

Case Study

Sharing Good Practice at a Grassroots Level: A Student Rep Workshop for the College of Engineering and Physical Sciences

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Abstract

The School of Physics and Astronomy has a well-established Student Rep system, numbering around 25 Student Reps in total, composed of Reps from all undergraduate years and postgraduate taught programmes. Students in the School actively engage with the scheme, which is so popular that it has been necessary to run elections this year. The School runs weekly informal meetings in addition to the compulsory SSC (Staff-Student Committee) meetings. We were aware of the existence of Student Rep systems in other schools but we knew little of how they operated. The aim of this project was to share good practice across the College of Engineering and Physical Sciences (EPS) with the intention of making recommendations on how to improve the Student Rep system at the University.

Introduction

The primary motivation for organising this event was to understand how other Student Rep systems operate within their School. It became apparent from talking to friends in other schools that different Rep systems each had a set of tried and tested ideas with which to engage students. We felt that these ideas could be shared between Schools in order to increase the number of Reps, raise the level of responsibility and improve the efficiency of the Student Rep system as a whole.

We were also keen for the School of Physics and Astronomy to participate in this exchange. We felt that we could advise other Schools on how to encourage more students to become Reps. Becoming a Student Rep allows the student to enhance their personal skills, but with limited responsibility this becomes difficult and may not seem worth the effort to potential candidates. In addition it can be difficult to obtain a suitable number of Reps from each year group. We hoped that, by running a College-wide workshop, we could collectively discover new ideas regarding effective recruitment by articulating the personal benefits of becoming a Student Rep. We also wished to raise the profile of the role of a Student Rep within the College.

Furthermore, we wanted to consider the best ways to represent different groups of students and to make sure all voices, not just the loudest, are heard. We had tried some ideas within our School but we wanted to know what other Reps had tried and how successful they were.

From the beginning the intention was that the workshop should be an informal, student-led event, where honest feedback could be given in the absence of academic staff. As students we felt that we could best relate to the topics being discussed, as we have experienced at first hand the challenges faced when working as a Student Rep and understand the ways in which students engage most effectively.

Running the workshop

Having identified the points to be addressed, we decided the best way to do the above was to hold a workshop in which Student Reps from all Schools within EPS were invited to participate. We decided to apply to CLAD (Centre for Learning and Academic Development) for Educational Enhancement Project Funding. This process involved completing an application form outlining the aims of the project, the intended outcomes and impact, how we intended to achieve these and the costs involved. This was a challenging process (requiring significant staff advice) because we had never submitted a project proposal before. It was a very good experience for us, especially because we had to ensure that we knew what we were aiming to do with the project.

After successfully securing the funding, our next step was to plan the workshop day. This involved organisation from two different sides: identifying the Student Reps to attend and publicising and organising the actual event.

Identifying the Student Reps and contacting them posed challenges due to it being hard to know who to contact in each of the Schools. Once identified, Reps were then added to a page on the University's VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) that was specifically set up for the Reps and is maintained by us. This allowed us to open discussions for all Reps to participate in and to share information about the upcoming workshop.

We wanted to ensure that Reps in all Schools were aware that this event was being run *by students for students*. We therefore tried to visit as many Rep meetings as possible in the weeks leading up to the workshop. Finding out when and where these were being held was much more difficult than anticipated. We also discovered that some Schools do not in fact have frequent meetings with Student Reps. This would therefore be an important discussion point at the upcoming workshop.

The practical side of event organisation was something that we all had almost no experience in and we were grateful for assistance from staff in this process. It was difficult for us to completely lead this stage of the project as the procedure for releasing funds meant many other people had to be involved to allow any spending to take place. However, we successfully provided refreshments, delegate packs and other equipment for the workshop.

The workshop itself ran for an afternoon with a total of around 30 Student Reps from across the majority of Schools within the College. The afternoon began with a talk from Michael Grove (STEM Education Centre), who spoke about different types of student and made us think about the people that we are actually representing. This was received positively by the Reps¹ and led on very well to the discussions for the afternoon. These were held in the form of a series of questions that were each discussed in small groups. During the discussion, groups were invited to take notes on the ideas they had come up with on large flipcharts placed in the centre of each table. This meant that all attendees were able to contribute to the notes as they were being made. Groups were then invited to share their key findings with all present.

