Monitoring the Diversity of Course Representatives

What do we mean?

Representatives (reps) are students who have either been voted in or selected to be the voice for the wider student body on academic issues. If they are to be truly representative of the entire student body, however, then it is recommended that their demographics are monitored so that steps can be taken to ensure a range of learners are being engaged.

Reps are most effective in their roles when they can bring feedback and opinions from a wide variety of sources. This can mean learners from different courses, apprenticeships, or levels of learning; it can mean learners who are BME, LGBT+, or disabled; and it can mean learners who are mature, have caring responsibilities, or are part-time. It is very easy to cater for the 'average learner' and forget about the true diversity of learners who are studying within your institution.

Why monitor the diversity?

It may seem like an obvious question to ask, but there are multiple benefits to monitoring the diversity of your reps.

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Students

- More representation from a diversity of learners
- More opportunities to give feedback and make a change
- Learners feel included and not marginalised

Institution

- Increased engagement with learner voice
- Provides evidence which can be used as a basis for future work into increasing the diversity of reps
- Can contribute to external projects, such as Athena SWAN
- Creates a benchmark from which to work and improve practices concerning rep diversity

Where to start

Measuring the diversity of reps happens in three steps: gathering the information, analysing it, and then finding ways to make an impact. It is important to ensure you carry out all three of these steps if you are going to start monitoring the diversity of your representatives, otherwise you will end up with a lot of data that is achieving nothing. There will also be barriers to overcome, particularly in the FE sector. As long as you are prepared, however, this can be a very worthwhile and rewarding project to undertake.

Step One: Gathering Diversity Statistics

Most colleges do not already collect data on the diversity of reps, so it is something which needs to be actively collected. The easiest way to do this is with a survey. The NUS diversity questionnaire is listed in the resources section below.

Keep in mind the sort of questions you ask, how you ask them, and why you need them.

Writing the Survey

When writing a diversity monitoring questionnaire, it is important to keep in mind the sort of questions you ask, how you ask them, and why you need them. Think about what it is you want to know and work backwards.

Ask for learners' input to the questionnaire during the writing process, and revise it if necessary. After learners have taken the questionnaire, ask for feedback at this stage as well, to **make sure the questions you are asking are appropriate and easy to understand**.

Implementing the Survey

As with any survey, you have to choose how you will implement it. If you already have a survey that goes out to reps, perhaps you can consider including some diversity monitoring questions, rather than creating a separate survey. If not, it might be that you could incorporate it into your training day for reps. It could be part of the feedback you ask for at the end of training, or it could be part of the training itself. At Edinburgh Students' Association, they include a diversity monitoring questionnaire as part of their online training module for reps. It is not compulsory, but still saw excellent response rates.

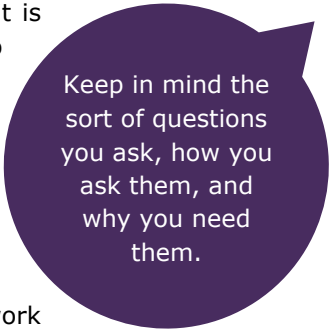Incorporating a diversity questionnaire in an already existing survey will make monitoring easier.

If you are creating a survey from scratch, you will need to think about whether it will work best as an online survey or on paper, when it will be open for responses, and how you will promote it. It is recommended that incorporating it into an already existing survey or event will make this part of the monitoring process easier.

When you are asking your reps for this information, it is important to tell them why you are doing it, how it will impact them, and to give them the option to opt out of completing the form, or answering 'prefer not to say' on all questions. It should not be compulsory to provide this sort of information as a student volunteer, but if you can demonstrate what impact it will have to benefit the institution, hopefully a majority of your reps will understand and want to complete it anyway.

Step Two: Analysing the results

Some institutions carry out research into the demographics of their reps, but then do nothing with the information. **This is arguably the hardest step**, as it is time-consuming and often provides more questions than it does answers.

A good place to start, if possible, is to compare the data you have gathered with any data the college may have on the student population as a whole. By comparing this, you can see how representative your reps really are. For example, you may see a very low percentage of your reps are part-time learners, but if your institution has a very low total number of part-time learners, this may still be a representative percentage.

Another possible step to take would be to monitor the demographics of not only your reps, but also those who nominate themselves for the roles. This would involve a greater level of analysis, however, so may not be possible depending on the resources available.

Step Three: Implementing Change

Once you have gathered the information and found out where your gaps in representation lie, the most important step is to fill those gaps and increase overall representation and inclusivity.

This can be something as simple as ensuring you promote course rep elections across all campuses or through emails sent to all learners (not just during tutorials for full-time courses, for example), or it could be something more fundamental to the structures of the college. At Goldsmiths Students' Union, for example, they found they had a large proportion of underrepresented disabled students. To help tackle this, they used a bursary from HEFCE to kickstart a project which recruited an 'Accessibility and Inclusion Rep' for each department. As a result, the institution has taken on a number of new initiatives to ensure it is more accessible and inclusive for disabled students.

Widening participation is never easy, but with the data you have collected, you can see whether the changes you have made will have any impact. By setting the benchmark, you can reassess engagement year-on-year and find out what has worked and what has not.

Involve learners at every step.

As ever, it is important to involve learners in these steps, as they can help you figure out what will work in terms of engaging those hard-to-reach learners. **Without monitoring the diversity first, though, you will not know who your heard-to-reach learners are**. That is what makes this process so valuable.

Barriers

As mentioned earlier, quite often these sorts of analyses will provide you with more questions than answers. It may require a significant amount of work to get really meaningful results. This is where it is expected most institutions will face the barriers of lack of staff time, expertise and resources to complete this kind of work. These barriers can be overcome, however, and the results of this work can show some really interesting trends in your representatives and help to drive forward work to help increase diversity.

One of the top barriers is going to be if **data on the student body is collected but withheld**, so comparisons cannot be drawn. This means you need buy-in from the departments that hold this information so they understand the importance of the work and what benefits it will have to the institution as a whole.

There is also the issue of a **lack of staff time**. If no one staff member has been allocated this task as part of their core hours, it is unlikely the work can be completed. Some tasks could be delegated to student volunteers, such as data entry, in order to maximise staff time dedicated to the project.

If there is also a **lack of staff expertise** on the subject, then there is training available to help with this. There is also the potential to collaborate with other colleges in order to share the expertise already in Wales.

An extremely important barrier that is essential to take into consideration is the new EU **General Data Protection Regulation** (GDPR). If your institution is going to be collecting data on your reps, you must ensure you are abiding by the new laws that will be in place on the 25th May 2018. The law will also apply to anything you do with the data, unless it is completely anonymised. This includes its collection, storage, application and retention. We recommend checking the guidelines from the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) website, which can be found in the resources section, to see how this will affect you.

Summary

There are many benefits to monitoring the diversity of your course reps, for both learners and the institution. It is a large body of work, however, so there may be some barriers to overcome, such as a lack of staff time and resources. If these can be tackled, the results from surveying the diversity of your course reps can be enlightening and make a real difference to the representative structures for your learners.

If you have any questions, do not hesitate to ask Wise Wales (contact details below).

Resources

- NUS Diversity Monitoring form
- Links to resources from ESEC, including 'Giving Disabled Students a Voice in your Course Rep System' from Goldsmiths, and 'Monitoring the Diversity of Course Reps' from spargs and Edinburgh SA
- ICO Guidelines on the GDPR

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