Working Together

A review of Department Representatives at Sheffield Hallam University

July 2021

Introduction & Methodology

The purpose of all student representatives is to act as a voice for the student body, working in partnership with University staff to facilitate positive changes to the delivery and enhancement of the student academic experience. At Sheffield Hallam, student academic representation is fulfilled across four levels and there should act as a direct flow from granular representation at the course level through Staff Student Committee Meetings to Department and College leadership and onwards to University level.

For the 2020/21 academic year, the Students' Union made some significant changes to the existing Department Representative (Rep) roles and College Officer model. The main differences were:

- Instead of an overarching Education Officer, 3 College Officers were instated, with a remit for students' academic and welfare experiences within each College.
- Instead of Department Reps being volunteers, the role was changed to a paid student staff role managed by the Students' Union. As a result of this, recruitment was carried out according to student staff recruitment procedures, rather than holding elections or asking students to volunteer. Instead of having several Department Reps per Department, there was a single Department Rep in each Department. In total, 17 Department Reps were recruited, one for each academic department at Sheffield Hallam.
- The 3 College Officers were tasked with working closely with the Department Reps in their Colleges to better understand students' experiences.

These changes, as well as the introduction of College and Department Student Boards, meant that four strands of student representatives work closely together, and with academic and professional services staff, to improve the experience for students. Therefore, this review set out to evaluate whether the current approach to the Representation System delivered the following:

- The representation approach was student-centred
- We had a focused student representation system
- We promoted consistent channels for students' voices
- We built a community of collaboration and co-creation amongst students, reps and academics
- We improved the quality and effectiveness of academic delivery and student welfare

The review also considered if the Representation System supported the principles of the Student Representative Framework, namely: inclusive, consistent, and fair representation; accessibility and awareness; support and partnership; transparent and effective.

The aim of changing the representation system in this way was to allow Department Reps to engage more effectively with Course Reps, giving the Department Reps a solid understanding of issues and themes relating to the student experience in their Department. It was also hoped that the newly-instated College Officers would have a group of well-connected students across their College, allowing feedback and knowledge to travel more effectively between different Representatives. In addition, having selected a group of students through a robust recruitment process for the Department Rep roles, we also hoped that we would have a group of reliable, enthusiastic and engaged students who would be able to build strong relationships with university staff, allowing those staff to gain a wide-reaching understanding of student issues 'on the ground' and to quickly resolve those issues. It was also hoped that having a single, engaging Department Rep in each Department would help to create more of a sense of a 'Community of Representatives' in their Department, making Course Reps more comfortable with sharing their experiences and collaborating with other Course Reps and by extension awareness of who their College Officer is and what they do.

For the Department Reps, as these new roles were paid student staff posts managed by the Students' Union, £10,000 total was allocated for the entire academic year. This meant that, Department Reps were told to work only 2-3 hours per week. Midway through the academic year, the Students' Union increased the budget by £5000 (for a total of £15,000).

The Research, Insight & Student Voice Team at the Students' Union conducted this review between March and July 2021. The review included a focus group with the 3 College Officers for the 2020/21 academic year (Business, Technology & Engineering College Officer; Health, Wellbeing & Life Sciences College Officer; Social Sciences & Arts College Officer); focus groups and/or a questionnaire with Heads of Department and/or Student Experience Leads within each College; focus group with Student Experience, Teaching & Learning Directorate; focus group with Heads of Learning & Teaching Enhancement in each College; interviews with all Department Reps; and questions added to the 2021 Course Rep Survey.

As a result of the new Department Rep and College Officer structure with reference to the principals of the student representative framework, the aim of the review was the answer 4 overarching questions:
- Do College Officers, Department Reps, and Course Reps feel part of a community with a collective goal? To what extent has this community enabled them to work together to improve the student experience in their respective areas? How has this community been influenced by their College Officer or Department Rep?
- Are the processes in place suitable and appropriate for effective communication between the student body, Course Reps, Department Reps, College Officers, and staff, and vice versa?
- To what extent has the perception of student representation improved as a result of the changes to Department Rep roles and the College Officer structure?
- How effective were College and Department Student Boards and how have they contributed to understanding students' experiences?

