Architects of their experience: the role, value and impact of student academic representation systems in Higher Education in England

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Research Aims

A small-scale qualitative research study which explored current perspectives and practices of student academic representation in contemporary higher education (HE) in England.

The study aimed to explore how higher education providers and their students' unions perceive the role, value, and impact of their student academic representation (SAR) system; discover examples of innovative and developmental approaches being used; and gain insight to inform the future development of effective and relevant student academic representation.

Research approach and participants

Participating providers and students' unions

Interview participants were students' union staff responsible for SAR and senior provider staff with responsibility for student experience and/or engagement.

- 4 expert interviews
- Pre-interview questionnaire to 6 students' unions
- Interviews with 6 providers and 6 students' unions
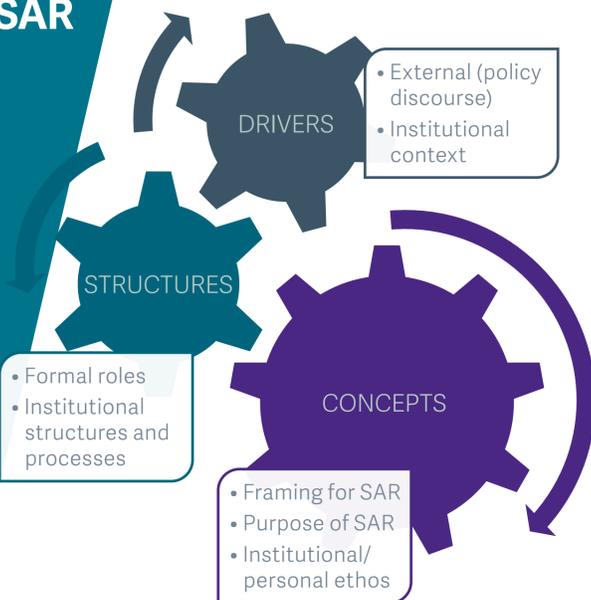
Geographic spread across England

Range of provider mission types

<2,000 to >30,000 students

Definitions of SAR

- Definitions were multi-dimensional.
- Most commonly framed in the wider context of student engagement and as a form of student voice, other framings included consultation, student-led, and partnership.
- Some definitions were shaped by the provider structures and processes where student representatives contribute.
- SAR was seen to focus on both academic and wider student experience.

DRIVERS
- External (policy discourse)
- Institutional context

STRUCTURES
- Formal roles
- Institutional structures and processes

CONCEPTS
- Framing for SAR
- Purpose of SAR
- Institutional/personal ethos

Purposes of SAR

- Perceived purposes were plural and complex.
- Most commonly seen as providing feedback on student experiences, other roles were in quality enhancement and assurance, influencing change and decision-making, and facilitating community and partnership.
- Providers and students' unions described common elements of the purpose of SAR, but emphasis varied.
- Some students' unions perceived providers to be more focused on quality assurance purposes.
- Some students' unions and providers shared a desire for SAR to feed-forward.

The value of SAR

TO PROVIDERS	• Alternative perspectives • Current and relevant information to inform improvement • Culture and community • Reputation
TO INDIVIDUAL STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES	• Emotional • Personal development • Professional development
TO THE STUDENTS' UNION	• Reputation and credibility • Political • Culture and community • Currency and relevance • Informing improvement
TO THE WIDER STUDENT BODY	• Being listened to • Valuing their voice • Changes secured on their behalf

- Multiple benefits of SAR were identified for providers, individual student representatives, students' unions and the wider student body.
- The value of SAR was not always easily articulated or differentiated from its purpose.

FUTURE PRIORITIES

- CULTURE AND ETHOS
- INCLUSIVITY
- NEW MECHANISMS
- TRAINING
- EVALUATION
- SECTOR POLICY

Challenges and strengths

- Issues may be framed as challenges and strengths in different contexts; indicating potential to share learning between providers and students' unions across the sector.
- The importance of engaging both students and staff for effective SAR.
- There were mixed opinions on the format of formal structures and meetings and how these enabled engagement with SAR.

Conclusions

Student academic representation (SAR) is an established and valued aspect of student engagement and institutional governance, with roles to play in the quality assurance and enhancement of higher education. Definitions of SAR were multiple and complex but it was most commonly framed as a form of student engagement and voice. The findings from this small-scale qualitative study indicate that SAR performs multiple roles for providers and their students' unions and, in most cases, is seen to influence change and bring varied benefits for different parties. The findings also suggest that SAR is contextual, with diverse practices and perspectives between and within providers and students' unions.

Recommendations for providers and students' unions

- Collaboratively explore definitions and purposes of SAR to develop shared understandings where possible.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities for SAR and outline these in shared documents which are regularly reviewed.
- Align the operation of SAR structures and processes (e.g. recruitment and training for representations, and the way formal meetings are run) with your definition and purposes.
- Consider how power differentials may inhibit effective representation and how these can be addressed.
- Consider how SAR is evaluated: working in partnership to develop meaningful criteria and indicators of success and regularly review practices against these.
- Reflect on the inclusivity and accessibility of SAR for your student body.
- Reflect on how student academic representatives are supported to appreciate the skills they develop and the value they bring.

The challenge of inclusivity

- The inclusivity of SAR is an area of development for many students' unions and providers.
- Students' unions and providers are developing creative and innovative approaches to address the challenge of inclusivity within their SAR systems.
- A range of 'yet to be reached' student groups were identified based on student characteristics, and mode and level of study.

Yet to be reached groups

Post-graduate
Caring/other responsibilities
Commuter
Apprenticeships
Partner organisation
Online
Mature
Part-time
Life-long learning
Campus-based international
Work-based/placement

The importance of relationships

- Positive relationships between providers and students' union, staff and students, and SAR and other student engagement activities are important for effective SAR.
- The strategic and operational responsibility for SAR is highly contextual.
- The importance of balancing the independence of the students' union with effective collaboration and partnership around SAR.
- Power differentials are perceived to exist in formal systems of SAR which position students' unions as holding less power.

The impact of SAR

- Most providers and students' unions felt SAR led to positive change.
- Those that described the mechanisms for achieving change tended to focus on formal provider mechanisms.
- More examples were given of SAR effecting change at the local and provider-wide level, than at the mid-level.
- Few students' unions and providers had systematic evaluation strategies specifically focused on SAR.
- Suggested criteria for the evaluation of SAR included focusing both on engagement with the process of SAR and its outcomes.