

LTC14D096

Title: *Code of Practice on Student Representation*
Author: Louise Bohn, Senior Faculty Manager, SSF
Date: 16 January 2015
Circulation: LTC – 28 January 2015
Agenda: LTC14A003
Version: Draft
Status: Open

Issue

An update on the review of the Code of Practice on Student Representation.

Recommendation

Recipients are invited:

- To receive an update on progress of the review
- To note the results from the student focus groups
- To advise on the draft recommendations outlined

Resource Implications

None at this stage although the final report and recommendations will have a resource implication.

Risk Implications

None at this stage. The quality of student representation at UEA and how well we meet this standard will be scrutinised by the QAA when the University is assessed in 2015. The outputs from the final report will minimise the risk of the University not meeting the expectation and indicators of sound practice in relation to student engagement.

Equality and Diversity

The review will take full consideration of the impact of any proposals on groups with protected characteristics. The Equality and Diversity Manager will be considering the impact of the recommendations to be presented in the final report.

Timing of decisions

A final report with recommendations will be brought to LTC for a decision in March 2015.

Further Information

Dr Louise Bohn, Senior Faculty Manager, SSF. Email: l.bohn@uea.ac.uk, tel: 01603 593444.

Background

The Code of Practice on Student Representation Working Group is currently developing recommendations to improve student representation at UEA. The remit of the review covers any formal or informal quality enhancement or quality assurance process, collectively defined by the QAA as quality systems. It reflects the QAA expectation that: "Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their education experience." The 'indicators of sound practice' set out in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education inform the scope of the Review.

Discussion

Since the last interim report undergraduate focus groups were undertaken in December and are included below. Postgraduate focus groups are planned for early February.

Undergraduate focus group approach

The aim of the undergraduate focus groups was to explore levels of awareness, requirements and involvement in student engagement at UEA focussing on those not currently involved in the SSLC. They were held in October and November 2014 with a representation of domicile, gender and age. The groups consisted of 90-120 minutes of discussion around current and ideal student engagement. Participants were selected for a mix of levels of awareness of SSLCs and wider student engagement at UEA.

Undergraduate focus group results

Across all groups it was clear that participants felt that students should be listened to and consulted about all major course and university issues. For many this was closely equated to the cost of their course, but also generally revolved around the concept of steering their own learning.

"If any other service provider knew that their customers were not happy they would change what they were doing." (SCI); "We are paying customers." (SSF); "We pay enough to be here." (SSF); "We are the ones doing the learning so we should be able to do it in the right way for us."(FMH)

Current engagement is very low with groups indicating that there are considerable improvements that UEA could make to Student Engagement. Across all groups a clear distinction was made with "course" feedback appearing to be the most frequently engaged in and opportunities for "university" feedback feeling lacking. Spontaneous discussion covered current ways in which students can feed in to their course/modules. The most common mentions were of module evaluation surveys and speaking directly to Personal Advisors and/or Module Organisers. However, these were described with extremely different levels of effectiveness across participants. There were occasional mentions of course reps but these were rare and inconsistent. There were however some positive mentions of specific initiatives such as "clickers" and "rate my lecturer."

A more prompted discussion of input into wider university issues centred around the lack of opportunity currently to engage. There were frequent mentions of issues such as redesign of Union House, 'Burger-gate' and Super Schools which participants perceived as happening without student consultation. In all groups an exercise to design the ideal student voice mechanism focussed primarily on university feedback.

In terms of Course Reps and SSLC, there was confusion and variation of awareness. Spontaneous mentions of Course Reps and SSLCs were extremely rare and still reasonably infrequent on prompting. There was a distinct variation by School in awareness levels but for many this was simply not something they had heard of at all. However, across some discussions the concept of feeding into this sort of process was viewed relatively positively.

