An insight into Academic Representation within the Faculty of Social Sciences

1) Introduction:

This report will look to evaluate how the Academic Representation system is currently functioning within the Faculty of Social Sciences across the 2018/19 academic year. The Faculty of Social Sciences was selected for this project, as it has well-established student voice initiatives within the context of the current Academic Rep system. The aim of this work was to determine how the Academic Rep system is working across the Faculty, investigate which areas of the system need improvement, and highlight best practice for the institution.

Across the Faculty of Social Sciences there are 14 departments, with a total of 340 Reps for 11,923 students. 209 of these Reps are UG, 120 are PGT, and 11 are PGR. It is accepted that the recorded number of PGR Reps is far smaller than reality. This is due to most of these students acting in this role without signing up.

1.1) Content:

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- Results, Responses to the new Academic Rep System: (Pages 9 - 10)

1.2) Who should read this report?

This report should be of interest to department and faculty staff who work with academic reps, academic reps themselves, and any staff interested in reflecting on student engagement practises.

1.3) Abbreviations:

SSC = Student Staff Committee, FSSC = Faculty Student Staff Committee,
SU = Students’ Union, HoD = Head of Department DLT = Director of Learning and Teaching
UG = Undergraduate, PGT = Postgraduate Taught, PGR = Postgraduate Research

1.4) Definition of ‘Student Engagement’:

“How departments interact with their reps and the wider student body”.
1.5) Faculty Wide Best Practice:

As part of this work, the Students’ Union has compiled best practice around student voice from across the Faculty. This will be shared separately to this report and can be found as part of our appendices here.

2) Overall Recommendations:

2.1: Continued development of new rep system
The new rep system has been overall, a positive change. It is seen as an improvement on the old system and will continue to be used in the future, with some adjustments needed.

2.2: Promoting the existence of Academic Reps
Academic Reps are not well known to the wider student population in departments, which makes it harder for them to carry out their role. Departments and the SU should consider how they promote the existence of reps through their communication channels.

2.3: Clarify support routes for Academic Reps
Reps are not aware of support routes, how they connect and how to deal with issues outside of SSCs. The SU and departments need to clarify where reps can access support and where to take questions that do not need to be escalated to SSCs.

2.4: Empower an Academic Rep community
Academic reps want more opportunities to develop a community within the faculty of Social Sciences. Be this through faculty specific masterclasses, an awareness of how each department works in the faculty or accessible ways to communicate with each other.

2.5: Staff development
Staff would like more support in taking a strategic approach to their student engagement activities. Most likely in the form of online or face to face training. The Institution may want to reflect on provision and guidance allocated to staff around student engagement.

2.6: Sharing faculty-wide best practice
Staff would like more opportunities to share and access good practice across the faculty. This is so that they can develop new ideas and gain a better picture of how their SSCs are functioning.

2.7: SSC Membership
Departments should reflect on the membership of their SSCs. There should be a balance between the number of reps, professional support staff and academic staff.
2.8: Connections between departments and the faculty
Overall consensus is that departments and the faculty could be having more productive conversations on student engagement. This covers multiple areas that both departments, the faculty, and the SU could develop. Suggestions include when should department staff raise issues to the faculty, how faculty reps relay information back to their departments, and how faculty reps are inducted into their role.

2.9: Student voice outside the rep system
Students who are not Academic or Faculty Reps should still be engaged in wider initiatives or consultations such as module and programme evaluations, the NSS, and department or cohort-wide consultations. These forms of student engagement are outlined in the University Map for Student Engagement here.

3) Research Methods:

3.1) Datasets:
A variety of research techniques were employed, including:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Detail</th>
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<tr>
<td>SSC minutes</td>
<td>Collating and reading SSC minutes (2018/19 academic year).</td>
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<td>SSC/FSSC attendance</td>
<td>Observing practice across the Faculty to gain a better picture of how departments inform Faculty level discussions.</td>
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<td>Discussions with Departmental Staff</td>
<td>Meeting a member of staff or student chair from each of the 14 departmental SSCs.</td>
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<td>Discussions with Academic Reps</td>
<td>Face-to-face conversations with Academic and Faculty Representatives.</td>
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<td>Discussions with Institutional/Faculty staff</td>
<td>Meetings with University Director of L&amp;T for Student Engagement and Faculty of Social Sciences Student Engagement Advisory Fellows.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online survey</td>
<td>Collecting ideas on further support which could be provided by the SU, through a survey targeted at social sciences Academic Reps.</td>
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<td>Academic Rep Focus Groups</td>
<td>Reps were invited to attend focus groups after the survey.</td>
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3.2) Overall engagement with consultations:

The engagement with this work has been strong, with 48 Social Sciences Reps completing the survey emailed to them, and all 14 departments seeing staff or students attend meetings to discuss current practices.

