Academic Representation Toolkit

Engaging students in the management and review of education provision

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Academic Representation empowers students to be full and active partners in their educational experience, with a view to improving the quality of their teaching and learning.

This toolkit provides some examples of ways to engage students in the management and review of their learning provision beyond the traditional SSLC and PGRLF meetings. These committees are generally more effective when supported by additional activities promoting student co-creation.

The Aims and Objectives of an SSLC and the Aims and Objectives of a PGRLF can be found online in the TQA Manual. The TQA Manual also includes a list of the topics that should be discussed with students over the course of an academic year; those topics could be discussed an SSLC or PGRLF, or through other methods outlined in this toolkit.

Contents

Student Voice Action Plan

The Action Plan is the basis for Academic Representation reporting. Its purpose is to detail the actions taken in response to student feedback. Each Department (for taught programmes) or Faculty (for research programmes) should produce its own Action Plan, which will form the core of their report made to the Faculty's senior committees for Education or Research.

- **The Action Plan should be updated following every activity undertaken as part of the student feedback process, such as those outlined in this toolkit.**
- The Secretary of a Department SSLC is responsible for maintaining and updating the Action Plan for that Department, and submitting it to the Faculty's Education and Student Experience Committee or Strategy Group.
- The Secretary of a Faculty PGRLF is responsible for maintaining and updating the Action Plan for that Faculty, and submitting it to the Faculty's Postgraduate Research Committee or Strategy Group.
- The Action Plan should be made available to all students in the represented cohort by publishing on the University SharePoint (or another secure site).

Student/Staff Liaison Committees & PGR Liaison Forums (Oversight)

Introduction
A formal Department-level (for taught programmes) or Faculty-level (for research programmes) meeting between senior academic staff (such as a Director of Education and Student Experience or Director of Postgraduate Research), administrative staff (such as a Department Manager or PGR Manager), and student representatives.

The main purpose of SSLCs and PGRLFs is to produce the Student Voice Action Plan outlining the actions taken by the Department or Faculty in response to student feedback. These meetings are good for formal reporting and updating on existing issues, but are less effective for impromptu discussions or raising new issues.

Academic Volunteers (Reps and Officers) are not required to attend SSLCs or PGRLFs if they have not submitted agenda items for discussion in advance.

Having a student chair is recommended, but not required (a meeting can be student-led without being student-chaired, if students have been involved in creating the agenda). The student chair can be any Academic Volunteer who has completed Chair training.

The Student Community and Partnerships team (for SSLCs) or the PGR Support Team (for PGRLFs) will liaise with student attendees who have completed Chair training to ask someone to volunteer to chair the committee. If no one wishes to, then the meeting will be chaired by a University staff member (usually the DESE or DPGR).

Remit
- Creation and oversight of the **Student Voice Action Plan** for the Department (taught programmes) or Faculty (research programmes)**.**
- Review and report on the activities and effectiveness of Academic Volunteers, Departments and faculty staff in response to student feedback.

Administration

- **Secretarial admin support for SSLCs** – Student Community and Partnerships.
- **Secretarial admin support for PGRLFs** – PGR Support Team.
- Recommended SSLC frequency – three times per year (usually once per term).
- Recommended PGRLF frequency – every four months, including once during the period June–August to ensure continuity of representation over the summer.
- SSLCs should be scheduled with respect to the Faculty's Education and Student Experience Committee or Strategy Group.
- PGRLFs should be scheduled with respect to the Faculty's Postgraduate Research Committee or Strategy Group.
- SSLCs and PGRLFs are required to be open meetings so that students are able to attend as observers ([TQAE/LTSH Ch. 11, 5.15](#); [TQAE/PGRH Ch. 6, 6.11](#)).
  - These meetings should therefore be advertised to the entire represented cohort at least one week prior to the meeting taking place.

Ad hoc Meetings between Staff & Reps (Collaborative Discussion)

Introduction

Informal meetings that take place between SSLCs and PGRLFs, good for discussion of specific student feedback with the aim of reaching a solution. This does not have fixed membership of students and staff based on their roles, as the Reps who have received feedback which they want to discuss can meet directly with the relevant member(s) of staff who are able to reach a solution.

