of staff engagement and effectiveness of the committee structure and whether this has been considered through the prism of the engagement of 'hard to reach' students.

However, given the constraints of a short article the, author will continue to focus on enhancing the effectiveness of student representation, but it will be important to keep in mind this wider framework.

Student representatives reflective of the whole student cohort

There has long been concern about the representativeness of student representatives. There has been a perception that student representatives are primarily drawn from particular demographics of students, with Fielding (2001) asking some challenging questions about who the student representatives themselves are and whether they are truly reflective of the student body as a whole. The quality manager in a large research-intensive institution identified one of their priorities as ensuring greater consistency and *"high levels of engagement irrespective of discipline and student demographics."*

This was seen as important because student representation is not a purely altruistic pursuit. Whilst those who are putting themselves forward may well be doing so to make the educational experience better for themselves and fellow students, it is nevertheless also important to recognise that there are benefits to the student representatives themselves that make it important to ensure that opportunities are extended to all students, especially those who are 'hard to reach'.

Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

In an increasingly competitive labour market, students are looking for opportunities to make their CVs stand out and so extra-curricular engagement, such as becoming a course representative, can become more attractive. However, it was commented that it is no longer enough just to be a course representative: what a representative does with the role is what counts. The quality manager in a research intensive institution summed this up:

“Course reps can be recognised by the university through various awards and there is hunger because of employability. So they want to get more stuck in with the training because they see that you can't just stick it on your CV anymore, because just doing that isn't going to get you the award that the person sitting next to you is going to get because they've done some of the assessed bits of the training.”

When you consider the potential skills and employment benefits, together with research elsewhere in this publication suggesting that there may be a link between student engagement and increased attainment and reduced likelihood of the student dropping out, then it becomes more important to ensure that these opportunities are available more widely to all students, including those who are 'hard to reach'.

However, it is not just ensuring that the opportunities for development are available to all students. As with the wider phenomenon of identity politics (Fraser, 1999), it is probable that students will be more likely to be prepared to speak to representatives who look and sound like themselves and seem better able to empathise with their experiences. Similarly, one of the student representatives the author interviewed stressed the need for a student rep. to be *“someone who's sociable, people tend to feel more comfortable talking to someone they've seen around a lot or they see on social media or they've had a conversation with and can feel like that comfortable environment”*. It thus seems important to ensure that student representatives are reflective of the wider student cohort – including 'hard to reach' groups - so that the institution is hearing from the widest possible cross-section of the student body.

This all makes it more important for those running student representation systems to gather the data of the demographics involved in student representation. This will enable them to map those involved against the demographics of the students whom they are representing and so be able to monitor who is engaging in these activities and whether there is any 'hard to reach' group that needs to be targeted to ensure a more reflective cohort of student representatives. Whilst other articles in this publication indicate that this is happening in some institutions, several years' personal experience in this field suggests that this is still the exception rather than the rule.

Why some students might not engage

If, having looked at the data for your institution, you have identified that there is a problem with student representatives coming from particular backgrounds, it would be worth reflecting on why this may be the case. There are several commonly-cited reasons. First, there may be quite real financial concerns (Flint and O'Hara, 2013). Students may feel that they need to take paid employment to subsidise their student loans and that between their paid employment and academic work there isn't time to take on additional responsibilities. One senior academic said that *“most of them are working in paid jobs and that inevitably impacts on the ability of some of them to engage as much as they might want”*. Second, there may be a fear in some students that getting actively involved in student representation may distract them from their academic work and so may impact on their grades.

It is perhaps also worth reflecting on whether the perceived power-imbalance between student representatives and the institution (Robinson, 2012) may also be a factor, with some

Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

students less confident that they are able to make their voice heard. In response to a question about the power imbalance, one of the students' union interviewees commented: *"there has been a problem before with feedback and there has been more intense problems that people are very uncomfortable to bring up"*. This is also important to consider in both the context of training for academic staff and the structuring of committees.

Students' unions and institutions have responded to the question of differing engagement in different ways. Some, particularly those with high proportions of students from poorest backgrounds, have seen the need to introduce payment for student representatives as a way of compensating them for not being able to take out paid employment during this time. This is an option that may work in some institutions and for some activities, with an implicit recognition of the need for a full-time paid role at more senior levels of representation, through students' union sabbatical officers.

However, this route is not without its critics. Whilst this may work for some, there are concerns that it may also have such unintended consequences as students' only participating if they are paid to do so or as changes in the motivations for students' becoming involved in representation (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). These concerns have led other students' unions to consider alternative options, such as greater recognition for student representatives through initiatives such as institutional awards or including on their transcript their involvement in representation; some institutions have even gone as far as introducing academic credit for volunteering.

