**Enhancing student representation: the LJMU way**

*Abstract*

*Student representatives have been part of university decision-making processes for as long as there have been universities. However, with growing emphasis on the importance of student engagement in all aspects of university life, the significance of representation is greater than ever. This paper reflects on how representation is located in broader debate around student engagement in higher education. It identifies many of the challenges facing representation systems and offers some possible solutions. There is a specific focus on how student representatives operate in LJMU. In line with this, the paper reports some of the most recent initiatives to incentivise representation activity. Allied to this, the paper considers efforts to more explicitly recognise the important impact that student representatives have on university life.*

The concept of student engagement is referenced throughout higher education policy and in an increasing body of research. It is associated with learning, governance and identity (Trowler, 2010). A significant focus is on the active participation of students in learning and assessment. However, engagement describes the extent to which students participate in the decision-making structures of their institution, as well as how they associate themselves with their university. Consequently, student engagement is a concept that is as wide-ranging as it is widespread. Whichever way you look at it, engaged students are not passive recipients of instruction or indifferent beneficiaries of policy. Instead, they are fundamentally involved in the construction of knowledge and the process of decision-making. In other words, the engaged student is an active citizen in her or his university community.

Much ink has been spilled in recent years as academics have struggled to grapple with the implications that engagement has for the notion of studenthood. Recent literature, research and policy is filled with references to the student as 'producer', 'author', 'participant', 'researcher' or 'change agent', These have added to the more familiar labels of 'novice' and 'apprentice', as well as less optimistic, contemporary descriptions such as 'consumer' or even 'child' (Tight, 2013). The search for nomothetic descriptors of studenthood overlooks a key fact. Students are students, with all the fluidity and uncertainty that this has always brought. The idea that they are architects of their own learning is not new. Furthermore, they have long had role in how their institutions make decisions. Indeed, students in the world's first universities had levels of power that would be unparalleled today, including the authority to hire and fire their tutors. Fast forward nearly 1000 years and, although that authority has lessened, it is not extinguished. UK universities have a statutory obligation to support the establishment of some form of student union as an advocacy body for their students. In addition, regulations demand that universities involve student in curriculum design. There are similar expectations for student participation in university governance throughout Europe, Australasia and North America, albeit that these are often manifest as aspirational guidance rather than mandated policy. However, there are examples of robust, legal expectations of the role of the student body in governance. In the Czech Republic, for example, there is a requirement that elected student representatives make up a third to half of each university's academic senate (Pabian, Hündlová & Provázková, 2011).

Whatever policy regime, a key aspect of efforts to engage students is through some form of representation. Indeed, the notion of students acting as 'course representatives' to speak for their

peers has long been common feature in how universities capture the student voice. Arguably, when the current fascination with surveys, league tables and consumer right diminishes, the system of student representation will remain. Engaging with a large and diverse student body is unfeasible without it. Yet, there is some confusion over the role and function of a student representation system (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). A key feature of this is significant role variation for representatives. Officially, the course representative is the 'voice' for their fellow students. They articulate this in a range of forums, most notably at programme level. Their function is to support the programme team to understand the student experience and make decisions accordingly. However, research has suggested that the student representative has a variety of other functions (Carey, 2013). They are frequently a messenger. Typically, this is associated with closing the feedback loop, where representatives return to their cohorts and explain the response to feedback. In addition, course representatives often communicate a wider range of programme related information, such as coursework deadlines. With the advent of social media, many representatives have the further task of moderating local Facebook pages. Moreover, representatives may find themselves advocating for their fellow students. It is not unheard-of for representatives to raise issues on behalf of individual students, as opposed to the more orthodox collective focus of their work. Furthermore, course representatives may act as mentors to fellow students, providing advice, guidance and support. Indeed, representatives often volunteer to be peer mentors in areas that have such schemes. Finally, representatives are regularly offer (or are asked) to undertake additional tasks, participate in research and apply for internships. As a result, course representatives are sometimes unfairly badged as 'the usual suspects', with the implication that their efforts, although welcome, are somehow insufficient.

There are understandable reservations over what areas of university life representatives should focus their efforts on. Ashwin and McVitty (2015) argue that student engagement is only meaningful if it centres on knowledge, whether this is concerned with comprehension, curriculum or knowledge creation. LJMU processes appear to conform to this view. The *Board of Study* is where student representation is formalised in this university. These meetings address programme matters, with aspects of the student experience that are seen as external to programme structure or operation being, at best, noted. However, it is inevitable that cohorts will ask their representatives to feedback non-programme issues. This blurs the lines between the student representative as the voice of their peers' academic aspirations and conduit for other matters. Hence, student representatives will often find themselves gathering information on matters such as the quality of the estate, the price of catering or parking facilities, with no formal reporting mechanism. Putting aside arguments regarding whether this is a legitimate part of a student engagement function, the lack of an official channel for representatives to raise non-academic concerns is a shortcoming. As a result, they may feel redundant or ignored. Worse, their peers may see them as ineffective (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009).

