Introduction:
The following is a summary of feedback from TUOS student academic representatives at the end of the 2017/18 Academic Year. The end of year summary form is now in its second iteration and allows for a good insight into the experience and opinions of our representatives. This year our rep survey gained 459 responses from our pool of 1,000 academic representatives.

A statistical breakdown to each question, alongside demographics and year groups can be found separately. Additionally, the Students’ Union has reviewed the open text questions feedback to help in establishing common themes that could be of use to departments, academic reps and the students’ union. Outcomes and recommendations would also be of benefit to these groups. The open texts questions are as follows:

Section 1 - Student Staff Committees (SSCs):
Q: What issues predominantly came up at your staff student committees?
Q: What did you find was the most effective way to find out ideas or opinions from your peers within your department/faculty?
Q: Do you have any further comments on your Staff Student Committee?

Section 2 - Support and enjoyment of role:
Q: Is there any further support you would have liked to fulfil your role?
Q: What did you enjoy most about being an Academic Rep?
Q: What did you enjoy least about being an academic rep?

Executive Summary:

- Academic Representatives want to engage in and improve assessment and feedback activities within their departments.

- Academic Representatives should be seen as a key communication group during busy times of the year or sudden large scale issues, such as strike action or programme level approach.

- Departments should review ways in which academic representatives can be promoted to students, through key touch points such as welcome talks or lectures.

- Student Staff Committees should be reviewed to ensure they are of use and engaging for both students and staff in attendance.

- Academic Representatives enjoy leadership opportunities, which should be fostered.
Section 1 - Student Staff Committees (SSCs):
1a) What issues predominantly came up at your staff student committees?

Various topics were discussed at SSCs across the University this year, however there was a strong focus on assignments, feedback and examinations. Strike action was also a prominent topic this year with both positive and negative aspects highlighted. Module/programme changes, teaching quality and technology use were also high priorities. The following topics highlighted from SSCs are in order of occurrence:

Assignments, Feedback and Examinations (Number of comments: 120)

Assignments, subsequent feedback and assessment issues are closely connected. For assignments and feedback many academic reps noted that students felt that there were frequent inconsistencies in the content they were taught and how this translated into assessment/examinations. This can be in the form of either questions not matching content studied, or the format of the assignment not reflecting the teaching style of the programme.

Likewise, feedback either being delayed, not applicable or beneficial to students was a consistent theme. Many reps noted that they had to follow up with staff about when they would receive feedback. This concern is echoed across all faculties and departments, which suggest SSCs and departments will want to re-examine their assessment and feedback processes. Programme Level Approach could be a useful framework for this. It would be suggested that departments look proactively for feedback from reps on these topics within SSCs.

Strike Action (Number of comments: 90)

Frustrations and positive remarks on the strike stemmed from the departments approach to the situation. In instances where departments were responsive and updated students on developments or actions taken by the department, frequent praise was provided.

Alternatively, reps felt frustration when their questions on the strike were either ignored or not responded to clearly. A theme to pull out of this irrespective of the strike is a need for clear communication and explanation of processes with Academic Reps. The answer is not always needed, but an open dialogue should be facilitated. This allows trust and confidence to be built between both Academic Reps and relevant departmental staff and demonstrates student concerns are being taken seriously.
Module & Course Changes (Number of comments: 63)

A breadth of challenges come under module and course changes. Most prominent is module choice with a majority stressing the lack of options available to them. Others noted that modules did not seem to make sense in relation to the rest of the course. Some felt that better guidance should be provided by their departments in helping with module choice. Whilst undertaking their different modules students noted that guidance or advice could be contradictory.

A small group of reps also highlighted wider programme changes, most likely connected to programme level approach. These changes do not seem to have been articulated clearly to the students as frustration and lack of understanding as to why programmes were being altered was frequent. Overall it seems that students would benefit from more information around the structure of their programme, a process for informed module choices and that the course is fluid and makes sense as a whole.

Teaching Quality (Number of comments: 60)

Whilst various comments were made on teaching quality most were not clear on their concerns. This could be due to the individualistic nature of teaching; however some general areas of improvement were noted. Common concerns echoed lack of lecturer clarity, either in their teaching method or how their material connected to the programme. Some academic reps mentioned that induction material or learning objectives in handbooks or module inductions then went against the reality of the content. Other comments included the feeling that the focus within lectures or seminars was not reflective of examinations, that academics were not proactive with uploading content to MOLE or that some lectures were missed. Although this last point is most likely connected to strike action.

