Academic Representatives Best Practice Guidance:

This best practice documentation is to provide guidance and wider support for academic staff who work with student academic representatives (academic reps). The following feedback and suggestions are recommendations and best practice which staff can include to fit their current academic structures.

It is acknowledged that every department is unique and that in some instances the information below may not be applicable to your department or faculty, but we believe many of the comments provided can be broadly applied across the institution.

If you have any questions on the information provided below please contact the Students’ Union Academic Co-ordinator at: scott.dawson@sheffield.ac.uk

Contents:

1. Feedback from Academic Representatives: Page 2 - 3
2. Concerns from Academic Representatives and areas to address: Page 4 - 6
3. General Suggestions: Page 7 - 8
4. Department and Faculty Best Practice: Page 9 - 10
1. Feedback from Academic Representatives:

Following the completion of the 2016/17 academic year, we requested feedback from Academic Reps on their experiences in the role across the year. This had a response rate of 465 unique responses which provides us with a high quality insight into the student experience as reps.

Some of the key findings that may be of use are discussed below:

1a) Students overwhelmingly find Student Staff Committee meetings (SSCs) to be effective means of providing feedback and sharing ideas:

- 95% of academic reps either agreed or strongly agreed that they “felt able to raise any relevant matters or issues at your Staff Student Committee”.

- This suggests that many departments ensure SSCs are an environment where the academic reps are treated as equals and their opinions and feedback valued.

1b) Academic Staff are seen to respond well to student issues/ideas and provide plenty of support for Academic Reps in their role:

- 86% of academic reps either agreed or strongly agreed that they “believe the relevant staff members within their department or faculty responded appropriately to any issues raised”.

- 84% of academic reps either agreed or strongly agreed that “received appropriate support from their department or faculty to fulfil their role”.

- This suggests that academic staff make proactive efforts to clearly explain and resolve student problems raised at SSCs and that provision, be this in the form of pre-meets, detailed agendas or follow up meetings and guidance were provided by staff to empower the academic reps in their role across the year.

1c) Academic Reps feel like they can make a difference within their department or faculty and mostly feel as though they are a part of a team:

- 81% of Academic Reps either agreed or strongly agreed that they “feel able to make positive change within their department or faculty”.

- 77% of Academic Reps either agreed or strongly agreed that they “were able to work as part of a team with other reps within their department or faculty”.

- This suggests an exciting opportunity for academic reps in that they see their ideas and thoughts shaping the work of their department or faculty on most occasions. Likewise most believe that they have a team of peers to work with and share the responsibility of being a rep.
What do these positive points tell us?

Overall academic reps have responded positively to staff support and encouragement from their departments or faculty. They see Student Staff Committees (or equivalent) as essential to the development of their department and in responding to student concerns and that ultimately they are making a difference at Sheffield.

Whilst this feedback clearly indicates the vast majority of departments are doing exceptional work, the following suggestions may help to maintain this standard:

1. **Ensure SSCs are provided adequate provision and are attended by key staff members within the department or faculty:** For example, are your SSCs co-chaired to allow students to have a say on the direction of meetings? Is there a clear reporting structure as to where concerns will be dealt with outside of SSCs and is this noted and shared openly? Are pre-meets in place to help reps understand jargon or key issues that have been historical within the department? Do directors for Learning & Teaching or, dependent on discussion topics, the head of department attend to hear student ideas?

2. **Are academic rep achievements recognised:** This can be in the form of e-mailing the reps to confirm that their ideas or concerns were raised at subsequent meetings or signposting to the outcome of their comments. Are there, ‘you said, we did’ posters or e-mails sent to students in the department with accreditation to the academic reps to indicate that their work lead to this result?

3. **Facilitate meetings between Academic Reps in your department/faculty:** Whilst many reps feel they are a part of a team, we have seen in the feedback and in anecdotal discussions that students may not meet their fellow reps until the first SSC meeting. Likewise some reps don’t understand the issues of other year groups within their department which can cause dis-engagement. This can be addressed, for example through inviting the reps to an informal meeting with the staff SSC co-ordinator where they can all meet each other over coffee or food. Alternatively, an e-mail with all the reps for a department cc’d in is another low cost method with which to help them establish contact with each other.
2. Concerns from Academic Reps and areas to address:

Whilst most academic reps have an overall positive experience during their time in the role, some areas were highlighted as significant issues or barriers to their time as a rep. We will outline the most common complaints below with suggestions as to how these could be resolved:

When asked “what did you enjoy least in your time as a rep?” the following themes emerged:

2a) An overall lack of student engagement in the academic rep system (96 unique comments):

Whilst a complicated and difficult barrier that requires efforts from the Students’ Union, departments and students themselves academic reps highlighted some very specific challenges. This included students not knowing who academic reps are or thinking that they don’t have an impact.