Attendance can be scaled as necessary depending on need, from one-to-one meetings between a Rep and an academic, to group meetings for Academic Volunteers and staff from across a programme or discipline.

Remit

- For the discussion of specific solutions to specific feedback raised by students.

Administration

- These can be scheduled directly between Academic Reps and relevant members of department or faculty staff when required.
- Informal discussions between reps and staff should be taking place frequently, e.g. once a month (or more), as a method for reaching solutions to specific feedback without needing to wait for the next formal SSLC or PGRLF meeting.
- A note-taker should be appointed (e.g. one of the staff present) so notes from the meeting can be fed into the **Student Voice Action Plan** by liaising with the SSLC/PGRLF Secretary.

Student Experience Forums (Cohort Assemblies and Town Halls)

Introduction

These are timetabled sessions for whole cohorts designed for the purpose of collecting feedback from a large group of students in an open-floor environment. They are usually facilitated by Academic Volunteers and/or department staff. Since it is often the case that students are less comfortable talking to staff directly, the most effective student forums may be scheduled by the admin team, but will be facilitated by student reps, with academics and other staff in attendance for only part of the session.

Due to the number of students in attendance, detailed discussion of specific issues is harder, but not impossible; discussion of particular topics that are of interest to the department may be easier if the session is themed (like a Focus Group), while an open floor is better for collecting new feedback. A common format for the Guild's Let's Talk sessions is for the first part of the meeting to be themed, based on topics pre-arranged with Reps and Officers, and the second part to be open.

These sessions can also be used for staff and reps to provide feedback on activity that is ongoing, and as a showcase of activities for Academic Volunteers and staff to close the feedback loop with students (i.e., to provide updates on actions taken in response to student feedback). These student forums must be integrated with other feedback systems to avoid functioning in isolation.

These sessions are variously called Town Halls, Cohort Assemblies, Student Voice Meetings, or Student Experience Forums, depending on who's organising them. It is recommended to use a title that will resonate with your students; when organised by the Guild in the past, we received feedback that "Town Hall" meant nothing to them, so Guild events like this are advertised as "open discussion forums" and have been titled "Let's Talk: <topic name>" since 2020.

Remit

- Enable students to raise any issues, ideas and praises they have about their academic experience with staff who can take that feedback away to be addressed, or with Academic Reps who can anonymise their feedback efficiently.
- Provide updates on recent staff and rep activity to "close the feedback loop" and promote the ongoing work of student representation.

Administration

- Admin support can be provided by the Guild's Academic Communities and Representation team if Department support is not available.
- Guild staff can also help with promotion of the event.
- These forums should ideally be scheduled into student timetables or Outlook calendars where possible, usually by the admin staff supporting the meeting.
- These sessions can be held in person or online – whatever works best.
- The recommended frequency is once or twice per term per cohort group, based on best practice by departments and faculties which already hold sessions like this (including the Business School, Medical School and DPGRs in HASS).
- Facilitated by staff and reps. Facilitators should take notes that can be formally recorded in the **Student Voice Action Plan** and brought to other meetings.

Focus Groups (Thematic Discussion)

Introduction

Focus groups are one-off meetings open to all students in a relevant cohort (not just to Academic Volunteers), set up and designed to collect feedback about a specific topic of discussion. By being open to anyone, these sessions may draw an audience of students who are interested in the discussion topic, and therefore have the chance of being more productive than a meeting where only student reps are invited.

These are ideal for getting opinions on topics that staff want to investigate and review, but not as useful for collecting feedback on the day-to-day student experience. These are recommended over an SSLC or PGRLF meeting for discussion of regulatory requirements, external accountability reports, Teaching Excellence Action Plans, PGR Quality Review, and new programme developments, as Focus Groups may draw an audience of interested students who are different from the team of appointed reps.

Remit

- For the collection and discussion of feedback from students about topics that are of interest to the Department or Faculty.