The discussion questions were based around two key areas:

1. Finding out how the Student Rep system currently runs in each School. Having found out what happens in other Schools, Reps were asked to think about areas of improvement they could take back to their own Schools.
2. Identifying the current methods used by Reps to make sure that the views of all students they represent are taken into account as much as possible. From this they were then asked to think of any other methods that could be used in addition to current practice.

Following on from the main discussions, the afternoon ended with the chance for all Reps to continue discussion informally over a buffet meal. Before leaving, all participants were asked to complete an evaluation form for the workshop.

The feedback from the evaluation forms was very positive throughout with all participants saying that they had found the workshop useful² and many suggesting that similar events should be held in the future³.

Results

Our findings are concentrated in two areas: an appraisal of the means of passing feedback from students and Student Reps to the School, and points of action which Reps suggested would improve the current system.

The Student Rep system

All Student Reps are invited to attend their School/Department's Staff-Student Committee (SSC). These were agreed to be useful in resolving long-term issues. They also make Reps feel that their voices are being heard as they have the opportunity to speak to many key members of staff. Attendees valued the SSCs but thought that more frequent Student Rep meetings are also necessary to find short-term resolutions to less serious problems.

We learned that most Schools/Departments have informal Rep meetings weekly or fortnightly. These informal meetings are usually overseen by a member of administrative staff, or sometimes a member of academic staff. Most attendees who don't currently have this arrangement thought it was a good idea.

There was much discussion as to whether it is better to have the meetings run by a member of academic or administrative staff, with no clear conclusion drawn. The advantage of using administrative staff is that they are impartial. However, they are often less aware of some specifics of certain courses or procedures, which can make difficult resolving issues raised at Rep meetings. Academic staff will have a deeper understanding of the workings of the School/Department, but it may be harder for Reps to bring up issues relating to that member of staff.

Some attendees raised concern that weekly informal meetings might make Reps unlikely to talk directly to the relevant member of staff to sort out minor issues. It was agreed that we as Reps should make more effort to resolve these small issues ourselves where possible.

We learned that some Student Reps are unable to attend their School's/Department's informal meetings due to time conflicts with classes or sports activities. Some Schools resolve this issue by timetabling the meetings such that no lectures run at the same time.

Other feedback channels

All students have other means of passing feedback to their School/Department in parallel with the Student Rep system. Schools are required to give a module evaluation form to each student partway through the running of the module. Attendees approved of the forms as they allow for anonymous feedback from all students. Some Schools give out paper forms, while others use online forms.

With regard to paper forms, attendees were concerned that students are not always given sufficient time to complete the questionnaire if it is given out during class (particularly if it is given out at the start of a lecture). It was also suggested that students should be given notice in the previous class that the forms are due to be given out, so they have more time to gather their thoughts on the module.

Many attendees were in favour of the online form, which has a longer window for completion. Some attendees were concerned that using an online form would result in a lower number of responses than a paper form. This problem has been dealt with in some Schools by setting up the online form in such a way that each response is anonymous, but staff can still see who has completed the form and exert appropriate pressure on reticent students.

Some Schools have a number of other methods for direct student engagement. We learned that some lecturers directly ask students for module feedback during a lecture, with Student Reps being expected to make opening comments if necessary. Some teaching staff make a regular appointment to be present at a student social area, with the aim of being approachable to all students to listen to feedback on their teaching. Attendees suggested using 'clickers' to give quick, anonymous feedback during lectures.

At the time of the workshop, the University had recently switched to a new VLE. Attendees thought it useful to give lecturers training in the new platform with respect to how it can best be used to channel feedback. It was suggested that Schools/Departments create a discussion page on the VLE to give students a common forum in which to give feedback to their School/Department. We learned that the new service does not allow for anonymous comments, which students felt might discourage some students from commenting.