Of the 14 departments, 7 were selected to represent an example of a large department, small department, and those with varying percentages of representation. These departments were visited to observe their SSCs, and include:

- East Asian Studies
- Education
- Urban Studies and Planning
- Sheffield Methods Institute
- The Information School
- The Law School
- Journalism

4) Results and Discussion:

4.1) Student engagement

Highlights:

- Reps highlighted the need for students to be able to comment to the department anonymously about their experiences
- Reps have requested access to departmental mailing lists
- Reps would like more information on the support routes available to them
- The SU and departments could do more to promote the existence, value and accessibility of academic reps to the student body
- Departments should promote changes made by the SSC to the student body
- Staff would like clearer guidance on how to engage Reps outside of SSC meetings
- Departments should utilise returning Reps in the recruitment of new Reps
- Academic Reps attending SSCs regularly continues to be a challenge
- The Students’ Union has compiled best practice around student voice from across the Faculty. This can be found as part of our appendices here.

Communication Methods:

The majority of Reps engage with students through social media. This is due to the ease with which Reps can communicate with a large number of students at once. Online polls, for example, are quick and give a good overview of student opinion. It also allows reps to circumvent the issue of not being able to access departmental mailing lists. However, using social media as the sole method of communication leads to problems when not all students are being given the chance to express their
opinions. The lack of anonymity can discourage students from giving feedback. Some of the international Reps mentioned this was a barrier for international students, as they were concerned about repercussions if they gave negative feedback. Reps suggested they would benefit from the creation of a departmental email address that students could contact so all students’ views could be represented.

Returning Reps:
Returning reps could be a way to further improve student engagement, as they are more well-known and can pass on knowledge to new reps as well as aid in recruitment. Departmental staff have stated they would like more support in retaining reps for future years. Providing students with evidence of changes made might help motivate more reps to sign up. For example, most departments have ‘you said, we did’ documents but students are not aware of them. More needs to be done to promote changes already made as a result of the hard work and collaboration of staff and students.

Support outside of SSCs:
The guidance given by staff is that there should be no module-specific content in SSC meetings. Only broad issues that require no immediate action should wait until SSC meetings. Reps are encouraged to talk to staff outside the SSC, but note that this does not always happen, and some Reps perceive that all issues have to be raised via SSCs. Ideally, what we want to encourage is for Reps to raise immediate problems to staff so the students can feel the effects of the changes made. With only 54.3% of Reps surveyed saying they felt confident raising issues outside of SSCs, this is clearly an area for improvement. Outlining the support routes available to Reps is a good place to start, as there were a high number of students who didn’t realise the Rep system was run by the SU. 69.6% of Academic Reps have reached out for support in their role, but 8.7% were not sure who to speak to. This shows that Reps do want more help in the role, but surprisingly the SU was the least likely source of support to be accessed.

Engaging other students:
Staff and Reps identified a disparity between the engagement of Reps and the wider student body. Reps said it was difficult to obtain feedback from students, stating there was an attitude of ‘change can’t be made’ among the wider student body. Reps have asked for departments to notify students when changes are made so they know their Reps are listening. If a Rep has raised an issue at a meeting, they would like to be kept updated with the progress of tackling the issue. Reps would like more support from the SU in making their voices heard and ensuring outcomes from departments. A wider public appraisal of Reps is needed to keep them motivated. Reps reported they wanted the SU and their own departments to do more to promote the role of the Academic Rep. It was stated that students who aren’t Reps don’t know
what the role is, nor who their Rep is, and Reps feel that they are the only ones provided with any information.

Meeting Attendance:

There have been some difficulties with Rep attendance at meetings this year, with concerns from staff that this is due to the change in HEAR accreditation requirements. Reps themselves have noted a disparity in the amount of work taken on, with some frustrated by the lack of engagement from their peers. Reps are also worried about accreditation, as those who take on more responsibility have less time for masterclasses, while there are Reps who do no work and can still get accreditation. They suggested the accreditation move to being department-approved, if not attendance based. Recruiting final year students due to their increased workload is another challenge.

4.2) Faculty Student Staff Committees

Highlights:

- Departmental staff need more clarity on how the FSSC connects to their SSCs
- Faculty Reps are not sure what to communicate back to their departments
- Faculty Reps find it difficult to physically attend FSSCs across the year
- Time demands on Faculty Reps should be considered when inviting to wider committees
- The timing, formatting and structure of the FSSC could be reviewed
- The SU could be doing more to support Faculty Reps and faculty staff
- The Students’ Union has compiled best practice around student voice from across the Faculty. This can be found as part of our appendices here.