Qualitative data was thematically analysed by groups (e.g. Department Reps, University staff, or College Officers). This was so that findings within these homogenous groups could be compared. Data from the Course Rep Survey was analysed univariate-ly in Excel and compared to trend data throughout previous survey years, where applicable.

Summary

The following summarises the findings of this review. Please also see the Conclusion and Recommendations pages for final thoughts. This summary is split into each section of this report: Students, Course Reps, Department Reps, College Officers, and University staff.

Students

The Students' Union sent a survey to all students between 12 April and 9 May 2021, which included questions about awareness of their Department Rep and Course Rep. Of those survey respondents, 56% were aware of who their Department Rep is and 70% were aware who their Course Rep is.

Course Reps

The Students' Union sent a survey to all Course Reps between 18 May and 21 June 2021, which included questions about Department Reps and Officers. Of those survey respondents, 81% were aware who their Department Rep was and how to contact them; 51% were aware of who their College Officer was and how to contact them. Feedback from Course Reps in relation to Department Reps was generally positive, with 69% of respondents indicating that they felt their Department Rep knew and understood issues on their course. Ninety percent of respondents that had attended a Department Student Board felt that their contributions were listened to, but that more should be done to ensure that actions were agreed and carried forward (77% strongly agreed or agreed).

Department Reps

The Students' Union invited all Department Reps to attend an interview at the end of their role. Thirteen of the 17 Department Reps were interviewed as part of this review and their feedback about their experience was generally positive. There were some areas for improvement, which are noted below.

- Course Reps are integral to the Department Rep role and establishing strong relationships and communities between Reps was important. Despite this, some Department Reps struggled to get strong engagement from Course Reps, and engagement from Course Reps with representation processes decreased throughout the academic year.
- The role helped Department Reps to develop skills and virtual meetings helped some of the Department Reps that normally would not have been able to undertake the role (e.g. students in health, social care, or teaching courses).
- The staff relationships were crucial for effective Department Reps. Where staff were supportive and they integrated the Department Rep into their areas of work, Reps felt that they could build a connection with staff. This helped them to understand why an issue might not be changed and to confidentially share this with students. There were a small number of Department Reps who felt that some staff dismissed feedback or were not open to change.
- Students' Union staff and College Officers were supportive of Department Reps and, regular meetings with them, enabled Department Reps to get additional help should they need it. An area from improvement is the relationship between Department Reps and College Officers, ensuring that College Officers are aware of boundaries and are clear about the hours that Department Reps can work.

- Department Reps felt that the role was not exactly what they expected based on the job description, but recognised that a new role came with the ability to shape and navigate. Some of the most effective Department Reps worked more hours than they were allowed, and therefore, decided to volunteer their time to ensure that they could dedicate more to projects, meetings, etc.
- The appendix includes a list of meetings attended by Department Reps involved in the review and how beneficial they felt their attendance at these meetings was. Generally, Department Reps felt quite positive about regular catch-up meetings with University staff or Students' Union staff, but opinions on Department Student Board were mixed (though all Department Reps in College of HWLS thought these meetings were good).

College Officers

All three College Officers attended a focus group to discuss their experiences working with Department Reps in the 2020/21 academic year. Below are the findings from this focus group.

- College Officers kept in regular contact with their Department Reps throughout the year, having meetings with them or using a group WhatsApp chat. College Officers felt that they bridged the communication or opportunity gaps between Department Reps and senior University staff. The regularity of contact with Department Reps varied between College Officers, dependent on how they utilised them in their role.
- College Officers felt similarly to Department Reps about University staff: they would not have been able to effectively do their jobs without the support they offered.
- College Officers felt that Department Reps should be utilised more in equality and diversity work or that they should be given more hours to attend meetings.

