An insight into Academic Representation within the Faculty of Social Sciences

Best Practice and Suggested Actions

Overview:

The following is an in-depth look into established best practice across the Faculty of Social Sciences in supporting and working with Academic Representatives. The executive summary which provides an extensive overview of the Faculty approach to student voice can be found on the SU Academic Rep Hub.

Suggestions are divided into the following 3 themes:

1. Established existing best practice within the Faculty
2. Additional support requests and suggestions provided by Academic Reps
3. Additional support requests and suggestions provided by Departmental Staff

1. Best Practice within Departmental Student Staff Committees (SSCs):

The following good ideas have been discovered through discussions with the Students’ Union Social Sciences facilitator and departmental staff. It is important to note that each department has their own approach to effective representation and there is no ‘perfect answer’ to supporting academic reps. The following suggestions have however found success within their local contexts and may be of benefit for colleagues to incorporate or trial.

1a. Scheduling and planning SSCs:

- **Education**: Due to the large number of distance learners and working mature students, SSCs are scheduled at the end of the day. To assist in ensuring they are accessible to everyone.

- **Geography**: The Geography Society are proactively invited to SSC meetings. So that they can be involved in activities and engaging the wider student body.

- **Management**: Due to the number of reps, the UG SSC has one large induction meeting at the beginning of the year for all reps. After that they split into 2 small groups, which can also be divided by course. This allows reps to be more engaged in discussions where they would otherwise feel too disconnected.

1b. Chairing SSCs:
• **Landscape**: Rotating Student Chair for each SSC - They are provided a 10-minute briefing and run through of the agenda so they know what to expect. The chair of the previous SSC attends the next department learning and teaching committee meeting and provides an update on behalf of the SSC. The students who have been involved in this have really appreciated this opportunity as they see how the views of the SSC are incorporated within the department. Switching student chairs also means more people become aware of how the department works.

• **Urban Studies and Planning**: SSC Chaired by Head of Department - The tables are arranged in a circle and everyone is always introduced at the beginning of a meeting. There are opportunities to break up into small groups for discussion before feeding back to the whole room. The students and staff produce a table of feedback from students and responses from staff which is discussed at the end of the meeting. As the session is run by the head of department, reps feel reassured that their ideas are being taken seriously and developed elsewhere.

• **Economics**: Single student chair for the entire Academic Year: The economics chair is voted in by current Academic Reps within the department at the beginning of the year. They have a large remit, deciding the flow and agenda for the SSC with general support from departmental staff. There is a handover meeting put in place (where possible) between outgoing and incoming student chairs.

• **Information school**: Pre-meetings between the chair and academic reps: Reps and the chair (student or staff) meet ahead of each SSC to help set the agenda and discuss themes/topics which may come up at the meeting. This provides reps with more confidence to proactively raise issues during the meeting.

1c. Running SSCs and student feedback:

• **Sociology**: The first hour of the meeting is attended exclusively by Academic Reps and support staff. This is to help students feel that they can share their ideas/opinions more freely. During the last 30 minutes of the meeting relevant academic staff attend to hear and engage with feedback which is provided by a nominated rep. This helps keep feedback more anonymous.

• **Journalism**: Padlet to engage students at open SSC meetings. With the Padlet link on the screen, students could ask questions anonymously and have them appear on the screen for staff to answer them. They really liked this format, and want to hold more open SSC meetings in a similar style.

• **Architecture**: Academic Reps collaborate to provide a biweekly update to the programme leader, which also helps in addressing issues that cannot wait until the SSC.

• **Sheffield Methods Institute**: They are introducing a 5-minute briefing from the Faculty Rep to all of their SSC meetings. This will help the department stay engaged in faculty level discussions.
1d. Advertising and promoting the rep role:

- **East asian studies**: Student Staff Committees are advertised during intro week, including first welcome talks of the year and the students’ first meeting with their degree tutor. Follow up emails are sent to remind students and make sure they have a copy of the information provided. The department has found this to be a successful approach.

- **Law**: Where there are gaps in academic representation for set year groups, that year is still made aware of all the reps across the department. This is so that they can still speak to a student on the SSC if they need to.

- **Politics**: The reps are given physical space within the department in the form of a notice board which they can use as a space to publicise themselves, their roles and the work they do.

2. Additional support requests from Academic Reps:

As part of the reflection of student voice within the Faculty, Academic Reps were invited to share ideas that they felt could improve the overall experience. These ideas may or may not already exist within particular departments. It could be that departments trial or incorporate some of these ideas.

Student suggestions have been divided between those that departments should consider and aspects that the Students’ Union should prioritise.

2a). Department Facing Suggestions:

- Support in making students aware of the role of reps within departments and how students can access them. Emphasise the importance of the role as part of providing feedback on the programme.

- Make sure the work reps undertake for the department is recognised. Both by directly thanking them and in sharing their outcomes with students across the department.

- Is there a process by which reps can check in on how their ideas or concerns raised at an SSC are being handled afterwards? Is it clear who a rep should go to with a concern and how they can ask for help within the department?

- Do departments support reps to effectively follow up on ideas/requests made at SSCs? I.E: Helping them create surveys/access to mailing lists etc…

- Reps would like a better understanding of how each department works ‘behind the scenes’. To help inform why certain requests or changes may take a while. Some suggest a specific presentation on structures that exist at
the department.