Representing all students

Student Reps have many channels that it is necessary to monitor to ensure that all students' views are heard. We learned that Facebook is used by many students in many schools to communicate with each other on an academic level. Attendees noted that certain groups of students, such as international students and mature students, are less likely to use Facebook. Other social networks such as Twitter are also used by some students.

¹ 'Michael was excellent and really got us thinking in different ways.'

'The speech by Michael Grove was excellent.'

² 'Extremely useful.'

'Really good to be able to see how other schools were dealing with similar problems and how they run.'

³ 'An annual sharing of best practices across the [College] is a must.'

'Great, do it again!!!!'

It was discussed that some Reps conducted online surveys for their year group, though participation was low. It was agreed that we need to find better ways of engaging with the year group.

Attendees believed it is important for Student Reps to know many of the other students across their year group. It was suggested that Student Reps should do more to increase awareness of the nature of their role, and should be able to pick up on implicit issues rather than waiting to be approached by a student directly. The importance of anonymity in passing on feedback was stressed.

Attendees believed that it should be ensured that all courses and minority groups are represented fairly at Student Rep meetings. Some attendees were MSc Student Reps, and some of these felt that they were not given the same level of support as first year students, even though many of the problems they face are the same.

A number of immediate points of action were suggested by attendees with regard to increasing engagement with, and improving representation by, Student Reps.

Student Reps should:

- Make students aware of upcoming meetings (for example, by making an announcement at the start of a lecture), as well as keeping them informed of the outcomes of past meetings by distributing the minutes to all students.
- Ensure students know who their Reps are and how the Student Rep system works. For example, some Schools have posters with the name and photograph of each Rep, to enable recognition.
- Hold an 'open forum', where all students are invited to hear the issues the Reps have raised and the progress they have made since the last meeting.

Recommendations

Recommendations for best practice

On the basis of our findings, we, the authors, put forward a number of recommendations regarding best practice for a Student Rep system at the University:

1. All schools should run informal weekly or fortnightly Student Rep meetings, overseen by a member of academic or administrative staff (in addition to the SSCs).
2. All students should have a clear understanding of how the Student Rep system works in their School.
3. All Rep meetings should be given a timetabled slot with no other lectures so that any student who wishes to be a Rep may attend.
4. All students should be made aware of who their representatives are and the methods by which they can be contacted.
5. Special efforts should be made to ensure that minority groups (for example, mature students and international students) are adequately represented.
6. Staff should ensure that, where appropriate, changes are implemented as a result of Rep feedback.
7. A database of Student Reps' names and contact details should be maintained by the College, to allow for easier organisation of future workshops.

Recommendations for a future event

As detailed in an earlier section, the workshop ran smoothly and was well-attended. Feedback gathered from attendees indicated that they found it a positive and useful experience. Most attendees said they would like to attend similar events in the future. Though this workshop provided a cursory overview of the nature of Student Rep systems within the

College of EPS, there are still many other issues surrounding the system to be explored. On this basis, we propose that this workshop become an annual event within the College. Furthermore, we encourage other colleges to consider running a similar scheme.

The next time this event is run, it should be scheduled earlier in the academic year. This would allow attendees to take ideas for good practice back to their school and have them implemented in the same academic year. For Schools with very few Student Reps, this workshop could be useful in helping the Reps from that School to improve the awareness of their system. Discussion topics may differ in each event. Some suggested areas to cover are:

- The effect of block timetabling on EPS students, who often have a higher number of contact hours.
- The suitability of module evaluation forms in accurately reflecting the opinions of students.

We would propose the project to have more staff responsibility: Student Reps would be responsible for contacting all other Reps, running the discussions on the day and summarising the findings, while staff would be responsible for the organisation and administration of the workshop.

A mentor's note

This event was planned and organised by an extremely motivated and effective team of second Year Reps from within the School of Physics and Astronomy. The efforts that they went to in particular in publicising the event in person to other Schools showed extraordinary commitment to the project. Staff mentoring guided the students through University systems, indicating at all stages what might be possible, and how it might be achieved.

A future EPS forum will again need this 'student run, staff facilitated model', with a motivated team of students who would probably find it logistically easier to work together if they are all from the same School.

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