

A voice for online learners: Findings from student focus groups

Contents

1	Executive summary	1
2	Background	3
3	Aim and method	3
4	Participation.....	3
5	Findings: Understanding and awareness of student reps and HISA.....	4
6	Findings: Potential barriers to involvement	5
7	Findings: Views on the class rep structure	6
8	Findings: Experience of current class reps.....	7
9	Conclusion and recommendations	9
10	Appendix 1: Focus group questions.....	10

1 Executive summary

- This report presents the results of two focus groups held with students from BAH Child and Youth Studies (BACYS), BAH Health Studies and BAH Childhood Practice during March 2019.
- The focus groups explored: understanding and awareness of the current rep system, perceived barriers to engagement with the rep system and views on potential enhancements to the current rep structure
- 10 students in total participated across two sessions that were held using Blackboard Collaborate

Key findings were:

Understanding and awareness of student reps and HISA

- All of the participants had a sound understanding of the role of the class rep
- Awareness of who their rep is, and how the rep system is structured was low
- Awareness of HISA was low
- There is a perceived overlap between PAT and rep roles. This, coupled with familiarity with PATs meant most students would approach their PAT rather than rep with any issues

Barriers to involvement

- Time commitments were mentioned by some, but not all participants as a barrier to them becoming a class rep

- Many students are unsure of what the role entails in terms of time commitment, and whether they would be able to contribute as an online student (e.g. if meetings are held face to face some distance from them)
- Participants felt that representing other learners at a distance would be difficult, or were unsure how 'representation at a distance' would work

Views on the current class rep structure

- Awareness of the current structure was mixed for both non-rep and rep students
- There was a lack of consensus concerning the ideal rep structure with several potential structures suggested

Experience of current reps

- There was a great deal of variation in the time that current reps reported spending on their role
- Class reps were always invited to relevant meetings but were not always able to attend if these were held during the day, or if they were face to face at a campus some distance away from them
- Reps felt that being kept up to date regarding changes in the student cohort (joiners and leavers) was vital in enabling them to communicate effectively
- Reps were evenly split between those who were unaware that training for their role was available, and those who had been offered or undertaken face to face or online class rep training
- Class reps were positive about the potential to network and work with other class reps

Recommendations are:

- 1) Raising awareness of the class rep role:
 - a) Role description for class reps
 - b) Resources explaining class rep and HISA roles (e.g. videos, explanatory diagram)
 - c) Resource explaining class rep structure within the programme
 - d) Clarification of role of PAT and role of class rep
- 2) Recruiting new class reps:
 - a) Introduction of class rep role at induction
 - b) Early and active recruitment of class reps
- 3) Supporting new and existing class reps:
 - a) Training offered to all reps
 - b) Identified point of communication between reps and academic staff
 - c) Class rep structures designed to encourage rep to rep collaboration and communication
 - d) Connecting reps with the wider UHI rep community

2 Background

One of the three strands of the university's work for the current [QAA Enhancement Theme](#) concerns linking student representation to enhancement. The overall aim of work within this strand is to engage student reps as creators and users of evaluation and feedback data, with subsidiary aims of reviewing the current student rep system, using student reps to raise awareness of feedback mechanisms, and improve engagement between academic staff and student reps.

Programme Leaders from the Applied Life Studies Subject Network put forward a proposal to undertake work within this strand, with a particular focus on enhancing the sense of belonging and student representation amongst online and distance learning (ODL) students. The following activities are taking place within this project:

- i. Focus groups with students to gauge current views of student representation
- ii. Reorganisation or consolidation of the student rep system based on the findings from the student focus groups
- iii. Recording of videos of academic staff, student reps and HISA explaining the aims of the student rep system and the benefits of becoming a student rep
- iv. Creation of a Learning Communities Special Interest Group to bring together staff members, share and enhance practice in this area.

This report outlines the findings from the student focus group activity detailed in (i) above.

3 Aim and method

The aim of the focus groups was to gather the views of current students concerning:

- Their understanding and awareness of the current rep system
- Any perceived barriers to engagement with the student rep system (both as student 'users' and as reps)
- Their views on potential enhancements to the rep structure

The focus groups were semi-structured with a list of questions devised covering the three areas above. These were used as a prompt for discussion, with participants also free to explore any other areas that they felt relevant.

4 Participation

Two focus groups were conducted during March 2019 involving a total of 10 female students from three programmes. The programme and location of participants is given in table 1 below:

Focus Group 1 participants	Focus Group 2 participants
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Child and Youth Studies (Moray College), Current class rep• Child and Youth Studies (Inverness College), Current class rep• Child and Youth Studies (Perth College), Current class rep• Child and Youth Studies (Inverness College) x 3• Child and Youth Studies (Argyll College)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Childhood Practice (Inverness College UHI), Current class rep• Health Studies (West Highland College UHI)• Childhood Practice (Perth College UHI)• Health Studies (Perth College UHI)

Table 1: Focus group participants

Focus groups were conducted online using Blackboard Collaborate. Facilitators interacted with participants using video and microphone whilst most participants chose to communicate via typed responses using Collaborate's instant messaging facility.