A senior academic manager in a small teaching-focused university summed up well some of the internal challenges that some institutions consider when addressing the question of paying student rep.s:

"We occasionally have a conversation about paying students, in order to ensure the evenness of quality, can you ask that amount of commitment in the current context without paying students. So far we haven't gone down that route. That may be a possibility in the future, it's hard when you have students holding down effectively full-time jobs in addition to being full-time students, it's hard to ask them to give up time, without compensation for it. So I suspect that we may eventually go down that route...[we haven't gone down that route yet because]... I know some institutions do pay, but whether it becomes a conflict of interest, that's the thing that we think about a lot."

Indeed, it is of note that the academic manager above seemed to be approaching paying student representatives as a way of enhancing representation and improving the "evenness of quality" rather than mainly as a way of increasing the representativeness of the rep.s.

Advocating on behalf of the whole student cohort

Small numbers of opportunities for engagement mean that it is important to ensure that the student representatives are not only just reflective of the student cohort but also able to speak on behalf of the whole student cohort, especially those who may be 'hard to reach'.

These doubts were raised by the quality manager in a smaller teaching-focused university: *"sometimes I'm not sure how representative they are. So that feeling, are they representing their opinions, as quite often confident, articulate members of the student body, or are they genuinely representing the views of their whole cohort"*. This has been recognised as a key issue and many students' unions have built it into training for representatives.

Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

When the author was a student representative, smaller class sizes made it far easier to speak to all the students on his course. However, whilst that may now be harder for many course representatives, and particularly as they progress to higher levels as school, faculty or institution-wide representatives, there are now tools available to help overcome this.

Institution-wide surveys and the National Student Survey (NSS) provide a rich data source for representatives. However, it was felt that representatives are not simply there to be vessels of other people's views or merely to re-present data. Their role was seen as being able to digest this information and use it to identify priorities. The NSS was highlighted by the students' union president in the small private provider as a key focus for change within the institution: *"we had it done for the first time last year, and student feedback from that was like, touch and go in each section...and they want to improve those scores for next year"*.

The opportunities provided through using and analysing social media came out in many of the interviews, with one quality manager describing the ease of being able to access the views of students at the *"grassroots level to feed up which could be done through social media"*. Several of the quality managers also described keeping an eye on student Facebook groups and other social media as a way of tracking issues that students were raising and, if appropriate, channelling it through the relevant mechanism. A senior academic referred to the fact that *"we have a lot of ways for students to communicate with us, I don't think they always sink in, so we have to actively monitor Facebook as well to see what's going on"*. Some of the student representatives also described the ease with which social media can enable them to access student views, but felt that this is still an area for further development, so as to be able to ensure that comments are deeply felt and representative. Innovations such as polls might, they suggested, become more effective in the future to track this.

Student representative behaviours

This ability of student representatives to advocate on behalf of the wider student cohort also led to discussions about the ideal student representative. Whilst recognising the importance of representatives from across the student cohort, it is worth considering whether there are certain behaviours that could be common to all student representatives. This could be a tool to help people considering becoming representatives, developing training to enhance these skills as well as supporting representatives to reflect on their own role.

One of the themes that came through in earlier research (Bols, 2015) was the perceived importance of course representatives' being democratically elected. There was a view from the students' union representatives that representatives have more of a mandate through being more formally elected: *"there is a leadership role with that, so it's not purely an advocacy role"* (students' union rep, large research-intensive institution). This was reiterated by the academic in the small teaching-focused university, who wanted to see more people standing to become representatives so that there was a genuine choice. Indeed, there was a perception that being elected gave the representatives more legitimacy and helped to mitigate to an extent the power imbalance between student representatives and institutional staff.

The student rep in the large research intensive institution went on to say that he did not think that they were just a market-research machine and should not just be a *"conduit of lots of issues and then you feed up those issues, there is an element of assessment that you need to take around which of those are the broadest and most deeply felt amongst the students that you're advocating on behalf of"*. Student representatives need to be able to apply some level of judgement to what they're hearing.

Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

The author has previously identified four key behaviours (Bols, 2015) of student representatives: being chameleonic, good communicators and policy actors and representing an internal externality. However, during the research, a number of themes and additional characteristics emerged that could form the basis of an enlarged set of behaviours. These included the following:

- *Empathy* was highlighted because student representatives are likely to be dealing with issues that students feel quite strongly about. One of the students interviewed said: *“one of the attributes I’d says is empathy, because that’s quite important in a leader more broadly, but certainly where you’re dealing with issues that students might feel quite passionate or distressed by, I think that is an important quality to have”*;
- There was a view that, if students’ unions want to move towards a system of partnership, then student representatives have to be able to bring *expertise* and really contribute to the partnership with reflections and thoughts on what is being discussed on the agenda, but also going further than that and actually being *proactive* and helping to shape the agenda itself: *“instituting an initiative, putting things on the agenda that’s what puts you into the partner category”* (academic quality manager, large research-intensive institution);
- The students’ union interviewee at the small provider also highlighted the need for *positive engagement*. Representatives should give feedback: *“not just to bring back negative feedback, positive feedback is needed as well so they can see what is working and obviously if you’ve got solutions for things that’s even better to bring back”*;
- She also highlighted the need to ensure that the issue was *widely or deeply felt* across the cohort of students: *“you need to bring things that are across the course and not just one person’s dilemma”*. In terms of wider behaviours, she described someone who is *passionate* but also *approachable*: *“smile...comfortable voice, you just catch a good vibe off someone when they have those qualities”*, someone who is able to communicate, presenting a range of opinions not just her/his own;
- The quality manager at the small private provider commented: *“extroverted is the first and foremost, so they can actually talk to their peers, not be shy”*;
- The academic in the small private provider said: *“I think to have the ability to **critical** and analytical insight rather than just anecdotal or narrative complaints”*;
- The quality manager in the small teaching-focused university described the ideal rep. as being: *“articulate, well-informed, clear, professional, positive”*;
- The academic in the small teaching-focused university had this to say: *“I think the best reps are those who are able to have conversations with the student body that help to manage the expectations of the student body and prevent a lot of unnecessary, and almost vexatious feedback really, I think in a way that comes with a certain amount of maturity, and experience, so often the best reps are third year reps who have been reps in the first and second years and have grown into the role, and it’s very helpful to have that kind of continuity”*.

These themes begin to point to some possible characteristics that could form the basis of a set of behaviours for student representatives. It will be necessary to test further these traits and characteristics through additional research, so that they can be developed into a set of behaviours for student representatives. But there was agreement across those interviewed that a set of behaviours could be a useful tool to enhance the professionalisation of representation. It was also agreed amongst those being interviewed that the key theme underpinning the behaviours was the representativeness of both those who are elected and what they say to ensure that they are representative of the whole cohort – including those who are ‘hard to reach’.

Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

Conclusion

Even against a backdrop of increasing numbers of student engagement schemes (such as Students as Change Agents, Student Fellows Scheme and a whole host of other schemes described throughout this publication), student representation plays a key, and quite different, role within institutions. We shouldn't forget the importance of this and must continue to ensure there is innovation in student representation.

Student representation has developed significantly in recent years, with students' union and institutional investment in the training and support of course rep and student representation systems. During this period, student representatives have become more aware of the need to speak on behalf of the whole student cohort - including 'hard to reach' students - and their wider responsibilities to be truly representative. There is also increasing recognition of the necessity of student representatives to reflect the wider student cohort, drawing from the widest possible diversity of the student body, both in terms of enhancing representation of these groups and also as a result of the increasing recognition of the benefits to students of being student representatives.

As we think about how student representation systems might continue to develop and be enhanced in the future, these factors need to be considered, as indeed does a wider notion of the professional behaviours for student representatives. However, whilst it is possible to enhance student representation by looking just at the representatives themselves, it will only be by looking at the Venn diagram of inter-locking factors of effective student representatives, engaged staff and an effective committee structure that we shall genuinely develop an effective system.

Reference list

- Bols, A. (2015) *Enhancing Student Representation systems*. Available at: <http://wonkhe.com/blogs/enhancing-student-representation-systems/> (Accessed: 2 January 2017).
- Fielding, M. (2001) 'Students as radical agents of change.' *Journal of Educational Change*, 2, 123-41.
- Flint, A. and O'Hara, M. (2013) 'Communities of practice and 'student voice': engaging with student representatives at the faculty level.' *Student Engagement and Experience Journal*, 2(1).
- Fraser, N. (1999) Social justice in the age of identity politics: Redistribution, recognition, and participation. In: Ray, L. and Sayer, A. (eds.) *Culture and economy after the cultural turn*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 25-52.
- Lizzio, A. and Wilson, K. (2009) 'Student participation in university governance: the role conceptions and sense of efficacy of student representatives on departmental committees.' *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(1), 69-84.
- Robinson, C. (2012) 'Student engagement: What does this mean in practice in the context of higher education institutions?' *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, 4(2), 94-108.