- More information about university wide strategic projects and how the department will interact with them for the year ahead. For example, programme level approach or assessment and feedback. This would help reps understand why their views on these topics are important.

- Reps would like more regular contact time with staff during their time in the role. This could be through more time in SSCs or agreed informal catch ups with key staff.

- If an urgent issue comes up, is there a clear process by which a rep(s) can flag this with their department?

- Could department staff help work with reps to allocate tasks amongst the group? Encouraging collaboration.

- Is there a visible and clear way to contact reps within the department? Such as an accessible single email account (historyreps@sheffield.ac.uk) for example.

- If departments gain student feedback through other means, they could be proactive in speaking to reps about their views on this information and what their suggestions would be.

- Are SSC meeting dates put in the diary at the beginning of the year and made clear to the reps involved? Similar suggestions were made for SSC pre-meetings.

- A few reps have suggested recruitment for missing roles could start before students arrive, or at least the rep role could be promoted as a core part of the departmental experience.

- Some reps felt departments could be more proactive with asking for help from these students in recruiting others to become reps. Particularly through induction, shout outs etc…

- Department could consider revising their communication strategies with reps, to make sure they are not overwhelming them (i.e: e-mails, social media, google docs).

There have also been several specific concerns around international student integration within the Academic Rep system which departments could reflect on:
• Are international students encouraged to become reps through department recruitment? Have any issues with language barriers been considered here?

• International reps have strongly encouraged SSC pre-meetings as a stress free way for them to share ideas ahead of more formal discussions.

• Is as much information about agenda items at SSCs provided in text in advance? As opposed to verbally. If students do not have a chance to raise a comment during the meeting is there a google form where follow up comments can be provided?

• For both departments and the Students' Union international students highlighted they would like more general and accessible information on how meetings such as SSCs work, what provision is available to reps etc…

2b). Students’ Union Facing Suggestions:

• Reps would like more specific training sessions on how to communicate effectively with students.

• Greater clarity on what the rep role actually entails and how the department may interact with this.

• More social opportunities between reps and across faculties would be helpful. Suggestions that the rep conference should be earlier in the year.

• Clarity on when a rep does officially start the role with their department.

• A more dedicated online platform for Academic Reps as well as an active facebook/social media presence by the SU for reps.

• Masterclasses for reps by department or faculty.

• Better integration for distance learner reps.

• Accreditation (through HEAR) should be re-examined to ensure that it's fair.

• Some departments feel very distant and disengaged from the Students’ Union.

• Make more clear the role the SU Advice Centre plays in supporting Academic Reps.
3. Additional support requests from Departmental Staff:

As part of the departmental consultations, staff were also welcomed to share their views on what they felt would be beneficial for them to develop any student voice initiatives. Particularly in relation to supporting academic reps. These suggestions are overall divided between broad suggestions that the institution as a whole could reflect on and ideas that the Students’ Union could incorporate moving forward.

3a). Institutional Suggestions:

- Department staff would like further support in understanding how their SSCs connect to the Faculty Student Staff Committee (FSSC). This may require considerations across the piece, from what department staff should expect from the faculty, to practical actions such as FSSC meeting minutes being shared more openly.

- Incentives for student representatives continues to be a challenge across the institution. The Students’ Union cannot fund all university incentivisation schemes for Academic Reps. Departments alongside Faculties may want to review what demands they are placing on reps and what they can offer in return for the time/energy they invest in department/faculty initiatives.

- Several staff have highlighted that the masterclass training programme provided to academic reps would also be beneficial for staff. For example, considering communication channels to engage students and how to effectively chair SSC meetings. This provision is something that should be considered between both the Students’ Union, Faculties and Institution more widely.

3b). Students' Union Facing Suggestions:

- Concerns around retention of returning reps and making sure reps feel able to stay in the system if they’d like to.

- Tailored guidance on how to recruit PGT students.

- Worries around rep attendance at SSCs, is this connected to changes in accreditation or a long standing issue?

- Some supportive guidance around what is and isn’t appropriate to raise at SSCs based on suggestions or guidelines from the Students’ Union.

- A feeling that rolling rep recruitment is excessive and can cause confusion with students and staff.

- A shared feeling that reps also do not speak to staff proactively outside of SSCs, the SU could help foster this connection.
• The SU could support reps in understanding meeting etiquette and what is or isn’t appropriate. IE: Raising issues about specific members of staff.

• Longstanding concerns and requests for clarity on sharing rep data and GDPR compliance.

• Advice on how to work more effectively with working, mature and underrepresented/widening participation student groups.

• Could the SU do more to be clear on the limits of the academic rep remit, so reps do not take on a lot of work.

• Request for staff who support SSCs to come together and share best practice and ideas. Either in person or online.

• Access to the core and masterclass training programmes so staff can see what reps are being trained in. Would help staff in promoting specific masterclasses to reps as well.

• Suggestions for alternative digital communication tools.

• General support in running various SSC processes appropriately, such as recruiting a student chair or revising SSC membership.

• What processes are in place if a rep is too demanding or a dispute that can’t be resolved is created between reps and staff.

• More clear guidance breaking down the various rep roles.

• How can the department work with the SU more - strengthen relations and achieve goals.