5 Findings: Understanding and awareness of class reps and HISA

5.1 Understanding of rep roles

All participants were able to give a clear articulation of the function of the class rep as a voice for the students to use to provide feedback about their programme. In addition, some students had an understanding of how student reps fit in to the broader structures of the University:

"They are to represent students on committees and also be a link to the student, staff, college and HISA."

Despite a clear understanding of the class rep role, some participants were unclear on the distinction between class reps and reps for HISA. General awareness of HISA, their purpose and function was also low:

"I've heard of them but because I'm not in a classroom I've never got into exactly what it's about"

"I would know roughly what it is but not exactly what they're doing"

"I've heard it, but don't really know anything about it, just seen the tab on the student page"

When asked who they would go to in order to resolve any issues with their course, all participants said that they would go to their PAT, rather than their class rep. Further discussion showed a perceived overlap in the role of the PAT and that of the class rep, and this, coupled with the strong relationship many have with their PAT, plus not knowing who their class rep is (see section 5.2 below) resulted in the PAT being their first port of call.

5.2 Awareness of current reps

Awareness of who their current class rep is, and how to contact them, was low amongst most non-rep participants. In exploring this issue, a number of reasons were revealed: part time students have an atypical year structure and are unsure who represents them; student reps leave and are not replaced; students are not aware of communications about or from class reps. It was also reported that class reps were not always introduced or recruited at induction:

"No, nothing was mentioned, was quite a hectic induction. We only had an hour and a half induction in the evening so a lot to get through"

“Our induction was non-existent so definitely nothing (was mentioned at induction). It is something I have brought up with college was poor induction for online students”

“My induction was a few courses all together so I don’t think they went over that”

With the exception of some good practice at Inverness:

“My course has an all-day induction on a Saturday and class reps are always sought out on the day, and one of the few courses that invites ongoing students to induction every year. It’s valuable because it is the only time you get to meet fellow students.”

“I know my PAT encouraged (people to become class reps) at induction and had a class rep come to the induction to talk about the role that was great.”

6 Findings: Potential barriers to involvement

For those students who were not currently reps, there were many reasons that they had not got involved. Worries about the time commitment were mentioned by a number of students who are already juggling paid work, study and childcare. Non-reps were unsure what kind of a time commitment was involved, and also whether they would be able to take part in e.g. course committee meetings, as these may be face to face (at an Academic Partner some distance from them, or where they are offered by VC, be during the day when many of them cannot attend (one of the focus groups was held during the evening to take student availability into account).

A significant number of participants were unsure of how the class rep role works for online students with their comments implying that representation only works if you know (or have met?) those whom you represent:

“Not really sure how it would apply to us being distant learning, not sure what would be involved”

“Because we don’t have classes, it’s kind of hard to think about how you would represent people that you don’t actually know”

“People are so spread out between modules I think it would hard.”

“I think it’s the connections, because we’re online we have limited connections with each other”

In some cases, class rep roles had not been promoted:

"I wouldn't mind being a class rep but I feel it's not something that PATs or tutors encourage us to do. I don't think anyone has ever asked either myself or others (...) if we would want to do it and I wouldn't know who to speak to, to offer to do the role."

7 Findings: Views on the class rep structure

7.1 Understanding of rep structure

Students were asked how the rep structure worked within their programme (e.g. by year, by location etc.). There was some lack of knowledge about this, even from current class reps:

"No idea about current structure"

"I'm honestly not too sure, I think I'm just Perth for BACYS but I couldn't tell you 100%. I can remember hearing that it could have been all years, but again I'm not 100% sure."

"I've just had a look through my emails to see if it says who I'm class rep for, there is an email from my PAT asking if I would mind being a class rep for other years as well and I said I didn't mind. She said I would get an email to confirm but I've looked through my emails and I've never actually received an email from anyone. So it was never confirmed who I am class rep for."

It was acknowledged that some courses have trouble recruiting students as reps, and this can explain some of the gaps within these structures.

7.2 Potential new structures

When asked how they would like the rep system to be structured students were positive about having class reps and the students they represent based at the same Academic Partner if possible:

I feel it's much better as they can relate to us a lot more as they're in the same boat.

We don't have (a local rep) for year four and I only recently realised that. I think it would be good to have one for each year in each location (...) there seem to be more in Perth than Inverness and I think it's important to have one in each year (at each location) so that more representation is available.

Aside from this, there was little consensus as to the ideal class rep structure, with a number of possibilities explored:

- i. Rep for all part-time students on the programme
- ii. One rep per year
- iii. One rep per location
- iv. A group of reps for the whole programme who represent all students, regardless of year or location
- v. Hybrids of i-iv

8 Findings: Experience of current class reps

8.1 Role responsibilities and time commitment

Class reps who took part in the focus groups ranged from those who had been in the role for a number of years to those who had only recently become a rep. There was some variation in the time that current reps reported spending on their role:

There is very little involved. I email students three times a year and take their feedback to the course committee meeting. It works OK, although there is very little feedback from students

In our training we were told an hour a month. However, I spend more time than that (...) the class rep meetings each month are an hour in themselves so anything I do on top of that such as getting feedback from my class or giving feedback from class reps builds on top of that. I also attend Course Committee Meetings and other meetings which I feel it's important to have an online student voice at (...) I would say 2-3 hours a month.."

