



## **Student engagement in university decision making and governance- towards a more systemically inclusive student voice,**

*an OLT Strategic Priority Commissioned Project led by Professor Sally Varnham, Faculty of Law, University of Technology Sydney.*

## **Use of Course Representatives to enhance student learning experience**

## **Why we are recruiting course representatives**

A number of courses being conducted at UTS have agreed to participate in a pilot project looking at the impact of course representatives on student learning experience. This pilot project is part of a larger project entitled *Student engagement in university decision making and governance- towards a more systemically inclusive student voice*. The project is being led by Professor Sally Varnham from the Faculty of Law who is a former Chair of the Academic Board here at UTS. Sally has a keen interest in effectively working with students in leadership roles. The award of the grant that underpins this project by the Australian Government's Office of Learning and Teaching as a Strategic Priority Commissioned Project is testament to her expertise and the importance of this research. UTS is also supporting this research demonstrating this institution's commitment to student engagement.

It is important that the courses involved in this project appoint representatives who are committed to working with the students and staff within the course and to providing feedback on their experience as a course representative to the project team.

This pilot project will run on a limited basis across this semester. Evaluation of the project outcomes and experience will likely need to take place before further use of course representatives occurs and further supporting infrastructure may need to be developed.

## **Acknowledgement**

This guide for students has been prepared after considering training materials and commentary on student representation developed by Student Participation in Quality Scotland (SPARQS), Quality Assurance Agency UK, University of Bath, Cardiff University, Victoria University of Cardiff.

## **Purpose of Course Representatives**

Student course representatives have been used in universities in the United Kingdom and elsewhere to continuously improve the student learning experience. Course representatives represent their fellow classmates' views and opinions on all matters relating to learning and teaching. They provide feedback to staff and act as a communication channel between staff and students. Importantly use of course representatives allows concerns to be addressed where possible during the course.

## **What do we mean by student learning experience?**

There are many factors that make up how students experience the courses they take at university. These factors in combination make up the student learning experience. The various inputs include curriculum, learning resources, learning and teaching processes, assessment and feedback processes, student progression and achievement, guidance and support and quality enhancement and assurance processes.

This means that course representatives need to recognise that any of these factors might give rise to issues that a course representative may need to be ready to discuss with staff.

## **Benefits**

Although there is a time commitment involved in being a course representative, the role provides an opportunity to learn new skills. Being a course representative is something you can include on your CV. It provides networking opportunities and useful background for future representational roles as well as being good experience for future employment.

As a course representative you have an opportunity to help shape the course you are representing students on and to gain a greater understanding of teaching and learning activities.

## **How are course representatives recruited?**

Different approaches to recruiting have been adopted including election, nomination (by staff or students) and volunteering. In this pilot project we suggest that classes briefly discuss how they would like to appoint their representative. If you would like to be a course representative it is important that you understand what the role involves and have the necessary skills and attributes to be able to carry out the role. At this stage there is not a formal infrastructure to support course representatives although we have identified resources representatives can use where necessary.

## **Effective course representation**

Above all a course representative needs to show up and actively participate in the course whether attendance is compulsory or not. You need to be accessible to your fellow students. This does not mean being available at all hours of the day and night and it does not mean devoting long hours to your role. Your role is as a point of contact and to liaise between staff and students.

You are there to represent all students in the course so be aware that different groups of students may have valid concerns that are not necessarily shared by all students. You need to be able to identify who is being affected by an issue and why.

The role of course representative may involve giving both positive and negative feedback to staff and students. Diplomacy is very important. Being a representative may involve having to present views that you do not personally share. It may be necessary to negotiate solutions on particular issues and it may be necessary to conduct some research to support or explain particular positions students want to present to staff. Good report writing skills may also be needed for documenting particular issues and responses.

Good representation requires good communication skills. Effective course representatives are good at listening, networking, relationship building and reflection. Course representatives also need to have good presentation and organisation skills. They need to

be good at time management and prioritisation because there will be some time commitment involved in being a course representative.

