

# **Baking in an ethos of partnership – an institution and student union’s approach to enhancing student representation and feedback mechanisms**

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‘Whatever the approach your institution takes [to student representation], it is important to reflect on the effectiveness of these structures.’ (Bols, 2020, p.79)

This case study reports on an institutional approach to enhancing and addressing feedback loops at The University of Winchester and Winchester Student Union, specifically in reference to our largest student representation mechanism. This mechanism, our Student Academic Representatives scheme (StARS), is administrated by Winchester Student Union but employs a partnership model with the university. Drawing on Bols’s (2017) framework for effective student representation, we hope this paper, outlining our rejuvenated approach to the scheme, can support the development of others seeking to improve their own approaches by considering an ethos of institutional partnership and co-creation, namely in the context of a university and Students’ Union working collaboratively to fulfil such aims.

More specifically, we explain the institutional drivers to prioritising this work; an updated suite of StARs training; a fresh approach to building staff engagement as an integral part of student representation processes; and our attempt to rebalance power dynamics within formal student-staff committee structures. We conclude by synthesising our respective learning gains from our partnership approach, advancing the ways in which partnership can be meaningfully adopted within student representation work.

### **Contextualising student representation in Higher Education (HE)**

Students being offered, and taking up, more active roles within university governance is well evidenced across global HE systems. This was largely spearheaded during the wave of democratisation of the university space in the 1960s and early 1970s (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). Now, within Europe, HE providers have legal provisions to include some form of student representation in university governance (from national to institutional levels), making this a virtually universal practice (Klemenčič, 2011). This shows how policy and policy development can shape how student representation is embedded in practice. For example, within the UK, government white papers, combined with increased transparency over use of public funding, have placed debates about student representation firmly on the political landscape for decades.

The marketisation of UK HE (i.e., increased tuition fees, and rhetoric of students-as-consumers, see Lowe and El-Hakim, 2020) has had two significant impacts for universities to consider in relation to their approach to student representation:

1. The proliferation, significance and instrumentalization of student voice/representation/satisfaction tools have led to the development of league tables, thereby increasing competition and accountability of all UK HE institutions. For example, National Student Survey (NSS) results being used within universities' Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) rating (Office for Students, 2020).
2. An HE regulator (i.e., the Office for Students), as well as other sector bodies (e.g., Advance HE, the Quality Assurance Agency, Sparqs), influencing and advocating for the establishment of appropriate student representation forums for all students to meaningfully engage with across their university experience.

### **Issues related to student representation**

As is the case with any decades-long practice that spans across global HE systems, there is natural variation in how institutions approach implementing student representation (Little et al, 2009). In setting the context for this paper, we make clear our use of the term 'student

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representation'. We take student representation, in this context, to relate to the wider role and subsequent activities elected students use to represent the views of their cohort within the academic sphere of the university – better known in literature as academic course representatives (though we acknowledge this type of activity can/does occur outside of this remit, see Klemenčič, 2012).

Whilst the benefits of engaging students as course representatives have been demonstrated (Carey, 2016), some authors note contentions associated with such roles. Of note, Alex Bols's (2022) comprehensive work on student representation identified that:

- Academic course representative roles tend to be restricted to a small number of students.
- With an ever-increasingly diverse student body, individual student representatives (and student representative processes) must adapt to and authentically represent a wide range of views.
- Considering staff within student representation practices is limited.

Other issues relate to complex power dynamics imbued within these roles (Freeman, 2013), and the tendency to position students involved in these processes in deficit, despite asking them to step into an unknown and foreign community of practice (Carey, 2016). Matthews and Dollinger (2022) have also critiqued student representation literature which conflates the practice with student partnership. Their paper regards conflating student representation with student-staff partnership to be simplistic, given that there is a qualitative difference relating to responsibility and access espoused in both practices. Nevertheless, they pertinently draw attention to an important point for future practice and research, namely that:

'opportunities to understand how student representation in formalised governance and decision-making structures can unfold through the values of partnership are manifold...In doing so, well-articulated conceptualisations of partnership and representation combined with critical attention to student voice would benefit such research processes' (2022, p 11).

We intend to humbly contribute to this emergent area, in addition to some of the previously outlined issues related to student representation processes (see also Naylor et al, 2017).

### **Institutional context – The University of Winchester and Winchester Student Union**

The University of Winchester and Winchester Student Union are proud to have a strong record of cross-collaborative working where overlapping strategic priorities have related to enhancing the student experience, and the implementation of student-staff partnership schemes (see Islam et al, 2019; Sims et al, 2014; Lowe et al, 2017). Within this, our largest student representation and feedback mechanism is our Student Academic Representatives (StARs) scheme. The scheme is administrated by Winchester Student Union but works in partnership with the university to train StARs and implement a culture of representation/mirror a culture of partnership working.