Reps were asked about their attendance at Course Committee Meetings (CCMs) (although I think that students responded about other rep meetings to which they were invited e.g. Academic Partner rep meetings). Many reported being unable to attend these meetings as they were usually held during the day when they had work commitments. In addition, although some reps were able to access meetings by video conference, some meetings were face to face and were impractical for the rep to attend:

For online learners it might be beneficial to have class rep meetings in the evenings as again, the majority of online learners work or have daytime commitments.

I'm not really able to attend as I live an hour away from campus so it really takes up a whole night if I'm able to come to them, which isn't very often as I work 2 jobs and have my studies.

My PAT contacts me about CCMs and I attend these by VC in my local campus.

When asked about how they communicate with students, a number of methods were mentioned: direct emails, emails forwarded by PATs on to students, Facebook groups etc. Reps felt that they would be able to communicate to their student cohort more effectively if they were kept up to date regarding changes i.e. joiners and leavers.

8.2 Preparation for the class rep role

The class reps were evenly split between those who were unaware that training for their role was available, and those who had been offered or undertaken the face to face or online class rep training:

"I'm a student rep but I've literally not had any sort of guidance on what I'm meant to be doing at all. I've been invited to the meetings (...) but that's it, I've not been told to contact anyone, ask questions, how to deal with issues that anyone has or anything like that

Not invited to any training at all.

I have done both face-to-face and online training.

I did the online training but only this year, I hadn't had any before that.

8.3 Community

Only one current rep was aware of or connected to the wider university rep structure:

There are a lot of class reps in UHI and I attended a meeting but I don't feel overly connected.

I regularly receive the emails from HISA for the monthly meetings. I don't feel completely part of the class rep community but I don't feel left out either. I have managed to attend one class rep meeting and found it beneficial in hearing what other reps are reporting. Otherwise the minutes are sent out.

However, those who had not yet engaged were positive about the potential to network and work with other class reps:

Support from other class reps would be valued

I think groups would be good so you could work together, at each location so you could talk to someone locally.

I'm hoping that after today I can get more into the role and be a part of it more.

I feel isolated as a class rep because I don't interact with other class reps.

9 Conclusions and recommendations

Amongst non-reps, awareness of current reps, rep structures and HISA was generally low which has led to little or no engagement with the rep system (PATs instead were the main point of contact). Although there were some students for whom the additional time commitment meant they would not consider becoming a rep, for others a lack of understanding of what the role entailed and how representation at a distance would happen was a barrier to them becoming involved.

Some current reps had not received adequate preparation for their role, were not always able to attend relevant meetings and were often not connected to the wider rep structures within the university.

The following recommendations focus on: raising the profile of class reps to raise awareness amongst students and boost class rep numbers; and enhancing support for new and existing class reps:

- Raising awareness of the class rep role:
 - Role description for class reps
 - Resources explaining class rep and HISA roles (e.g. videos, explanatory diagram)
 - Resource explaining class rep structure within the programme
 - Clarification of role of PAT and role of class rep
- Recruiting new class reps:
 - Introduction of class rep role at induction
 - Early and active recruitment of class reps
- Supporting new and existing class reps:
 - Training offered to all reps
 - Identified point of communication between reps and academic staff
 - Class rep structures designed to encourage rep to rep collaboration and communication
 - Connecting reps with the wider UHI rep community

10 Appendix 1: Focus group questions

Icebreaker

What attracted them to take part in the focus group i.e. is student representation something they wanted to learn more about, something they feel is an important issue that needs to work better for them etc., or was it just the incentive that sparked their interest?

Current perceptions of student representation

- What is your understanding of what student representation is / what kind of things do you think are the responsibility of the class rep?
- Do you know about HISA and what it is that they do?
- Are you aware of who your class rep is?
- Do you know how to contact them when you have feedback that you'd like them to raise with teaching staff?

Student rep structure

- Do you think that the current method of student representation using class reps works for you as online students?
- Do you have any suggestions of alternative ways to represent online student cohorts?

Potential barriers to involvement

- Do you see student representation as something that you are able to get involved in?
- If not, why not? / What are the biggest barriers that you feel hinder your involvement?
- As an online student do you feel that you get the same opportunities to get involved in activities **if you wish to take part**?
- If not, and you would like to be involved more, what would help to support this?
- What aspect of being a class rep is most likely to make you consider volunteering for the role?
- What aspects of being a class rep is most likely to put you off taking up the role?

Current class reps

- If you are a class rep, do you get invited to attend class rep training and meetings?
- If you are a class rep, do you know about the online class rep training that's available to support students who can't attend face-to-face training?
- If you are a class rep, how have you found the experience as an online student?
 - Do you feel part of a class rep community?
 - Is there anything that could be done to improve your experience?