Encore & Technology Use (Number of comments: 50)

Comments on Encore were focused around recurring themes. Firstly a lack of accessibility to Encore, be this awareness or accessibility in terms of lack of subtitles or visuals. Sound quality was noted as a concern. A specific comment was made of those departments that had access to interactive whiteboards and that these were not integrated into Encore. Shared frustrations between reps and academics seems to be student low usage in some departments. Lastly, some academic reps feel that staff were not using Encore despite facilities allowing it. This could be due to the ‘opt out’ policy not being articulated to students clearly. General comments on technology included a push by some reps to ensure all feedback is provided online and encouragement to further develop online heavy modules or programmes.
**Timetabling** (Number of comments: 30)

Similarly to teaching quality, whilst many comments were made on the issue of timetabling the specifics were often not mentioned. Those that did provide specifics flagged errors on the timetable such as rooms and timings. Other comments included clashes for dual students and the need to put this more firmly on department radars.

**Department Communication** (Number of comments: 27)

Communication issues can underpin many of the comments already highlighted. Additional aspects however are centred around communication between the staff and students on various aspects of day to day operations. Academic reps noted that year groups can feel isolated and cut off meaning that they miss out on opportunities, events or collaboration. The guidance provided by tutors across departments was also mentioned as an area in which communication could be greatly improved. Welcome week likewise seemed to be an area of weak communication between students and their department in some instances.

**Mental Health & Well-being** (Number of comments: 21)

Department provision to support students was also mentioned with some regularity. Mental health provision, both with what the department provides and its signposting guidance were mentioned as areas to improve on. There was also a feeling that departments could do more to consider the state of student health and stress in relation to the timing of modules and examinations. The impact of the strike was also clearly felt by a range of students in creating uncertainty for end of year assessment.
1b) What did you find was the most effective way to find out ideas or opinions from your peers within your department/faculty?

When asked how Academic Reps communicated with their fellow reps or student groups social media was a prominent approach to processing student views.

Unlike question set 1a however we will not be providing a specific breakdown on the number of times a topic was mentioned. This is due to the overwhelming nature by which Facebook is used as a primary communication tool by students. Other communication techniques were almost all equally matched in the regions of 10 - 15 comments a piece and are very fixed within their local context.

**Facebook:**

Whilst some students spoke of social media in a general sense or some specific unique instances such as WhatsApp or google communities, Facebook was by far and away the most prominent. The flexibility provided by Facebook through groups, polls, pages and that many students already have Facebook accounts promote this approach.

The Facebook system is so unanimous, that it suggests we should be looking to support and empower this, rather than creating entirely new communication techniques. However, it should be noted that some reps recognised that not all students have or use Facebook and alternatives should still be used, particularly for official communications.

**Online Polls:**

A tool used increasingly by Academic Representatives is live online polls, most often through Google Forms. However other tools are used in some instances, such as those provided by Facebook or Doodle.

The benefit of this is the responsiveness and simplicity of setting up and sharing Google Forms, particularly as they can be restricted to University of Sheffield users only. They also provided neat summaries which Academic Reps can use proactively in discussions with staff at SSCs.
Face to Face Discussions:

Face to Face communication was cited as another significant approach to gaining student views of ideas. The approach taken to this varied on the size of the programme and the confidence of the rep.

Particular approaches often used include:

- Lecture shout-outs.
- Seminar discussions
- 1 to 1 informal chats
- Friendship groups

Other approaches less commonly used include:

- Open meetings or forums
- Year group meetings
- Drop in sessions
- Anecdotal feedback

Community Spaces/Notice Boards/MOLE or E-mail:

Some departments had distinct and specific best practice on these areas, but they were not established common practice. Whilst it may be that these initiatives are less obvious and thus need to be highlighted in training many of these ideas are restricted by the logistics of a department, programme or general capacity.

For example, informal community spaces which can be used to gather feedback rely on frequently used areas such as cafes, labs or common rooms. Notice boards likewise require a clear and useful space with high student traffic. MOLE and E-mail rely on student/staff partnership with conversations on access to MOLE/E-mail lists required or maintenance support needed.
1c) Do you have any further comments on your Staff Student Committee?

This question was a chance for academic reps to provide further or more in depth responses. Much of what is covered below were individual comments and should not be seen as representative of the entire academic rep experience. However, these suggestions could be used as best practice both for departments and the students’ union.

SSCs are seen as useful and productive sessions in most instances:

When asked about SSCs the overwhelming consensus from Academic Reps is that they are useful and productive. Many state that they feel like equals and their ideas are considered seriously by staff. Many see the meetings as a collaborative space that brings student and staff views together in a fair fashion. Therefore, many of the negative or critical comments are not in spite of SSCs, but rather to make them more effective.