"What does a student rep do?"; "I have never heard of them"

NO/LOW AWARENESS	SOME/MIXED	HIGH AWARENESS
CHE –1 Participant BIO -1 Participant PPL(LCS)-1Participant AMA-1 Participant PSY –1 Participant DEV –2 Participants NBS –1 Participant	ENV –2 Participants PPL(PSI) -2 Participants ECO –1 Participants	PHA –2 Participant EDU -1 Participant ECO –1 Participant MED –2 Participants HSC –3 Participants

Considerable concern and mistrust was expressed in relation to the role of the Union. Across all four groups the respondents expressed some negative perceptions of the Union as a route for the student voice. Positively, across majority of discussions the Union was positioned as a key method for the student voice to be heard. However, general feeling that this was not currently operating in the way that students want at all. For some this was about a lack of visibility and/or access, for others there was outright suspicion that personal agendas were being pursued without consultation.

*“We hear from them at election time and then never again.” (FMH);
“Union reps don’t make it easy... People generally feel that the SU do not listen to them.” (HUM); “I think people get elected and then do what they want.” (FMH); “Very hard to get involved with Union Council unless you are a Union Rep.” (SSF);*

In order to boost participation all groups identified the requirement for a direct online route to feed in to all areas of the University. Participants in all four groups raised the issue of not knowing where to go with different problems. Across all four groups spontaneous discussions regarding issues with giving feedback via representatives were raised including experience for feeding back to advisors and then this not going anywhere (especially about issues not directly associated with course). Concerns were raised regarding course reps –“What if they are your worst enemy.” Feeding back to academics was also raised as a concern if the problem was regarding them or a colleague.

When asked to design an “ideal” feedback system all groups focussed on the concept of an online process by which each individual could feed directly back in a way that would reach the relevant part of the University.

In terms of the SSLC’s increasing effectiveness, there was a lack of consensus as to how reps and chairs should be selected. For choosing representatives there was a general consensus that should be voluntary. For some participants this was enough of a selection process although possibly based on the fact that they did not feel there would be many volunteers. Some felt strongly that there should be an election process, although commonly in Schools where this was currently the case. There were several discussions around the concerns that they would become a “popularity contest” with one group proposing anonymous elections. There were several discussions that this should be centred on ability to do the job not issues whereas others felt that it should be more of selection process to ensure rep “could do the job”. Academic staff were seen as the right people to “select”. The SSF group also discussed the profile of reps mentioning that there should be Mature and International reps.

When choosing chairs there was significant variance across schools. For SCI some participants were keen on student chairs as they were felt to be more unbiased than staff but others went as far as academic from different School in order to be truly independent. In contrast SSF students felt it should be an academic from within School as a student would be patronising. HUM and FMH participants had no strong feelings either way.

When considering the balance for SSLC’s structure and processes there was a general consensus that a consistent process would be the ultimate aim, but that practical considerations had to come into play. Across all main groups there was an initial general feeling that all Schools should have consistent processes with some respondents expressing surprise that this was not the case. However, in more detailed discussion, all groups came up with reasons why this would not always work. These included practical constraints e.g. not enough volunteers to run elections or selection process and the need for representation e.g. different size or profiles of different Schools. The outcome of discussions tended to be agreement that there should be an “ideal” but with processes for students deciding if their School should differ.

A major issues raised in all groups regarding lack of action being taken on the basis of feedback. For many this was driven by actual examples of perceived inaction, for others, more a generally feeling of mistrust that action will be taken. All groups also mentioned the issue of structural issues with the way feedback is gathered and acted upon.

“The lecturer is still teaching that module despite us all feeding back that he shouldn’t be.” (SCI); “Why would I wait six months to raise an issue at an SSLC meeting? My problem is now.” (SCI); “Module evaluation won’t have any impact on you.” (HUM); “The lecturer stated that the people at the top don’t care what we think...I felt like a small fish in a big pond.” (HUM); “We’ll do it next year is redundant really.” (SSF); “Nothing really is going to change.” (SSF); “They did change it but for the next year.” (FMH)

In addition, to seeing changes was the issue of simply being kept in the loop. There is a general perception that outcomes of Union activities are not made available. SSLC minutes and outcomes are only perceived to be received in a few Schools, with one student mentioning of having to fight to see them. Module feedback outcomes are also only received in some Schools. When asked to design an “ideal” system all groups build in the concept of hearing back as an essential element. There was generally understanding that sometimes this may be an explanation as to why something could not happen etc. All groups raised the likely ripple effect of feedback, with all mentioning that students would be more likely to engage if they knew that there would be outcomes.

