

TO: Assembly
FROM: David Evans
RE: **Academic Student Representation**
DATE: 20/06/2019

The belief and its justification

- Students have a right to be involved in decisions about their education, both from the position as the potential 'consumer' of a University service and by the nature of a University education in being a collaboration of academics, from the student body through to the academic staff
- Students hold a differing and valid viewpoint than that of career academics regarding the education of which they are a part – a multitude of viewpoints must be brought together to generate a complete picture of the educational experience, and where it might be improved
- Collaboration between students and career academics is developmental for both parties, fostering trust, effective working and the development of ideas at all levels of teaching, learning and research
- Nominated student representatives at Departmental and Faculty level are an integral component of effective student voice, providing a clear route by which student opinion may be brought to the attention of career academics, and ensuring students have a voice directly on University decision making bodies
- The democratic selection of representatives creates legitimacy in their ability to represent significant student populations; however effective representation additionally requires mechanisms by which all students may engage informally in discussions about their education
- The Students' Union has a duty to ensure representatives have the right tools and ongoing support to effectively voice the views of their constituents, and to facilitate the administration of representative systems in partnership with the University

Definition of a better future

- All students know who their appropriate reps are, know the variety of academic issues they can raise with them, and feel confident being able to do so
- Representatives shape not only the educational experience of their peers, but their own collective development of skills needed to be an effective representative
- Trust is built between academics, the student body and the Students' Union in the system of selection used to appoint student academic representatives
- Academics and representatives proactively identify areas where student voice must be included in decision making, and representatives' contributions are valued
- Turnout in democratic elections for course reps is comparable to those of similarly administered Students' Union and University Common Room elections
- Students and Representatives are able to reflect on each year in post and recognise issues they have raised to their department or faculty translating into action by staff

- The voices of undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research students are represented equitably, their differing needs and expectations respected

The barriers

- Differing views amongst departments and faculties, in addition to students and the Students' Union, as to the efficacy of any single system naturally arise, but all must have confidence in the representative systems used for them to be effective
- Providing assurance on effective informal representation is difficult by its nature; we must collaboratively develop mechanisms that both support and evaluate such efforts
- Perceptions of the Students' Union's place in supporting academic representation vary significantly amongst stakeholders – the Students' Union must demonstrate its will and ability to lead in this space to secure engagement with its platform
- Student experience at Durham University is an intensely volunteer-driven space – student academic representation must not become lost amongst the wealth of other activity placing demands on students' time and attention
- Academia is a skilled profession, and we will encounter some academics sceptical of the value of input from students regarding academic matters – we must work to convince them of the benefits of partnership working, and of our right to student voice
- The sheer number of representatives needed to support each course creates unique administrative and communication challenges – we must develop robust systems to manage this, and recognise we cannot work in isolation to achieve this

Belief about the change and the responsibilities

- *Durham Students' Union must* develop and maintain comprehensive training and support resources to enable our academic representatives to fulfil their potential
- *Durham Students' Union, University leadership, academic departments and students must* collaborate to evaluate and improve the systems used for appointing academic representatives on a agreed, regular timescale
- *University leadership must* instil a culture of listening amongst career academics, creating an expectation that student voice is taken on board and acted upon
- *Durham Students' Union and University leadership must* collaborate to develop mechanisms for the accurate capture of informal student feedback, and promote their use and evaluation by departments and faculties
- *Durham Students' Union must* continuously improve its channels of communication with academic representatives, putting together the wider picture of student concerns and targeting support to representatives in departments with emerging student issues
- *Durham Students' Union's Academic Officers must* act strategically on common student academic concern elevated to them through the representative structure, and through this action continue to develop trust in the Students' Union as our representative body