StARs are elected students within programmes who represent the voice of their cohort. They bring feedback to Student-Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC) meetings which are chaired by one of these students. As noted by Lowe et al (2017, p 3):

‘The officiality of student representation needs to continue to be built so StARs are a formal part of more processes at Winchester. This is particularly pertinent in the context of the emphasis UK higher education place[s] on the National Student Survey’.

We have sought to build on our StARs scheme by moving away from a previous model (Programme Committee Meetings) in 2018 which prioritised staff presence and had the potential to deviate meetings away from a core focus on student experience. Our institutional move towards SSLCs now ensure shorter, more focused, and student-centred meetings, particularly with the implementation of a student Chair. Further, power-imbances are mediated, in that staff representation is limited to a Programme Leader (PL) and Administrator. Whilst an intention to rebalance and re-prioritise student experience was at the forefront of this change, the below issues arose:

1. Anecdotal evidence from academic staff suggested that SSLCs promoted a culture of complaint from students, as opposed to partnership working. This led staff members to feel less ownership/equal footing within student representation processes.
2. The move did not adequately address other issues related to student representation e.g., how representative StARs were of the entire diversity of cohorts.

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3. Below benchmark 2021 NSS results for certain questions related to feedback, particularly Q24 (staff value students' views and opinions).

### Re-establishing effective student representation

Our approach to addressing these concerns led us to revisit Bols's (2017) diagram (Figure 1) which considers how student representation can optimally function. It implies that when student representatives are effectively trained, when staff are appropriately and meaningfully engaged in these processes, and when committee structures are calibrated to support student representation, we then develop effective systems of student representation. Below, we describe our approach to meeting this "holy trinity" of student representation, specifically through "baking in" an ethos of partnership within institutional processes.

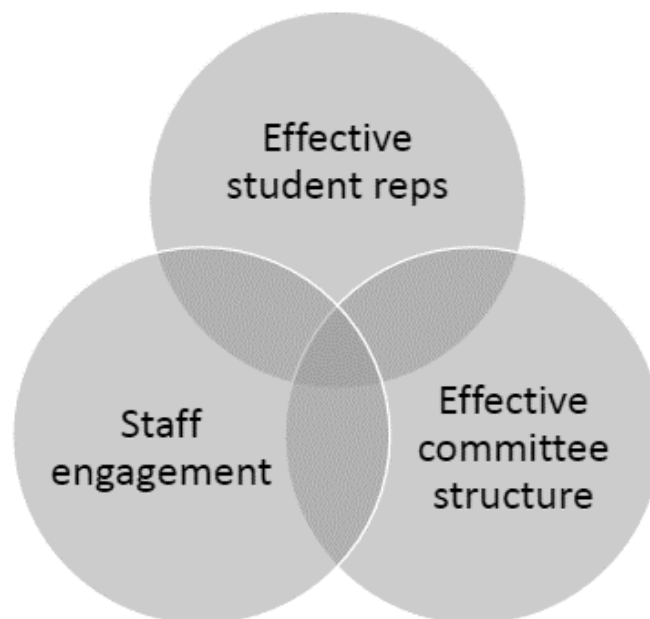


Figure 1 – Enhancing student representation, taken from Bols (2017)

### Effective student representatives

In the 2022/23 academic year, we recruited approximately 700 StARs across the university. Since moving towards SSLCs, we have seen a year-on-year increase in the number of StARs (9.5% avg. p/a) and StAR Chairs (18.8% avg. p/a), as well as overall engagement with the

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scheme. As such, 8% of the University's student population now function as course representatives. With growing numbers of representatives attending SSLCs, coupled with StARs's higher profile on campus through the Student Union's communications, outreach, merchandise and reward system, we have seen increased student awareness and engagement with StARs. This has led to greater representation of the student experience overall at SSLC meetings.

This year, we have sought to further develop our student voice process by placing an increased emphasis on effective student representation as something which arises from collaborative partnership between students and staff. The Vice President (Education and Welfare) and Winchester Student Union support staff annually lead a series of comprehensive training sessions to ensure that StARs understand the context of their roles, how they feed into the institution and various committees, the importance of their roles as representatives, and our expectations regarding professionalism and conduct.

The current iteration of the training has intentionally engendered a (linguistic and tonal) shift away from 'representatives-as-antagonists', placed in meetings to wring student-desired programme changes from staff characterised as being reluctant and/or opposed to student feedback. To encourage a reality of parity between staff and student partners, training and associated materials were updated to include a diagram of shared expectations and responsibilities for student representatives and PLs. This new approach, implemented within the 2022/23 academic year, saw newly elected StARs (n=261; 37% of all StARs) undergo mandatory training via in-person, online or self-directed provision. Continuing StARs were also offered the opportunity to attend updated training, which they can voluntarily undertake as a refresher course.

