

Supporting student representatives

1. Ideas to improve student participation in elections

Raise the profile of reps within your institution

Demonstrate that reps are valued within the faculty/department and that they can make a difference. You could promote the role of rep by:

- including, as part of your induction programme, a session on the student rep system and how it works and inviting CUSU or GU reps, or your outgoing reps, to speak;
- including reps' contact details in student handbooks, on noticeboards and prominent webpages;
- asking reps to write about their experiences in the faculty/department's newsletter;
- allotting a page on the faculty/department website to reps;
- allocating time in lectures, or after meetings of graduate students, to promote the role, explain how the rep scheme works and to encourage students to participate;
- creating an election webpage onto which nominees can upload their manifestos;
- emailing all students about nominations, and again about voting.

Examples from within the University and in other UK HEIs

The Department of Applied Mathematics and Theoretical Physics has a website about, and run by, student reps: www.damtp.cam.ac.uk/user/studrep/.

Representatives in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science (HPS) update a student advice section in the undergraduate student handbook: www.hps.cam.ac.uk/students/handbooks/partii.pdf (pp.38-44).

University of Sussex student rep election website: www.studentreps.co.uk/

Clarify expectations of the role

Clearly define and publicise responsibilities in advance of elections so that potential reps understand what the role entails and the kind of support they can expect.

Clarifying the responsibilities of other parties (including staff, Students' Union reps, and students) would show that reps are well supported and do not work in isolation.

Practice within the University and in other UK HEIs

HPS' undergraduate student handbook features a section about the election and appointment of student members which outlines the responsibilities of the role: www.hps.cam.ac.uk/students/handbooks/partii.pdf (p.6).

The University of Manchester produces a job description for potential reps: www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/medialibrary/policies/student-rep-guidelines-0206.pdf

Codes of Practice and staff guidance

University of Glasgow: <http://senate.gla.ac.uk/ga/studentrep/cop/cop.pdf>

University of Sussex: How to get the most out of Student Reps: Staff Handbook www.sussex.ac.uk/academicoffice/documents/reps_staff_handbook5.pdf

Give positive feedback on successful actions

'Close the loop', by informing students of actions carried out in response to their feedback. Publicising successes creates a positive cycle which motivates reps and encourages other students to get involved.

You could disseminate feedback through:

- notes in committee minutes;
- an annual report or presentation to the Staff Student Liaison Committee/Teaching Committee;
- posting information on your faculty/department's website, newsletter, noticeboards and course handbooks.

Promote the benefits to potential reps

There are many competing demands for students' time, so promoting tangible personal benefits of acting as a rep can boost recruitment. These incentives include:

- the opportunity to have their say and influence decision-making;
- CV points and the development of transferable skills;
- a raised profile within the institution;
- the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to their faculty, department or College and to understand how it works 'behind the scenes'.

2. Ideas for gathering information on the kind of support reps need

Hold debriefing meetings with outgoing reps

Ask outgoing reps to review their time 'in office', commenting on areas such as support arrangements, student participation, election procedures and staff engagement. This feedback can be disseminated informally to colleagues or, more formally, as a report to the Staff Student Liaison Committee or Teaching Committee.

Designate a staff contact to reps

Many institutions designate a member of staff as a primary contact for student reps. This contact oversees the student rep scheme, taking responsibility for:

- holding regular meetings with reps to go through agendas and papers;
- ensuring that reps have the resources and knowledge to do their job effectively;
- liaising with Students' Unions and central bodies as appropriate;
- providing guidance to staff about making the most of their reps;
- considering the composition of the student body to ensure that all groups are represented.

The contact can advise which issues should be taken straight to a committee and which may be resolved informally.

Allocating a primary contact helps to clarify lines of communication and enables the contact to develop an in-depth understanding of reps' support needs.

Consider the demographics of your institution

The size and diversity of student populations varies enormously between institutions and may affect the kind of support that reps need. Be aware of the various groups in your institution and discuss the challenges of representing them with reps.

Liase with CUSU and the Graduate Union

CUSU: www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/

The Graduate Union: www.gradunion.cam.ac.uk/

3. Ideas to help reps do their job effectively

Develop local advice and guidance

The General Board publish a statement of good practice on consultation and discussion with junior members which institutions may wish supplement with local guidance.