“They email and email begging for participants but then we hear nothing more.” (SCI regarding SSLC); “What is in it for me?” (SCI regarding SSLC); “We only hear from the Union at election time.” (FMH)

Discussion occurred across both the detailed groups and those with first year around appropriate communication channels to aid in encouraging student participation. The importance of face to face communication and approachable reps was highlighted. Where awareness of SSLC’s was greatest this tended to be when reps communicated face to face, gathering feedback and/or reporting outcomes at the end of lectures/ seminars. There were many mentions of the need to “see” Union Officers more e.g. canvassing student opinion in Square/ Cafes, coming to accommodation to introduce themselves etc. There were several mentions of academic staff being more available and visible for feedback such as an hourly drop in in the Hive.

“it is intimating having to knock on a door.”

In terms of online communication, where engagement was strongest this tended to include an active School/ Course Facebook page with notifications. Social media was frequently mentioned when the groups were asked the best ways to reach the student body. The Portal and e-vision were often mentioned as a way of grabbing attention of those who may not open emails. There was considerable discussion on email but the general consensus was that whilst not all would read it, this is a way to reach the many.

Report recommendations

To give an indication of the direction of travel of this review, the structure of the report recommendations are outlined below, and some draft recommendations are appended to this report.

- Setting the culture – relates to QAA indicators 1 & 2. To include a set of principles to underpin the UEA approach to student representation and engagement in quality.
- Representational structures - relates to QAA indicator 3. To include decision making bodies, SSLC and individuals feedback mechanisms.
- Effective engagement - relates to QAA indicators 4 & 5. To include effectiveness and clarity of responsibilities, roles and training.

- Evaluating and monitoring engagement - relates to QAA indicators 6 & 7. To include giving feedback and monitoring representation and engagement.

Appended to this report are draft recommendations relating to a set of principles for student representation and engagement as well as some initial recommendations relating to SSLC's.

Communication

In order to ensure the adoption of any recommendations made by the review, they will be shared with Faculty LTQ Committees and other relevant stakeholder for comment before the final report is brought to LTC for decision. The schedule for the rest of the review is as follows:

January	Equality and Diversity (Helen Murdoch)
28 January	Learning and Teaching Committee – interim report
February	Focus groups with PG students
4 February 2015	Faculty of Science LTQC
Mid February	Working Group Meeting 6 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PG focus group results • LTC feedback • FLTQC feedback • Final report and recommendations
18 February 2015	Faculty of Arts and Humanities LTQC
25 February 2015	Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences LTQC
25 February 2015	Faculty of Social Sciences LTQC
WB 2 March 2015	Discussion/finalisation of report
18 March 2015	Learning and Teaching Committee – Final report and recommendations

Attachments

- Draft principles of representation and student engagement in quality
- Draft SSLC framework recommendations

Draft principles of representation and student engagement in quality

Community awareness

We believe all students should be aware of their representatives, and of the channels of communication they have with the University, as well as the value of taking part in these structures.

Student-centred

We believe all students should have real power over their degrees and be trusted as valued decision-makers and meaningful partners.

Transparent and accessible

We believe that decisions and processes should be clearly explained, meetings should open and that Reps should be held accountable to their peers.

Consistent and fair

We believe every student has access to the same "level" of representation, whatever the delivery method and that student should be able to choose who acts as their representative.

Evidenced and accountable

We believe partnership work should be recorded and documented so that progress can be monitored and enhanced by all parties.