University staff

In total, 23 University staff members (from all 3 Colleges and colleagues from the Directorate of SETL) took part in either a focus group or filled in a short questionnaire sharing their thoughts on the Department Rep roles and the Representation System. Below are the findings.

- The majority of staff had a positive experience with their Department Reps and felt that Reps were professional, prepared and worked collaboratively with staff. Nearly all staff that participated in the review that worked directly with Department Reps would also like Department Reps to be allocated more hours, so they can be involved in other projects or meetings.
- Some staff had negative experiences with their Department Rep, though these were less common. When Department Reps were disengaged, staff felt that this put their Department at a severe disadvantage compared to other Departments. This very small number of staff also felt that there was no clear way that they could get support to improve this.
- Some staff found that the level of input from Department Reps decreased through the academic year, with Department Reps more active in Semester 1 compared to Semester 2.
- Staff used various means to communicate with their Department Rep: emails, formal and informal meetings, and in very small numbers, text messages. Staff felt that the ability for Department Reps to gather student feedback varied, but also recognised that even when they received feedback, actions would at times not be carried forward them.

- Staff want to continue to be involved in the recruitment and training of Department Reps and felt that, in comparison to last year, conversations about the recruitment process and engaging staff in this should be done sooner.

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Student Feedback

Between 12 April and 9 May 2021, students were sent a survey about the Students' Union services, including opinions on Course and Department Reps. This survey received 1463 responses. Of those, 56 percent of respondents (n=742) were aware of their Department Rep and 70 percent (n=940) were aware of their Course Rep(s).

Furthermore, data from the 2021 National Student Survey (NSS) with final-year, undergraduate students found that 80 percent of respondents felt they had the right opportunities to feedback about their course (though this decreased from 88 percent in 2020 and 89 percent in 2021). Of the section on student voice in the NSS, the question on feedback being acted upon (i.e. "It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on") has had the lowest percentages of students that agree; in 2021, 47 percent of respondents agreed with this statement, though in 2020, 61 percent agreed and, in 2019, 68 percent agreed. As this paper will outline, both Reps and staff agree that more can be done to create actionable steps in relation to student feedback, both at the Course and Department level. In addition, 45 percent of respondents to the 2021 NSS agreed that the Students' Union effectively represents students' academic interests, though there were large variations by Department (60 percent of respondents from the Department of Social Work, Social Care & Community Services agreed, compared to 38 percent of respondents from the Department of Management). Whilst there is no correlation between NSS results and the engagement of Department Reps over the past academic year, the NSS is reflective of the whole experience of an undergraduate student (and this survey is open from January to April, which means that some final year students will have completed this survey after Department Reps have been in their role for only four months). It is very likely that any effective changes made to the representation structure (College Officer roles, Department Reps) will take more time to reflect improvements.

Course Reps

Between 18 May and 21 June 2021, Course Reps at Sheffield Hallam were asked to provide feedback about their role in a short survey. The survey received a 17.5% response rate, a total of 209 respondents across all three Colleges. They were asked specific questions about their Department Reps and College Officers, as well as their opinion and attendance at Department Student Board meetings. These Department Student Board meetings were established as a space where Course Reps within a Department could come together to share issues collectively; the meetings were chaired by the Department Rep.

Awareness of Department Reps & College Officers

As the below table indicates, 81% of respondents to the Course Rep Survey were aware of who their Department Rep was and how to contact them. Only half of respondents were aware of who their College Officer was or how to contact them. As is explored throughout this paper, the Representation System acts as a funnel of student voice activity; that is, Course Reps collect feedback from the students on their course, Department Reps collect feedback from their Course Reps, and College Officers collect feedback from their Department Reps. Therefore, it is much more important operationally that Course Reps are aware of how to contact their Department Rep than their College Officer (although greater awareness of both is always likely to be better for the system).

Table 1: Course Rep awareness of Department Rep and College Officer, all respondents (n=209).