SSC connection to FSSCs:

Departmental staff feel that they do not know exactly how the FSSC works. Due to this, they struggle to advise their Faculty Reps if they are seeking support. Suggestions from staff in resolving this include: having the agendas and minutes for FSSCs shared, being kept up to date on faculty issues and provided more general knowledge of the FFSC from the SU. This would allow departmental staff to be more confident in directing issues to the faculty.

Timing issues:

Faculty Reps noted a mis-match in timings between departmental and faculty SSCs. A suggested timeframe for SSCs would help in scheduling FSSC meetings appropriately. This may also assist Faculty Reps in relaying appropriate information back to their departments.
Workload:

Faculty Reps are already Academic Reps, meaning that they have additional responsibilities. As such, asking these students to attend wider faculty meetings can add a lot of pressure and time commitments. There should be careful consideration as to what meetings need student voice and how this will be allocated to Faculty Reps. Furthermore, these opportunities do not have to be exclusive to Faculty or Academic Reps and can be promoted to the wider student body. The Students’ Union can play a supportive role in advising the Faculty on how to approach this.

4.3) Rep Recruitment and Induction:

Highlights:

- Reps would like more clarification of the Rep role from the SU and their department
- The induction provided to Reps at the start of their role varies by department
- Reps seem unsure of their role, which may require Rep training to be made clearer
- Departments would like more support in recruiting PGT and distance learner Reps
- The Students’ Union has compiled best practice around student voice from across the Faculty. This can be found as part of our appendices here.

Rep Role Confidence:

Of the 48 students who responded to the survey, 60.9% of students said they were confident in their role as an academic rep, with 32.6% saying they weren’t sure, and 6.5% saying no. This is a long-standing issue that hasn’t been resolved by the new system, and highlights a need to better communicate the expectations placed on reps. In the survey, students asked for more guidance from their departments about how they should tailor the general role of an academic rep to suit what their department needs. In particular, students wanted to know what other reps were doing so they didn’t repeat the same work.

Approach to Recruitment:

Recruitment methods vary by department, but most use a combination of lecture shout-outs, email reminders, and meetings with course directors as opportunities to promote their SSC. To engage first years, most of these activities take place during intro week. Staff noted that most Reps were unsure of their role when they first started, and perhaps the role descriptions or training needed to be made clearer. There are also concerns from staff that students are not accessing the information provided. They queried whether the old format of sending out the documents directly, rather than sending a link to the Rep Hub, might get more engagement.

Academic Rep Inductions:
In terms of induction information provided to reps, some departments set up an SSC google drive where they share all the minutes of previous meetings, rep role descriptors, and links to the Academic Rep Hub. Additionally, most departments spend their first SSC meeting informing students about SU expectations of the Rep role and introducing them to the committee. This is positive, but departments could be more clear on what they expect from Academic Reps themselves. Academic Reps could also benefit from greater clarity on what they should expect from the role. In Economics for example, the committee is led by a student who provides a handover to the new chair each year. If there was more guidance or communication between incoming and outgoing reps, this would increase the efficiency of the rep system.

Equal Representation:

There are some issues posed during recruitment. For example, ensuring a wide variety of students are represented. A struggle identified across the faculty was the recruitment of PGT students, working students and distance learners. There is a problem with recruiting PGT students as they are often only at university for a year. Overall they are less engaged than the rest of the student body within the rep system. Distance learners and working students tend to have an even lower level of engagement, partially due to the lack of accessibility of these activities.

4.4) Membership of Student Staff Committees (SSCs):

Highlights:

- An increasing number of departments now have student chairs
- Many SSCs are missing academic or senior departmental staff
- The SSC student-staff ratio is in most cases, 50:50
- Departments are considering separating UG and PG SSCs
- Some departments have been particularly proactive with SSC accessibility
- There is no standard SSC practice across the Faculty due to the specific needs of each department.
- The Students’ Union has compiled best practice around student voice from across the Faculty. This can be found as part of our appendices here.

Who leads SSCs?