Figure 2 depicts the visual diagram used to demonstrate that each participant in SSLCs (StAR, Chair, and PL) are subject to universal and equal expectations. Importantly, the diagram makes clear that all participants' engagements followed similar behaviours and intentions, differentially embodied through their specific role. Expectations were not limited to administrative duties and courtesy expectations, but also included language to remind participants of potential barriers to the effective provision and reception of feedback (e.g., giving overly personal, unrepresentative feedback, and/or receiving feedback as a personal attack). Appropriately, the juxtaposition allowed students and staff to track their own

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requirements across to the corresponding requirements of others, visually reinforcing parity of their contributions to SSLCs.

<b>StAR</b>	<b>Student Chair</b>	<b>Programme Leader</b>
Attend EVERY SSLC.		
Be professional, respect each other's time and perspective.		
Read any relevant papers ahead of time.		
Prepare key points of feedback to present.	Lead the SSLC, making sure members' voices are heard and responded to.	Acknowledge students' feedback. Collaborate with the SC to open/close the SSLC
Keep feedback and contributions relevant to the item(s) being discussed.	Keep the agenda moving and the meeting to time.	Work in partnership with the SC to compile and share the agenda.
Check your unimail account regularly and respond to emails.	Respond to emails from StARs and PL/PAs.	Check your unimail account regularly and respond to emails.
Do <b>not</b> use SSLCs as an avenue for calling out lecturers or other individuals, or make personal remarks.	Ensure SSLC items remain productive, meaningful, and appropriate in discussion of student experiences.	Respect & acknowledge student experiences as collective, non-personal, feedback.
Speak to your Chair separately if you feel there are matters which the meeting has not addressed satisfactorily.	Chase up action points from previous meetings. Investigate further any unclear matters.	Review actions points from previous meetings, note any updates to share.
For unavoidable absences, a written report, outlining feedback, must be sent to your Student Chair.	For unavoidable absences, compile a report for the Deputy SC and the PL. Review feedback from DSC after.	For unavoidable absences, contact the SC as soon as possible to discuss arrangements.

Figure 2 – SSLC expectations for StARs, Student Chairs and Programme Leaders

The above sits alongside an additional suite of Chair/Deputy Chair training initiated in recent years, delivered in collaboration with a university staff lead. By co-leading these sessions, Chairs can see partnership working in action, while also providing reassurance to academic staff that training has been “quality checked” by leads in both organisations. To encourage Chairs to role model “representativeness” of diverse cohorts, we used self-reflexivity and situational activities to allow students to think about:

1. To what extent am I **advocating on behalf of the whole diversity** of my peers?
2. To what extent **am I myself reflective** of my wider peers/cohort?

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### 3. To what extent am I enabling a culture of **partnership or complaint**?

During training, students demonstrated thoughtful and honest responses to how their own relative privilege influenced their outlook. To summarise this, a set of attributes for StARs and Chairs to embody in their practice were provided:

- **Professionalism** (related to conduct).
- **Parity** (in engaging with diverse voices).
- **Productive** (meetings centring on student experience).
- **Partnership** (working with students and staff).

Post-training feedback from StARs and Student Chairs administered by Winchester Student Union was used to assess students' experience and enhance future training. As a result of changes made to training, post-training surveys showed that 22% of respondents specifically highlighted their increased confidence in understanding expectations of themselves and others. This was also supported by students commenting more broadly on a strong understanding of the context of their role in the university setting, and how this was important to their wider understanding.

### **Staff engagement**

Staff engagement with student representation is pertinent to successful student voice structures, ensuring feedback loops are closed, and providing consistency to cohorts across differing years. Students are experts in their experience, but where student representation can lead to failure is where lived experience is not considered in relation to the institutional context, (i.e., policy, procedures and practices). This is something staff can provide to supplement feedback and collaborate in solutions that ensure students feel recognised and valued in the process. At Winchester (and elsewhere), academics have noted how student voice is incredibly powerful. As such, it is integral that students feel empowered and supported to build rapport and trust with staff. This led us to focus on what can feel like the forgotten element of Bols's (2017) "holy trinity": staff engagement. As such, Winchester Student Union and university leaders collaborated to create a 'PL Briefing Session' to inform staff about SSLC expectations and share best practise.



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Bols noted:

‘The question of training for staff was raised in the particular context of there being the perception of a power-imbalance between student representatives and staff within institutions. Training was seen as the means by which staff might be made aware of this perception, so that they would take steps to mitigate its influence and thus enable better engagement by representatives.’

Our approach to this type of training was to focus attention on addressing programmes with lower engagement, as well as wider concerns around the effectiveness and representativeness of the StARs scheme. There was also a widespread lack of knowledge around content covered in the aforementioned training. Concerns were raised around how comprehensive this was, and whether it adequately prepares students for these integral roles.