Question	Yes	No
I know who my Department Rep is.	81%	19%
I know who my College Officer is.	52%	48%
I know how to contact my Department Rep.	81%	19%
I know how to contact my College Officer.	51%	49%

Furthermore, when these same respondents were asked about their Department Reps' understanding of issues on their course, 69% agreed that they did (see Figure 1). When asked if they felt that the Department Rep shared issues on their course with the right people, nearly three-quarters (71%) felt that they had. Respondents were only marginally less satisfied with the Department Reps effort to connect them with other Course Reps (63% agreed, 23% disagreed).
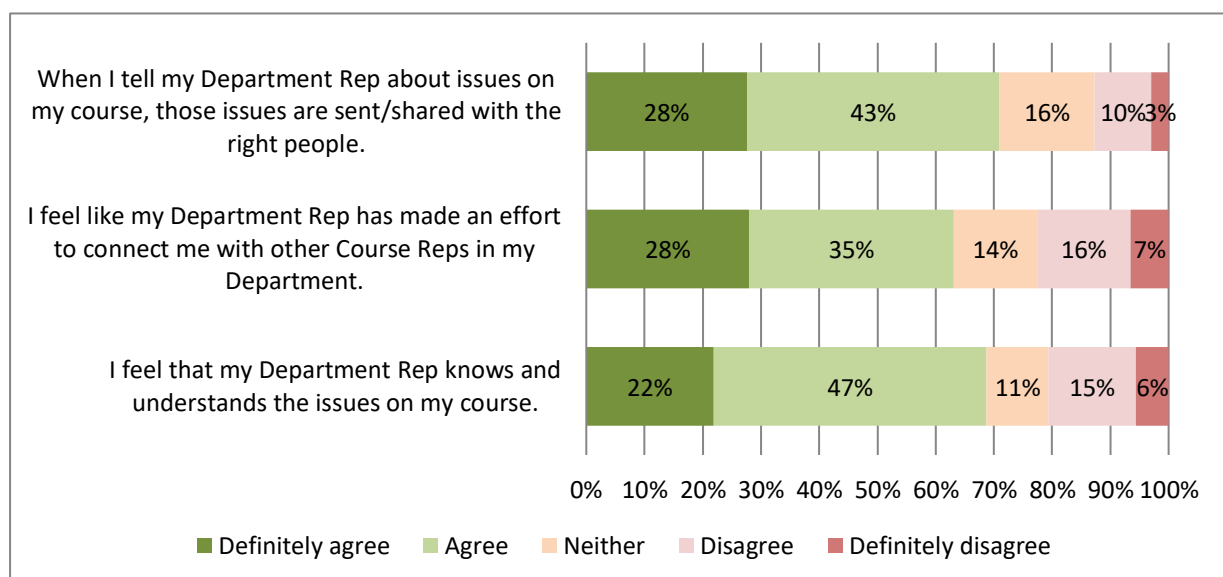
Figure 1: Extent of agreement with corresponding statements, of all respondents (n=160). NB: not applicable/ do not know responses have been removed from analysis.

Department Student Boards

Generally, Course Reps that indicated they had attended a Department Student Board (n=111) felt quite positive about the meetings. As Figure 2 indicates, nearly all respondents agreed that the meetings were either a productive use of their time (86%), the time was used effectively (88%), and/or their contributions were listened to (90%). Nine percent of respondents disagreed that actions were agreed and carried forward within these meetings. As the remainder of this paper will illustrate, this was similarly felt by Department Reps and University staff involved in these meetings.

Thinking about Department Student Boards, to what extent do you feel...