Appropriately resourced

We believe that staff and students should be given adequate time, resources and power to engage meaningfully in partnership work

Responsive, adaptable and developing

We believe the way in which student representation and engagement functions should be adaptable. We should regularly look at, adapt and adopt good practice in the sector to ensure we are developing.

Representative of the student body

We believe there should equality of access and efforts should be made to ensure engagement comes for all members of the student body.

Draft SSLC framework recommendations

Communications and Awareness

Any system of effective representation involves many people adopting different roles, and so communication is a key part of keeping everyone engaged and active. We believe that the following practices will help everyone to stay in the loop.

1) Web presence

Schools should provide reps with access to a blackboard site and encourage them to form one of more social media sites for their fellow students.

2) Emailing

Student Reps should be encouraged to email their students and the route to doing this should be clear.

3) Blackboard

The agendas and minutes of all SSLCs should be available to all students via Blackboard and these should be updated in a timely fashion

4) Induction

Student Reps should have a clear and visible presence throughout the year and particularly through induction. Reps should be given a slot in induction and re-induction lectures to make themselves known and to make students aware of their role. The Students' Union will provide information about how to stand as a rep, and how to use the rep scheme, and work with schools to distribute these to all students.

5) Publicity throughout the year

It is important that students are aware of and reminded of their reps throughout the year. Schools should employ initiatives to raise the profile of student reps through school notice boards for reps, and allowing reps time at the start of lectures to convey developments throughout the term.

Culture

For students to act as effective representatives they must feel confident in approaching staff, even with difficult issues. It is staff and the Student's Unions responsibility to welcome and support student reps and encourage them in their roles. The following practices will help to develop confident and effective reps.

1) Contact with staff

Students should know their staff contact for SSLCs and feel comfortable in approaching them. Staff should facilitate this by organising pre-meetings with student reps at the beginning of each semester, so that students are comfortable and can be briefed on how the school representative system works, as well as giving the reps a chance to meet each other.

2) Contact with Student Reps

Student reps should be encouraged to meet informally both within and beyond their schools. The Students' Union will hold formal and informal events for all reps throughout the Academic Year. Schools should facilitate reps in having pre-meetings before SSLCs so that they can collate their issues and organise them into suitable sections and assist the Chair in writing the agenda

3) Staff training

Supporting an SSLC is a big responsibility and staff should be supported as such. The Students' Union will provide meet-ups for SSLC staff members each semester to share new ideas, sector developments and good practice. The University will continue to run student representation workshops in CSED, and the Union will help to develop these into practical training for staff.

4) Accessibility

All Universities have a complex language and this can be difficult for students to navigate. Additionally, new proposals and policies need context and explanation so that students can have an informed and valuable input into decision making. Staff should make efforts not to use jargon and to explain issues that are arising.

5) International students

Universities present a unique set of challenges to international students who are adapting to a new culture as well as a new university. Efforts should be made to recruit international students and to link them with the Students' Union International Student Rep to ensure they are tackling issues at an institutional as well as local level.

Structure

1) Selection and election of reps

The Students' Union will provide the opportunity for schools to run online elections. All students should have the chance to act as a Student Rep whether the school has elections or not.

2) Chair reps

All schools should elect a Chair and Deputy Chair Rep in the first SSLC of the year. They will be trained and supported by the Students' Union to chair or co-chair the SSLC. These roles will be supported by the two Faculty Convenors as well as Students' Union staff, and the academic lead in the school.

3) Membership of Student Staff Liaison Committees

SSLCs should involve reps across year groups and courses. Key staff members should attend - for example, the Head of School, the Director of Teaching and Learning, the Senior Advisor, and Course Directors. If these staff cannot attend, it should be clear how they access and interact with information from these committees.

4) Frequency, timing and adhoc SSLCs

We recommend that SSLCs are held twice a semester as this allows for students to see issues through, and allows time for the school to work on issues. The chair can call an ad hoc meeting if a specific and large issue arises, and these meetings can be held virtually if needs be.