Recommendations:

- Are academic reps highlighted in clearly designated areas which have high student traffic? For example, departmental intro packs? Department webpages or MOLE? Department helpdesks or during tutor meetings?

- Are students informed of changes to their courses or the department based on feedback from the previous cohort? Could this be done in intro talks prior to the beginning of a module or course? Are academic reps informed of changes or alterations from the previous academic year?

- Do the departmental staff members know who the academic reps are and what they do? This can help with student awareness if staff takes the position seriously.
2b) Academic Reps feel unable to make change in their department or faculty (63 unique comments):

Specifically academic reps stated that they felt change takes too long to implement. That their ideas were waved out of hand as being impossible or that issues in the department for years have not be addressed or handled.

Recommendations:

- Being honest with academic reps on their ideas or implementation of changes. Most reps and students will understand the department or faculty position on an issue if context is provided. This is both if a change is agreed (how long will that take) or why solutions can’t be adopted (logistical limits, staffing issues, legality complications etc…)

- Ensure that a provisional timeline for change is shared with the reps and that this can be communicated to student effectively. Could this be shared via a departmental newsletter update or via the MOLE in the form of SSC minutes?

- If historical issues repeat in departments, are these addressed in the first SSC meeting of the year? This can help to outline what is being done to resolve these issues or why they are as they are and perhaps allow reps to come up with new solutions or alternative ideas instead of always repeating similar demands.

2c) Raising ‘difficult issues’ with staff (30 unique responses):

This was most commonly in the form of complaints of a particular staff member or if an issue is sensitive for students or staff. Dependent on what this ‘difficult’ issue is there are several different ways this could be approached.

Recommendations:

- Is the purpose of the SSC meeting made clear to reps when they start their role? I.E: That the grievances of a specific singular student (such as failing an exam or problems with their lecturer) should be brought to the attention of their personal tutor or the Student Union advice centre?

- If an issue is particularly contentious, such as the closure of a course, perhaps it may be best for a pre meet to help address student concerns so that a formal meeting is not taken over by a singular topic?

- Whilst an issue may seem minor to staff or students, if a particular topic comes up that is contentious for a reason that is not immediately clear to others in the room (for example, keeping Wednesday afternoons free for sport) are staff or students provided the opportunity to explain their reasoning and not shut down for their thoughts or ideas?
• It may be worth putting down a series of agreements/rules for the SSC committee each year that help with directing discussions. For example, not referring to individual lectures if an issue is particularly sensitive and perhaps ensuring that staff and students must raise their hand to make a point so that no-one attending feels cut off or interrupted on a particular point.

• Lastly, it is important to be clear when a topic is not appropriate for an SSC or similar meeting. It may be worth suggesting this issue is picked up in a separate meeting or directed to the Students’ Union, dependent on the severity of the topic.

2d) Clashes with SSC or departmental/faculty meetings (21 unique responses):

Academic Reps would often state that due to either a lecture clash, sport event or a delayed circulation of the date of a meeting they would miss the opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas.

Recommendations:

• Are the dates of meetings and agendas circulated with at least one weeks’ notice?

• If a student cannot attend are they encouraged to share thoughts to the convener of the SSC meeting or have a separate catch up meeting with relevant staff members?

• If a large percentage of academic reps cannot attend a meeting, can the session be run online via google hangouts or e-mail correspondence?

• If a meeting repeatedly has low attendance, have the reps been consulted as to why they aren’t attending and the barriers they face? (Lecture clashes, accessibility issues etc...)

2e) Academic Reps not being taken seriously by staff (18 unique responses):

Whilst a relatively low amount of comments were made on this topic it is important that SSCs empower reps, not disadvantage them.

Recommendations:

• Academic Reps are experts in the student educational experience within their department. As such their views should be valued by always encouraging each rep to speak and that they are given plenty of time to express ideas or concerns.

• If an academic rep suggests something that is unrealistic or contentious, time should be made to explain in a clear and friendly manner why this may be a challenge rather than simply shutting it down.

• Are academic reps provided the opportunity to chair or co-chair SSC meetings so that there is a sense of partnership between staff and students?
3. General Suggestions:

Alongside the specific comments made by academic reps in their feedback there are general, more broad suggestions that we feel may be worth noting and being aware of for the coming 2017/18 academic year:

3a) Encourage collaboration between Departmental Societies, Students’ Union Councillors and Academic Reps:

The Medicine, Dentistry & Health and Arts & Humanities SALT Projects into academic representation at Sheffield had several key outcomes. One point of interest was that many academic reps had either nothing to do with their departmental society or were taking on the responsibilities of the society alongside being a rep. There is an opportunity here to foster a greater sense of community between student groups within a department or faculty.

We encourage all departments to bring departmental societies and academic reps together to help co-create projects, share ideas and help each group understand their remits in relation to the other. It should be noted that that departmental societies should have an open space at the SSC meeting to attend if deemed applicable; this may be a good opportunity for such dialogues to occur.