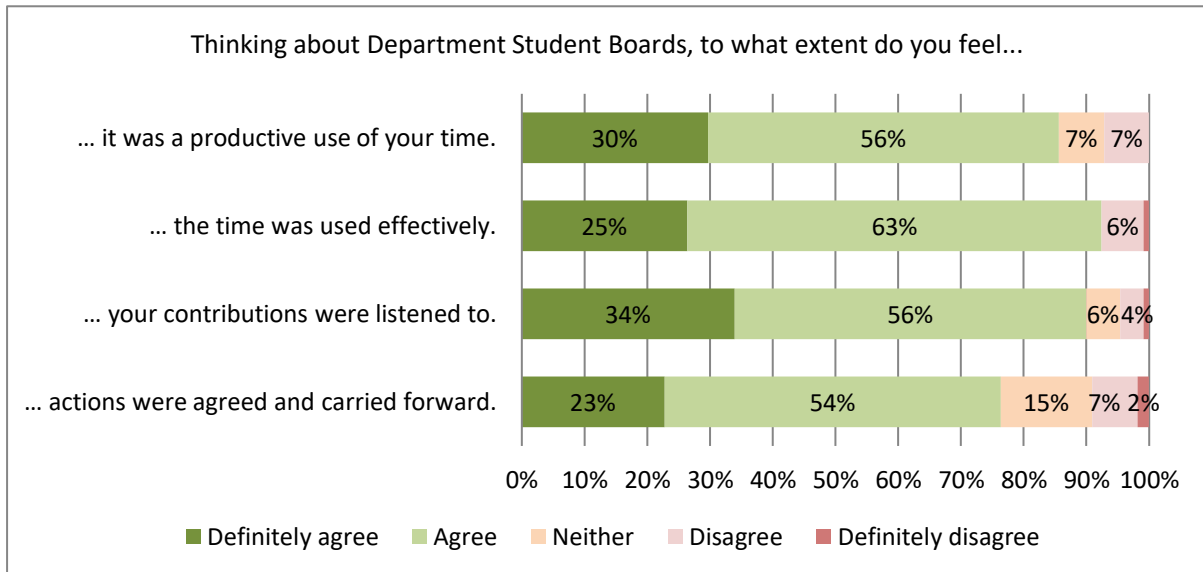| Statement	Definitely agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Definitely disagree
… it was a productive use of your time.	30%	56%	7%	7%	
… the time was used effectively.	25%	63%		6%	
… your contributions were listened to.	34%	56%	6%	4%	
… actions were agreed and carried forward.	23%	54%	15%	7%	2%

Figure 2: Extent of agreement with corresponding statements, of respondents that had attended a DSB meeting (n=111). NB: Not applicable/ do not know responses have been removed from analysis.

Department Reps

Thirteen of the 17 Department Reps took part in an individual interview. The following Department Reps were not interviewed as part of this review (Media Arts & Communication; Humanities; Law & Criminology; Management). The following themes were found through thematic analysis: Course Rep relationship; benefits of the Department Rep role; relationships with University staff; relationships with Students' Union staff and Officers; clarity of the Rep role; diversity initiatives; and meetings.

Course Rep Relationship

Of the 13 Department Reps that took part in an interview, all emphasised the importance of the Course Reps in the Representation System and the value their role provides in collecting student feedback. There were, however, quite a few Department Reps that indicated the relationship with Course Reps has been difficult. They have often struggled to have contact with Course Reps and consequently been unable to gather wide ranging student feedback. This is not as a result of Department Reps not reaching out to Course Reps; they have often used many methods to try and create communication channels, for example through Facebook pages, WhatsApp groups and email. Some Department Reps commented on the amount of communication that Course Reps, and any other student, will receive, and many felt that whilst emails might enable them to get in contact with all their Course Reps, it was an ineffective tool for gathering student feedback about their course or Department. Another Department Rep who had a successful experience with their Course Reps explained how they used Discord to collect student feedback. This worked as some Course Reps did not want to use Facebook or WhatsApp as they were not comfortable providing any personal information to other Course Reps.

However, two Department Reps commented on the positive relationship they have had with their Course Reps. They had been able to set up a WhatsApp group where high percentages of Course Reps (from 50 to 80 percent) had joined and this enabled them to effectively gather student feedback. This further highlights the needs for Department Reps to have effective communication with their Course Reps.

Some commented on how they felt Course Reps would sign up to the programme for something to put on their CV but rarely, if at all, engage in any of the work of being a Course Rep. About half of the Department Reps interviewed felt that more should be done to promote the Department Reps to the Course Reps, encouraging them to work with their Department Rep and to feedback issues at a Course level.