Course representatives need to familiarise themselves with meeting procedure and to be prepared to participate in scheduled meetings with honesty, integrity, fairness and respect. Confidentiality needs to be respected where sensitive information is shared.

These are all skills that most of us will need to develop in our working life and other activities so experience gained as a course representative may be useful elsewhere including on your curriculum vitae.

## **What do course representatives do?**

### *Introduce yourself*

After being appointed as a course representative make sure the students in your course know who you are and how to contact you. In large classes this is likely to be more important than in smaller cohorts where students may already know one another. Your course coordinator should be able to assist particularly if there are a number of classes in each course through sending out class emails or announcements on virtual learning sites.

It may be desirable to have more than one representative for very large courses and courses run across multiple classes.

### *Gather student opinion*

Course representatives need to consider how best to gather input from fellow students. It is important not to disrupt regular class operation nor access to the room for classes using the room before or after your class. Respect for staff is also very important so some issues may be best discussed outside the class environment. Emails and social media may be useful. Face to face chats or telephone discussions may also be useful. Remember that the scope of issues you are dealing with is student opinion and concerns about issues related to the course content, delivery and assessment. Students raising issues outside this scope should be referred to student services for assistance.

### *Provide feedback to staff and students*

A key task for course representatives is to present student views at meetings with staff. Therefore it is essential that course representatives attend these meetings prepared by having gathered feedback from fellow students and having considered how any problems you raise might be resolved.

In providing feedback it is important to make sure that the information you provide is accurate, balanced, constructive and depersonalised. You need to be specific and where necessary provide evidence to support what you are saying. But be careful not to identify particular issues with particular students. This is important to your credibility as a course representative. Avoid sweeping generalisations or emotional language.

Remember that it is important for staff to hear what is working well as well as what needs improvement

When delivering criticism direct it to the issues that are a problem rather than the individuals that may be associated with them. This often makes those receiving criticism more receptive and is a professional and courteous way to raise issues. If it becomes necessary to deliver criticism that is personal consider whether the person concerned should be advised outside a meeting forum or whether you may need to discuss the issue with another member of staff.

### *Meetings*

We recommend that course representatives and staff meet at monthly intervals. Meetings should not need to take more than an hour. Urgent matters may need to be dealt with outside scheduled meetings.

Make sure you know where and when meetings are going to take place. Make sure you have gathered feedback and prepared for the meeting by having read any previous minutes and any circulated papers and having done anything you were asked to do for the meeting. Think about whether there is anything you want to put on the agenda and that you know how to do that. If there are other representatives for your course you may want to discuss the issues that are arising before the meeting.

Always be on time, if you are going to be late let the Chair/Secretary know before the meeting. Be equipped to take notes. Turn off your mobile phone in the meeting. Follow

agreed protocol regarding speaking in the meeting. A small meeting may be less formal than a large meeting. Ask questions if you do not understand anything. Support other course representatives present in the meeting. Report back to your classmates.

### *Don't wait for a meeting for urgent matters*

if an issue arises that needs to be dealt with quickly or before a particular date approach the relevant staff to make a time to discuss it or present the issue in an email

### *Support*

If you find there are issues that you feel you are not equipped to handle please feel free to contact Associate Professor Bronwyn Olliffe who is a member of the project team on xxx. Bronwyn has served as both Associate Dean Teaching and Learning in the Faculty of Law and as a student Ombud and will be able to provide advice on how you could manage the issue.

Remember your role is to address concerns of the class not to advocate on behalf of individual students. Students with individual concerns should be encouraged to seek assistance through appropriate channels.

Remember the role of course representative is a voluntary one and while a great opportunity you must look after yourself at the same time. Make sure that your activities as a course representative do not interfere with your studies. If you are experiencing any stress or concerns associated with your role please contact xxxxx.

## **Recognise limitations**

It is important to recognise that while some issues might be able to be addressed quickly and easily others will not. Constraints that may prevent quick changes include limitations on resources the staff have access to and any policy and procedural constraints that staff will need to comply with in bringing about change. It may also be that the thing students are asking for cannot be done. If that is the case it is important you understand and are able to communicate the barriers to your fellow students.