The staff and students present at SSCs varies by department. Some have their head of department present or chairing, whilst others are entirely led by student chairs. There is a high proportion of support staff present at meetings, and sometimes no academics. For the majority of departments it is the case that academics can be involved if interested, with only the DLT required to proactively attend.
Staff/Student Ratio:

The student-staff ratio is commonly 50:50 or higher with regards to the number of students, though some did have more staff than students. A few departments have highlighted issues with rep attendance which will affect this ratio. Departments with several courses on offer saw students with higher contact hours less likely to become reps or being unable to attend due to timetabling clashes. However this was not a large concern as these students are in contact with staff quite regularly.

UG and PG SSC Separation:

Some departments have considered separate UG and PG SSCs, but in some cases this was too complicated due to undergraduates studying the equivalent of a PG degree. Staff asked if separate UG and PG committees was standard practise, but it is important to highlight that there is no standard practise. This is so that departments can operate in a way that suits their local context. Those with mixed PG and UG SSCs believe this works well as students tend to answer each other’s questions, and the perspective of older students can be helpful. Irrespective of SSC structure there was consensus that each department should have at least 1 UG and 1 PGT/R faculty rep due to their varied experiences.

SSC Accessibility:

Several departments have established best practice around accessibility requirements e.g. sending more detailed agendas in advance, and allowing students to skype instead of being physically present. This promotes the engagement of different groups of students. The majority of departments observed that their SSCs had strong representation of international students.

4.5) Responses to the new academic rep system

Highlights:

- The SU is aware of the need to increase accessibility of training and masterclasses
- Reps would like to choose between online or in-person training for the Rep role
- Staff would like to be more aware of when masterclasses are running
- There are recruitment imbalances across year groups and UG/PG
- It was felt Reps should be provided guidance on appropriately raising points at SSCs
- Staff would like more support in how to set up their SSCs
- Staff should ensure a handover process is in place if they stop supporting Academic Reps
- The SU recruitment system needs to be clearer (i.e: when does a student successfully become a Rep)
- The Students’ Union has compiled best practice around student voice from across the Faculty. This can be found as part of our appendices here.

**Response to the new rep system:**

The overall response from staff has been positive, with an apparent decrease in the admin work required and an easier recruitment drive. Initial concerns that the new system would lead to an imbalance in representation across year groups has been limited, with a majority of departments seeing similar numbers to usual. Staff note they can now easily keep track of who their reps are and that putting the emphasis on students to sign up through compulsory training has created more engaged reps. As HEAR accreditation is no longer SSC attendance-based, staff have saved time due to a reduction in monitoring. The new system has been described as “better than it was a few years ago when reps who didn’t understand their role used to dominate”. One member of staff summed up their thoughts on the new system, saying “It is infinitely preferable and less work for staff.” It has been felt that changes by the SU have improved discussions between reps and students during SSCs.

**Workload Issues:**

However, some departments flagged the admin workload has not shifted and that they are still struggling to recruit reps in certain years e.g. at PGT level. There have been varied opinions about the issue of inconsistent representation. Some staff have stated there were clear gaps, some saying there was no difference to previous years, or that there was an uneven distribution by year group. Most departments decided they didn’t mind inconsistencies in representation as long as there was a rep in every year, with one member of staff stating that “any student who wants to be a rep should be able to sign up”.

**Experience of returning and new reps:**

As only a small percentage of students are returning Reps it was difficult to get opinions on how the new system compares to the old one. Despite this, Reps in general have been happy with the new system. When asked if they would prefer training in person, those that weren’t returning Reps usually said they preferred online training as it affords more flexibility. Some returning Reps who were consulted said they remembered the in-person training being more useful. This was due to it being easier to ask questions and meet other reps. Staff and students agreed the training should be compulsory, but raised the issue of accreditation for distance learners and working students who can’t attend the masterclasses necessary to receive this. By having online training, the rep system has become more accessible. The SU will look to develop this further over the coming year.
Long Standing Issues:

Alongside general responses to the new rep system, there are several long standing issues which also need to be reflected on. For example departmental staff would like further guidance around areas such as SSC staff membership and possible training development as they may feel unsure of what is expected of them. This can be exacerbated when staff step down from supporting Academic Reps. The SU has had difficulties when staff have not passed on the details of the role to their colleagues. Departments could reflect on communication between incoming and outgoing members of staff who support Reps to minimise this problem.

The new system also has not addressed provision for Faculty Reps, distance learners and students with wider commitments. Training being held too late in the year, provision being inaccessible or time pressure of the role being identified as issues for each of these groups. Reps mentioned having a sense of information overload, which has also been reflected in staff conversations.

The SU already provides training on how Reps could best communicate with students. However both Reps and staff feel more could be done in this area. Through better promotion of masterclasses and ensuring effective resources are in place, staff would have more opportunities to highlight Academic Reps to other students across the year.