Benefits of the Department Rep role

There was an underlying feeling with Department Reps that the role helped them to develop skills, was a bonus for their CV or future employability, and was a flexible role that worked well with their timetables.

- They felt the role was beneficial for enhancing their employability in future and this should be advertised to students in future recruitment.
- The role enabled Department Reps to build or enhance their communication, interpersonal, leadership, and chairing skills. Others commented that it helped them to develop data analysis skills (e.g. related to surveys put out to Course Reps).
- Due to the role being new, there were a small number of Department Reps that appreciated the autonomy to create the role how they saw fit within their Department. Whilst, on one hand, some commented about the lack of direct support from Students' Union staff especially at the beginning of their role, this helped them to develop the role themselves and use their own initiative.

The role was flexible with their schedules and they could fit it in around their studies or other commitments they had. Some of the most engaged Department Reps were involved in other extracurricular activities outside of their course. Although time management was difficult for most of the Department Reps, especially in the beginning of the role and during exam/assessment period, knowing that, as an employee within the Students' Union, their studies came first, was a comforting notion for them. The Covid-19 situation strengthened this feeling with Department Reps. As one Department Rep said:

"I'll say like COVID actually helped a lot because a lot of my Uni session we're online so it's just like jumping for meeting to meeting and like obviously it's just it's not time consuming at all, it's really practical. I'm literally just navigating a button and going on for meeting and to another. But if I had actually been in university sessions and I'd have to physically change locations, I don't know how that would have panned out."

University staff relationship

Throughout the Department Reps interviews, participants felt that the transparency between the Department Reps and staff had become clearer and more trusting. This was especially apparent for Department Reps who spoke very positively of University staff, especially their direct contacts in the

University (normally a Student Experience Lead or Head of Department, sometimes both). Participants felt that being able to email regularly, meet with, and feel supported to navigate the environment of their Department would not have happened without their direct support staff.

"If I didn't have [staff name] *I wouldn't have a clue what I was doing. Now we have clear communication between staff and students, there is a better working relationship between staff and students. We seem to get along."*

From the interviews it became clear a positive relationship between Department Reps and University staff is imperative for creating change. Department Reps who have positive relationships with University staff where they can give student feedback in a receptive and constructive environment commented more positively on their experience as a Rep. There were, however, some Department Reps that said they had a slightly more negative relationship with University staff; this was mostly due to staff either dismissing feedback they were providing as not being a 'significant problem', or due to them not being open to change. Some Department Reps commented that getting access to minutes from meetings with University staff was difficult; Department Reps felt that having these readily available would enable them to clearly see actions and close the feedback loop with their students. Despite this, some Department Reps commented that, whilst change might not have happened for students where they would have liked, the relationship with University staff meant that they could understand *why* an issue might not be able to be changed and felt confident to communicate this back to students. That is, because Department Reps were embedded and included in these conversations, there was an understanding of the complexity and the difficulty of making change.

Students' Union Staff and College Officer Relationship

Nearly all the Department Reps interviewed discussed the positive experience they had with Students' Union staff, explaining how they offered support and they thought staff were passionate about the Representation System. There were a very small number who felt that they would have liked more direct line management support, especially in the beginning of their role. As mentioned previously, most Reps liked the autonomy of their role and the ability to shape so that it would work in their Department. Similarly, as discussed below in the section on University staff, the role of a line manager for Department Reps, and making this very clear, was discussed.

Most of the Department Reps spoke about their College Officer positively and although there was confusion at the beginning of their role related to line management and the Officer role within that, Reps felt that the structure of the Representation System worked well. There were comments from Department Reps within one College about the overenthusiastic nature of their College Officer, who encouraged them to do more hours than they were allowed to do. Despite this, Students' Union staff helped to reassure Department Reps about their role, responsibilities and allocated hours.

Department Reps normally kept in contact with their College Officer through WhatsApp (as they did with their Course Reps), which worked really well and enabled them to get quick responses. Department Reps commented on how supportive Officers had been and how they were passionate about creating positive change.