More or longer SSCs

A frequently cited concern is that the number of SSCs within a department and the hours allocated are not enough to have sufficient conversations. This is a surprisingly complicated issue depending on the local context of a department. In some instances, a department may only have one SSC in a year and therefore an increase seems understandable. In other departments where 4 SSCs a year are well established, other approaches may need to be considered. These include increasing the time of the session, adjusting dates so that they are at a more useful time in the year for students or more direct time management of the session.

It is suggested that departments reflect on their SSC process and perhaps discuss with academic reps about how they can enhance these sessions.

Ensuring each year group can contribute to SSCs:

Common feedback from early year UG or PGT reps is that they often do not feel able to provide comment during SSCs. This is often either due to the agenda being heavily aimed at higher UG year groups or a lack of confidence and encouragement to engage. Best practice often suggests that if department staff can either give dedicated space to or engage lower UG/PGT years in discussion then this is well received.

Another approach is to build the leadership skills of the older UG reps and encourage them to hold pre-meetings with other reps to help share ideas or views ahead of time. Generally, departments should review their SSC agendas in partnership with academic reps carefully so that all reps feel able to contribute.
**Improve or create pre-meets for students:**

Building on the previous point, some departments already run or encourage reps to hold SSC pre-meets. This gives time for the reps to come together, collaborate on ideas or issues and provide a more informed discussion within SSCs. The students’ union will as part of the recommendations from the academic rep review, be encouraging departments and reps to bring in pre-meets where they do not already exist.

**Engage all students in purpose/use of SSCs:**

A point made by many academic reps is that more awareness and promotion of SSCs could be undertaken within departments. This would help with legitimising their roles and importance to students, whilst empowering the partnership between staff and reps. Pre-meets could be another way of building awareness of SSCs by giving reps and students a space in which to share ideas in a less formal setting.

**SSC accessibility (lecture clashes):**

Another common concern is reps not able to attend an SSC due to a lecture clash, sport commitment or similar. Whilst SSC clashes are unavoidable departments should see this as an opportunity to reflect on accessibility to SSCs. For example, could google hangouts be used to engage reps? Alternatively, is skyping in an option for commuter students or those on a year in industry? Could there be as a minimum the option for reps to email in comments which would be responded to in the meeting?
Section 2 - Support and enjoyment of role:
2a) Is there any further support you would have liked (department/faculty or students' union) to fulfil your role?

Responses to this question are general and assist in providing overall guidance and ideas for those supporting academic representation. As such the ideas suggested are divided into department/faculty, students’ union and general.

**General Comments:**

**Department/Faculty Specific Advice:**

A historical ask by many academic representatives is to be provided more information and context around the challenges facing their department or faculty. For staff this can be done through allocating time for an induction for academic/faculty reps. NSS scores or prominent issues from the previous academic year could be shared and a dedicated staff contact should be identified.

The students’ union should look to provide more specific training to empower reps to engage with their departments more proactively. This is being addressed through the masterclasses being ran by the SU this coming year. Additional training for faculty representatives is also essential and is being developed alongside the masterclasses.

**Introduction sessions for Academic Reps to meet each other, across all year groups:**

Alongside more specific advice reps want more opportunities to collaborate and meet with other reps. Academic reps will often state that they do not meet others until the first SSC of the year which can make collaboration difficult. Departments and faculties should encourage reps to come together in a way that suits their context. For example, an informal social between staff and academic reps or placing the students in a shared e-mail correspondence at the start of the year. SU provision will be looking into providing socials in which Academic Reps can come together, alongside a possible academic rep conference.

**Increased promotion of the Academic Rep role to students:**

As has already been discussed, many reps feel that both the SU, department and faculty could do more to improve promotion of the academic rep role to their classmates. Be this through induction packs, social media or lecture shoutouts. For the SU the recent academic representation review has placed increased importance on the need to highlight the outstanding work of academic reps and to promote recruitment more heavily.

**How to follow up issues outside of SSCs:**

An ongoing feature of the rep system is that academic representatives feel unsure as to how they should follow up issues or comments that cannot be
addressed during SSCs. Given that many SSCs are separated by 2 to 3 months a process should be encouraged locally and across the piece. The nature of the issue also influences the approach.

At department level, if the topic is substantial and on areas such as curriculum, course content or department operations then most likely an additional meeting or clear responses to reps will be required. If an issue is low level or historical, department staff should have the confidence to answer this through email, whilst ensuring it is captured in SSC minutes. Department staff should also feel able to signpost a question they are unsure on to the students’ union for guidance. The SU will, through our training be looking to encourage academic reps to not hold onto issues until the next SSC and contact the department or SU according to the topic, as highlighted above.

**University Specific:**

**Response time to academic rep queries:**

Academic Reps expressed frustration at delays in communication from staff regarding their comments or questions. A key outcome here is to provide realistic expectations for the reps, clarifying how long they can expect to wait for a reply and the depth of response provided. This should ideally be outlined at the beginning of the year so as to provide consistency.