This guidance could be distributed as a handbook or uploaded onto your website. You may want to include some of the following:

- foreword from an academically respected figure about the importance of the reps' role;
- clarification of the roles and expectations of reps, staff and students;
- benefits of the rep scheme to all those involved (reps, students, department, University);
- details of previous reps' achievements;
- guidelines for being an effective rep (how to be representative and gather feedback etc);

- FAQ list covering issues such as expected time commitment, support etc;
- synopsis of committees and key roles with a diagram to show how representatives fit in;
- a meeting checklist and list of committee jargon and acronyms;
- details of common issues and how to deal with them;
- contacts and further sources of support.

It may be useful to review the information that your current reps received, asking them whether it has enabled them to feel confident in their role, or whether they would have benefited from any of the above suggestions. You could even ask your reps to contribute to any documentation produced.

Resources

General Board guidance on consultation and discussion with junior members:

www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/education/support/

SENLEF produce guidance sheets on various aspects of the student reps' role which can be tailored to fit your institution: www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/learning/assessment/senlef

Introduce a Staff Student Liaison Committee (SSLC)

SSLCs give students and staff the opportunity to raise issues of concern in learning and teaching that may not be considered suitable for more formal committees. They deal with concerns at a local level, feeding into other committees where appropriate.

More students can sit on an SSLC than on a Faculty Board, potentially including students from every year, subject and award (i.e. MPhil and PhD students as well as undergraduates), so that each course is represented for its duration.

SSLCs in the Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages (MML)

Student representation in MML: www.mml.cam.ac.uk/faculty/studentrep.html

Department of Italian's SSLC webpage: www.mml.cam.ac.uk/italian/ssl/

Arrange a hand-over meeting with the outgoing rep

Hand-over meetings between incoming and outgoing reps ensure that knowledge is transferred and forms a useful part of incoming reps' induction.

Where a physical handover isn't possible (i.e. for MPhil reps who have already left the University) you could ask them to keep a log of rep-related activities which could be passed onto the new rep. After the first year, reps would only need to check for currency and amend where appropriate.

Support your reps with committee work

The General Board already ask that a senior committee member meets Faculty Board reps to discuss the form and practicalities of FB business (e.g. how to submit items for the agenda etc). As good practice it also recommends offering reps regular opportunities to meet the Chair in advance of the main session to discuss agenda items.

Other ways to support reps through committees could include:

- providing background on the context of issues, and outlining the committee format;
- checking that items on the reserved agenda need to be there i.e. asking the Chair not to define areas of reserved business beyond those required by Statute;
- listing the reserved items on the unreserved agenda and explaining to reps why these items are reserved;
- ensuring that reps are treated as full members of the committees on which they sit (i.e. recording their comments in the minutes and sending them agendas and minutes);
- giving prompt feedback on actions arising from the items raised by student reps;
- allowing reps to submit comments in advance or send another rep if they are unable to attend a meeting.

Reference material

Statutory definition of reserved business (Statute C, IV, 13 and Statute K, 20):

www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/education/support/views.html#appendixI

Encourage your reps to participate in training programmes

CUSU provide training sessions for newly elected representatives:

www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/academic/facultyboard/facultytraining.html

CUSU and GU ask that you notify them at the earliest opportunity after the elections so that they can encourage reps to make the most of networking and training opportunities with other reps.

Ask for help

Responsibility for supporting student reps in the University of Cambridge is delegated to individual faculties and departments to a far greater extent than in many other Universities.

Most Universities provide training sessions and handbooks for reps and others have introduced transferable skills modules with academic credit for student reps as an incentive to participate.

In some Universities, the student rep scheme is overseen by a team from the central administration, reducing the administrative burden on faculties and departments.

If you think it would be useful to have University-wide guidance about the role of student reps, or would like more central coordination or training, let CUSU and the GU know so that they can gauge demand.

4. Ideas for providing reps with the necessary resources

Offer administrative support

Provide promotional tools

- a generic email address e.g. rep@faculty.cam.ac.uk
- webspace on your institution's website
- a noticeboard and pigeon-hole in the main office

Help with practicalities

- space for storing papers from previous years to help promote continuity between reps
- reasonable access to photocopiers to help copy reports, updates or promotional materials
- small budget for producing promotional materials
- reimbursement of travel expenses for reps if they need to travel back from placements to attend meetings

5. Sector wide guidance

- QAA: Outcomes from Institutional Audit, Student Representation and Feedback Arrangements: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/OutcomesStudentRep.asp
- SPARQS (Student Participation in Quality Scotland): www.sparqs.org.uk/