The briefing saw representation from university Executive Leadership (ELT), Winchester Student Union and training leads involved in StARs-related training. PLs were briefed on the comprehensive training delivered to Chair/Deputy Chairs, providing a confidence in our due diligence to prepare students for the role. We also invited a PL who delivered an insightful sharing of best practice, with definitive examples of what has worked for their programme. This was particularly powerful as this programme scored some of the lowest 2021 NSS scores within the institution around opportunities to provide feedback, perceptions of staff valuing student feedback, how student feedback had been acted upon, and overall satisfaction. Following a purposeful intention to enhance the quality of staff responsiveness to student feedback (including targeted work through regular student e-newsletters, and weekly informal drop-ins in a shared communal space, alongside SSLC meetings), the programme saw an increase of around 30-40% in their 2022 NSS scores.

The Session also included ELT underscoring its commitment to student voice and the importance of the feedback loop. This received good feedback and allowed a platform for positive discussion. Whilst Winchester Student Union found that having ELT presence emphasised its importance and demonstrated the partnership approach, future areas of improvement/issues were identified:

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- Attendance comprised “already-engaged/engaging” PLs, meaning that those areas currently sitting below desired engagement continue to fall through the net. To mitigate against this, this briefing was recorded and circulated to all PLs via ELT.
- More time for Q&A/discussion would be beneficial as often PLs have specific concerns to raise that may be holding them back from engaging fully. A platform with both Winchester Student Union and ELT presence provides valuable direct contact.

### Effective committee structures

As part of an effective committee structure, our SSLCs firmly centralise student voice and participation, primarily with Student Chairs. The intent is not only to ensure meetings are student led, but also to provide a more comfortable environment for students to engage in the feedback process. We recognised the complex, and likely asymmetrical, power dynamics involved in having a formal meeting to discuss a programme’s progress in which the PL (a potential target for feedback) is also operating as Chair. Further, the reality of requiring students to confidently navigate this dynamic in order to communicate constructive feedback can be challenging (Carey, 2016; Young & Jerome, 2020).

Recent institutional discussion around SSLCs had revealed however, that our attempts to rebalance this dynamic to support students to communicate feedback may have resulted in some adverse effects. Feedback from academic staff indicated some discontent arising from a perceived power imbalance in favour of students. This was seen to disenfranchise staff in the process, citing a perceived lack of ownership in the SSLC process. Recognising the importance of co-ownership, we amended our template SSLC Agenda which now encourages PLs to jointly welcome and close meetings alongside the student Chair. This allows PLs co-ownership over their introduction, responding to/setting out their meeting expectations, and space at the end to provide any institutional context. Our intention from this action is to provide a focused space for PLs to respond to next steps, institutional processes, context etc. As StARs often hold positions in a cyclical manner, this aims to help

further embed their understanding of how their feedback feeds into wider committee structures, meetings and processes.

### Concluding remarks

This paper demonstrates how The University of Winchester and Winchester Student Union have questioned mechanisms related to representation, feedback, institutional hierarchies, and broader power relations. Our collaborative approach, located and guided by Bols's (2017; 2020) work and model, highlighted that much of our student representation work must (and does) focus on our students. In doing so, we learnt how we were able to materialise an enhanced approach towards student representation guided on principles of partnership (Cook-Sather et al, 2014). Our collective learning from the process largely related to how this mission was made possible only through our joint working. Creating more deliberate and explicit training, materials, resources, and spaces which centred on partnership is what we believe has resulted in the successful onboarding of our rejuvenated measures. This is demonstrable of the fact that creating an ethos of institutional partnership can directly result in equitable relationships – between students, students and staff, and university and Student Union.

Whilst being different organisations, this fact unites our work, ambitions, and goals for supporting student experience. As noted here, creating truly effective student representation requires both parties to seek out, maintain, and grow positive working relationships together. In this way, it may serve for Unions to reframe their relationship with their institutions, further exploring the nuance of their role as a link between students and the university, as critical partners working towards the same ends – and vice versa. This is particularly pertinent given anecdotal accounts which scrutinized certain universities' approach to partnership working with their Students' Unions during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dickinson, 2020), but also to further establish our own commitment to doing so (see Islam et al, 2021).

It is intended that examples used here can influence other institutional approaches to enhancing student representation by ensuring that, in a pendulum of staff and student ownership, the chain swings comfortably in the middle. Our intention and motivation to

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“bake in” an ethos of partnership to student representation processes between the university and Student Union have also sought to further discussion raised by Matthews and Dollinger (2022), in addition to improving cross-relational working. However, we recognise that approaches cannot remain static, as suggested by our recommendations for future practice. Thus, remaining agile and analytical will serve the dynamism presented to us in the face of an ever evolving HE landscape and institutional context.

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