**Closing the feedback loop:**

Alongside clear expectations reps feel that department staff do not provide information as to how an issue brought up by reps was or has been resolved. Examples include changes being made to programmes or content based on rep feedback without informing the reps ahead of time. Or that if an issue was to be looked into and could not be solved, this was not reported back to the reps. This is an area where departments should look to improve on through a combination of initiatives such as ‘you said, we did’ and clear minutes with allocated action points for staff.

**Establishing honest communication:**

Whilst the above suggestions are practical another critical aspect to communicating effectively with academic reps is to be honest and clear throughout correspondence. If an issue cannot be resolved or a solution could take a long period of time, be open about this.

**Approach and communications on departmental ‘historical’ issues:**

Efforts should be made to address ‘historical’ issues that have come up at SSCs in the previous year as early as possible. Best practice could include sharing a brief summary of last years activity with the incoming academic reps and making clear what actions have been carried over.
Students’ Union Specific:

Clarify what meetings reps must attend:

There is some uncertainty between reps as to what meetings they should attend and expectations generally. This will be clarified in core training and within the role descriptor.

More opportunities for training/development:

The students’ union will be developing academic representatives through an extensive masterclass training programme, starting in October 2018.

Support in how to engage students and collect feedback:

Academic reps would like further support in how to create feedback tools and in what ways they can gather feedback. The students’ union will be providing this as part of its masterclass training.

Clarity on the different roles with the Academic Rep System:

As part of the academic representation review the academic rep system has been simplified to the two roles of academic rep and faculty rep. This, alongside clearer guidance and information should help clarify the roles.

Clarity on support which can be accessed from the SU:

The role and support the students’ union can provide to both academic reps and staff will be outlined as part of induction work within September.

2b) What did you enjoy most about being an academic rep?

This section highlights the various aspects that motivate academic reps and provides a positive experience as part of their role.

Being a leader in providing feedback on a topic or issue:

Reps enjoy being able to provide feedback as a representative of their classmates whilst also engaging in the discussions and debates that this generates. There are also those who enjoy being able to provide a voice to those less confident to engage with university processes.
‘Making a change’/‘Making a difference’:

Another aspect to the experience of being an academic rep is to enact change, however little or large that improves the experience for their programme, department or faculty. Empowering reps to make these changes and take ownership of them will continue to develop this.

**Hearing the views of other reps, students and staff:**

Similar to providing feedback, academic reps enjoy hearing and engaging with the views of others. Irrespective of this being the ideas of other reps, students or departmental staff. This continues to be a prominent aspect of the appeal to being a rep.

**Learning how the department or faculty works:**

Improving their knowledge and understanding of how their department or faculty operates is another appeal. Expanding their appreciation for the work of university staff and the process required to enact change.

**Problem Solving:**

A practical aspect of the role is being able to come up with solutions, be this in communicating with students or sharing solutions with staff on a departmental issue. Trusting and investing time and energy into to develop this would be beneficial for their confidence and interest in the role.

**A strong and equal relationship between staff and reps:**

Finally, academic reps enjoy being seen as equals with department or faculty staff as part of the role. Seeing that they are taken seriously in meetings, their ideas considered fairly and provided time to engage in wider meetings and initiatives.
2c) What did you enjoy least about being an academic rep?
This section highlights the negatives as seen by Academic Reps in the role. Most of the negatives are practical and as such can be seen as areas to work on and improve.

SSC meeting organisation:
SSCs either overrunning, cancelled or not being a productive use of time for those involved. Likewise there many comments regarding minutes and invites to SSCs being last minute and at times that the reps within that department could not attend.

‘Closing feedback loop’ following SSCs:
As has been addressed in previous points, academic reps feel that not enough is being done to close the feedback loop after SSC meetings. This will need addressing in well-timed minutes or follow up action points in subsequent SSC meetings.

Historical or repeating recurring issues:
Likewise addressed before, departments should engage reps on historical issues and explain why they have not been resolved before.

Students not engaging with the rep system:
Frustration that students are not aware of or do not engage with academic reps. Academic reps require a larger profile and promotion to students, particularly at peak times in the year, such as exam season and around essay deadlines.

Lack of interaction/collaboration between reps:
A desire by many academic reps to share ideas and socialise with other reps. Actions to develop this have already been highlighted.

Staff/Rep relations in meetings:
Academic reps have noted the feeling in some meetings of being ignored, treated in a demeaning manner or concerned that they might annoy or frustrate staff. Solutions to this stem from establishing clear expectations at the beginning of the year.

SU training not being relevant:
Concern that SU rep training is too broad. SU will be looking to address this through our masterclass training.