Administration

- Administrative support is required so minutes of the meeting can be taken and fed into the **Student Voice Action Plan**. Staff who want to run a Focus Group should contact the Student Community and Partnerships team or PGR Support team in the first instance.
- Focus Groups should be scheduled directly into student timetables or Outlook calendars wherever possible by the admin staff supporting the meeting.
- Frequency will depend on when items for discussion arise throughout the year. This will likely average at once or twice per term.
- Financial and/or food-based incentives are recommended to encourage participation!

Socials and Drop-ins (Coffee Mornings, Pizza Evenings)

Introduction

Informal activities designed to enable students to meet with their reps, and to enable reps to collect feedback from students. This can include scheduled events in a seminar room, pop-up stalls in an academic building, or "office hours". For any of these formats, the inclusion of refreshments provides an incentive for students to stop by.

Socials such as coffee mornings and pizza evenings provide an informal setting for students to raise issues with reps with the added incentive of refreshments. These provide excellent opportunities for detailed collection of feedback, but less so for discussion of solutions. Depending on the nature of the academic community, these could be more or less effective if staff are also in attendance.

Drop-ins target the "captive audience" of students waiting for lectures as well as the footfall of students going about their academic work. Note that drop-ins would be less effective in a social building, where students are generally going somewhere and not thinking about academic work.

Remit

- Enable students to meet with Academic Volunteers informally to discuss any issues, ideas and praises they have about their academic experience.
- Directly collect feedback from students.

Administration

- Scheduled and facilitated by Academic Volunteers with support from Guild staff.
- Notes should be taken by Academic Volunteers to feed into the **Student Voice Action Plan**.
- These should be advertised as student voice / student feedback events so they are distinguishable from other socials, and to promote the work of student reps.
- Recommended frequency – as often as possible, at a minimum once per month!

Shout-Outs (Lectures, Research Seminars, Tutorials)

Introduction

A short timeslot (5 minutes) at the beginning of an existing timetabled session (lecture, research seminar, workshop, tutorial, etc) for Academic Volunteers to provide introductions or updates about their work.

While not particularly effective for collecting feedback, the main purpose of this activity is to allow Academic Volunteers to promote themselves and their work by closing the feedback loop – telling students about the work that they have done makes them known to students, and should encourage students to bring more feedback to them in the future. Note that this works best at the beginning of a lecture or seminar and would be less effective at the end, as students are getting ready to leave.

Remit

- Promote the existence of Academic Volunteers, and the methods by which students can raise any issues, ideas and praises they have about their academic experience.
- Provide updates on the work done by Academic Volunteers and staff in response to student feedback.

Administration

- Organised directly between Academic Volunteers and lecturers, seminar leaders or module tutors.
- PGR students also attend seminars – shout-outs should not be discounted as a UG/PGT-only activity!

Other Formats

Digital Feedback Platforms

Digital feedback platforms exist to provide a single location for the efficient collection of student feedback, and the escalation of that feedback directly to the administrative or academic staff who are able to resolve it. These systems also provide a platform for tracking progress, assigning actions to specific staff, and closing the feedback loop, thereby positively reinforcing their effectiveness as a feedback tool. With admin support, digital platforms also provide a ready-made source of feedback and solutions for formal reporting in the Student Voice Action Plan.

There are currently no feedback platforms operating University-wide, but some departments may be using their own digital solution.

Surveys

It is wise to keep survey usage to a minimum, as most other activities are generally more useful. Survey data can be used relatively easily for formal reporting, but would be inadequate as the only method of collecting feedback, as engagement with surveys is always very low. Also consider the method by which the survey is promoted to students, taking into account some of the different methods already considered.

Emails

Generally, sending emails to students is not an effective means of engagement, particularly when prompting students to provide feedback. The primary use of emails and newsletters would be to close the feedback loop with students (but not alone – the feedback loop should be closed through other methods as well).

Social Media

Setting up group chats on social media specifically for the purpose of representation is not particularly effective, but where reps are engaging with existing group chats for specific cohorts, effectiveness is much higher. There have also been requests for "official" academic discussion platforms for reps, students and staff supported by the Guild and the Uni – Viva Engage (previously Yammer) might be appropriate for this, but would require more promotion since students are not generally active on that platform.