An extra source of confusion relates to the process of becoming a representative. Across the sector, representatives are either elected or selected (Little et al, 2009). In addition, there is significant variation in the ratio of representatives to students. Indeed, most student unions appear to advocate a permissive system, whereby many individuals can become course representatives to maximise impact. This ambiguity creates misunderstanding and confusion. Consequently, it can be difficult for observers to establish whether an individual representative is doing her or his job. There is no doubt that some student representatives do not discharge their duties appropriately. A handful make little or no effort to gather feedback from students or attend relevant meetings. Most representation systems have a process for deselection, but there is little evidence that this is often

used. In fact, an inactive representative is more likely to step down voluntarily than be asked to resign.

A further criticism relates to questions over who student representatives are actually representing. In other words, there is sometimes suspicion that course representatives may only speak for themselves or a clique of similar students. Arguably, this is an outcome of a scheme that has few explicit checks and balances. In the absence of these, the system only works when it is a partnership characterised by trust. Representation is at its best when students are highly motivated and skilled in gathering and disseminating feedback from their cohorts. However, it also needs academic and professional service staff to be receptive. To put it simply, there is no point have a mechanism to express the student voice if no one is listening. Representatives also need institutional support to do their job. This is not an excessive demand. In a 2014 review of student engagement in LJMU, student representatives reported that one of the biggest barriers to their role was a lack of visibility. Their peers did not always know who they were and the solutions to this were modest: in-class introductions, photographs and distinctive lanyards for student cards were seen as quick wins. There were also concerns over a lack of space for representatives to talk to their peers. Tutors would often provide opportunities for representatives to gather feedback from the cohort, but tended to overlook the need for similar chances for them to feedback responses and actions.

The LJMU course representative system is "owned" by the student union. This is the case in with most universities, (Guan et al, 2016). It demands a supportive working relationship between the student union and the University to enhance representation. It is in this area where LJMU and the Liverpool Student Union have made significant steps in recent years. This is associated with the development of a system of reward and recognition for student representatives. Course representatives are generally highly valued by university and student union staff. Yet, with the exception of the odd prize, this is rarely tangible. Hence, there is an incentive to acknowledge formally the efforts and impact of individual representatives. The premise is simple. Can we reasonably expect students to take on the role of a representative if there is no formal recognition? Furthermore, what message does it send to the student community if the institution is not explicit in its gratitude to those individuals who ‘go the extra mile’ to support its endeavours? Official recognition also offers considerable scope for better quality assurance. Last year, in partnership with Liverpool Student Union, the university recorded representation for the first time on the student Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR). This was based on a recognition scheme that required explicit evidence of activity and impact at different levels. The LJMU scheme reflects a growing number of similar initiatives across the sector as institutions accept the need for more robust and explicit recognition.

Reward for student representatives is another area of growing interest. Some rewards are intrinsic. Research has suggested that student representation offers considerable opportunity for personal and professional development (Carey, 2013). It exposures students to high-level decision-making in a large and complex institution. This helps them to hone skills associated with communication, problem-solving, negotiation, leadership and time management. These are highly desirable to employers. In acknowledgement of this, the World of Work Careers Centre offer bespoke materials to help representatives maximise the employability advantage associated with their role. However, no matter how compelling the personal benefits are, there is a risk in relying on these alone. Many students have to work to earn money to study. Adopting a significant representative role will limit their opportunities for paid work. Arguably, this may discourage some students from becoming representatives, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Hence, an increasing number of institutions and student unions operate formal systems of payment for representatives

(NUSConnect, 2017). This is highly contentious. Indeed, the National Union of Students caution against emphasising payment for engagement activity. They argue that students are academic citizens and will participate out of a sense of social responsibility. Payment may reinforce potentially disruptive consumer-focused models and undermine academic collegiality (NUS, 2015). There may be a happy medium. Liverpool Student Union, with the support of the University, have introduced a payment scheme for selected student representative roles. This has seen the creation of a new category of representatives with a whole school or faculty-wide remit. Appointment to these positions is through a competitive process of application and interview. These representatives engage at a level above the programme team. This has facilitated stronger student representation in School and Faculty decision-making structures.

As a result of these two initiatives, LJMU is one of a relatively small number of universities that have a clear system of both reward and recognition for student representation. However, we should not rest on our laurels. The institution can exploit more opportunities. One area that is gaining traction across the sector is the accreditation of representation. In many instances, this is aligned with non-academic credit through the employability, citizenship or engagement certificates. However, there are some examples where academic credit is awarded, subject to appropriate quality assurance (NUSConnect, 2017). Either model offers an incentive for enhanced representation and would signal even greater support from the university. Of course, as is characteristic of the whole debate around representation, such schemes present their own challenges. However, they may be worth exploring as an additional incentive for representation and symbol of this university's support for student engagement.

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