Similarly, Students’ Union departmental councillors may also attend SSC meetings when relevant. The Students’ Union is working to help foster this link.

3b) Refer to the ‘Code of Practice’ in any work around academic representation:

The Students’ Union and Learning & Teaching Services have worked together to update the code of practice. This document sets out the expectations for student academic representation across the institution.

It should be referred to if you are looking for further information on the various types of academic representation at Sheffield, the academic representation recruitment cycle, the responsibilities of those involved in the system and an explanation of how student staff committee meetings should function. This should also be shared with the academic reps to help create a shared understanding of expectations.

3c) Make your academic rep recruitment deadlines clear for students:

Some departments have seen issues this year with students and applying to be a rep past various deadlines. Whilst the Students’ Union put in place a deadline of week 4 for all reps to be recruited, departments may create a unique deadline at their discretion prior to week 4. Such deadlines should be clearly communicated with students.
3e) Students enjoy representing their peers, making a difference and working as a team with staff and students – work to enable this:

As suggested in the feedback above, Academic Reps enjoy representing their cohort and working with staff in partnership to enact change. If you believe there are wider opportunities for academic reps to influence the work of your department ensure that these opportunities are shared with them.

3f) SSCs should not operate solely as a feedback system:

Some departments have struggled with SSCs if there are not issues to feedback on. However, we suggest that SSC meetings need not only be about feedback but can also be about curriculum design, innovation, and other learning and teaching enhancements. For example, if you are working on programme level view changes within your department, perhaps bring some key questions to the SSC so that you can gain the student input.

This can benefit departmental work and enhance the student voice in changes across the department.

3g) When in doubt, contact the Students’ Union Academic Coordinator:

If at any stage you feel uncertain as to how to handle a topic in an SSC or wish for explanation of guidance in works such as the code of practice feel free to contact the students’ union academic coordinator at any time on: scott.dawson@sheffield.ac.uk
4. Departmental and Faculty Best Practice:

We have had several requests from departments around institutional best practice on academic representation. Whilst not a definitive list the following initiatives or departments have been noted by academic reps as having undertaken exceptional work.

4a) Google Hangouts - Education Department:

The Education department has had success in engaging their large number of part-time and distance learnt students through online google hangouts. These allow staff to be logged online in a chat space for a day and academic reps can jump on at any point with questions and feedback.

Students don’t have to be committed to sitting in a designated room for 2 hours or staying logged on for the duration of the chat. They can follow the conversation thread and comment on these whenever the feel able. Students can have instant feedback on concerns or feedback by the end of the hangout. For instance staff can quickly send emails or phone colleagues for a response to a students’ query and reply later in the day.

4b) Mascot System – Arts & Humanities Faculty:

In combination with student consultation with students and academic reps the Arts & Humanities SALT project have suggested a mascot system to increase the effectiveness of the student voice in the Faculty.

This is to help students gain a greater awareness of the academic reps and to provide a more accessible less daunting way to provide ideas/feedback. They are a figurehead for rep teams to provide clarity, accessibility and consistency.

The mascots were voted on by students and thus help with ownership, with details shared on MOLE, Facebook and a dedicated e-mail account. They are a tool designed to enhance the rep voice within the Faculty.

4c) Using Student Staff Committee for Quality Enhancement and Project Input – Arts & Humanities/Social Sciences Faculty Student Staff Committee:

Both social sciences/arts and humanities have looked to re-define the purpose of SSCs beyond being a feedback opportunity. As discussed in recommendations on previous pages, students and reps want to have a larger voice on changes around curriculum design and general department/faculty changes in partnership with staff.

By dividing up the SSC meetings into general business first and saving the second part of the meeting for student consultation, be this on building changes or career development opportunities that the faculty provides reps are able to do more than simply provide feedback from their peers.

4d) Clear Communication Structures and Social Media Support – Physics and Astronomy:
Academic Reps in physics and astronomy have praised the support staff have provided in being clear on what will be discussed in SSC meetings and that these are effectively communicated to students via the appropriate communication streams (MOLE etc...).

Likewise these academic reps were provided support in establishing a social media presence through Facebook and Twitter to help share the accomplishments of the academic reps.

4e) Encouraging Co-Chairing of SSC meetings – Molecular Biology and Biotechnology:

Academic Reps have found MBB SSC meetings to be very welcoming. They proactively encourage students to chair through a rotation system. This allows multiple reps to have the opportunity to chair the SSC across the year.

4f) Collaboration between departmental society and academic reps – Nursing & Midwifery:

Nursing students and academic reps have benefited from departmental staff working with these students to plan and promote events such NHS Soc projects and that by collaborating with the reps they can create larger turnouts and more a buzz for society events.