Some area for improvement within the relationship between College Officers and Department Reps was Officer organisation and requesting that Department Reps attend last minute meetings. Some

Department Reps explained how their College Officer may sometimes send a message on WhatsApp asking if they would attend a meeting with short notice; Department Reps felt that they should attend these meetings, but were often unable to do to clashes with their timetables and schedules. Additionally, some Department Reps commented on how it can be difficult for College Officers to fully understand how their areas work (particularly areas within health and social care subjects). They suggested increased support for Officers in learning certain jargon within departments might help to mitigate this in future.

Role Responsibilities and Clarity

As previously discussed, most of the Department Reps commented that whilst they appreciated it was a new function, they felt there could have been more clarity on their role. They also commented on how if they had been confident in the function of their role they could have promoted this more to Course Reps and students. Most of the Department Reps said that their role was not exactly as they expected based on the job description; participants felt that they would be contacted by Course Reps more than they had been in reality and that the role was more than they had expected it to be, especially for the very engaged Department Reps. As staff also discussed in the University staff section below, the most engaged Department Reps were involved in other projects and, very likely, worked more hours than was agreed. That was unexpected for some of the Department Reps. As one Department Rep said, it " *… met expectations, and went beyond.*"

As discussed in the introduction, the Students' Union allocated £10,000 to paying Department Reps throughout the 2020/21 academic year. With 17 Department Reps, this meant an average of 2-3 hours allotted each week, during teaching periods. The most engaged, and therefore most effective, Department Reps would regularly work above their weekly hours; they felt they needed to attend certain meetings (especially at the onset of the role) to ensure they understood everything well, they wanted to have ample opportunity to feedback the student voice within their Department, and were involved in projects with their Department. A small number of Department Reps discussed how they would submit timesheets with fewer hours than they actually worked because they knew that the budget for the programme was tight. This meant that these Department Reps accepted that these hours were given voluntarily, and they would very likely not be paid. In recognition of this, the Students' Union increased the budget to £15,000. This meant that the most engaged Department Reps could be paid for more hours (which they were very likely already working). The Students' Union was able to deliver the project within this budget, although, as discussed further in this document, many of the suggested improvements for next year may make this difficult.

In addition, Some Department Reps explained how they thought it would be beneficial if there was a handover given for the next Rep. One Rep compared it to when shift work ended and there would be handover for the next member of staff. As another commented "*I don't want all the work I have done this year to go to waste.*"

Equality & Diversity initiatives

Some Department Reps also discussed how they would like to see increased diversity amongst the Reps which may improve feedback from students. For example, if there are more BAME Department Reps, BAME students might be more likely to come forward and provide feedback on their course. One Rep discussed how they also felt if there were more BAME academic staff students may feel more confident coming forward with feedback. Another Rep discussed how they set up BAME

informal coffee mornings and felt this really helped to gather feedback from BAME students about their course and create a community where they could share their experiences. As one of the Department Reps commented about why they decided to apply for the Department Rep role:

"Being able to represent students also… like a diverse range… I don't want to generalize but sometimes a lot of people in leadership are one type of demographic. So I thought just like increasing the diversity a little bit and so students sort of see that diversity in leadership. It can [help] *and it's really important to reflect different identities, I think."*

Meetings

Most of the Department Reps found the meetings they were invited to be a useful use of their time where they were positively able to provide student feedback. In particular, one-to-one meetings with support staff in their Department were especially beneficial at enabling them to integrate into their role and make effective change.

The following meetings were mentioned by nearly all Department Reps, irrespective of their College:

- **Department Student Board.** Generally, Department Reps felt positively about these meetings, though nearly all complained about Course Rep attendance. When not enough Course Reps attended, some Department Reps described these meetings as 'pointless'.
- **College Student Board.** These meetings were valuable for Department Reps to hear from each other, to discuss and escalate issues that crossed Departments.
- **Catch up meetings with University or Students' Union staff.** These meetings were seen as very beneficial for understanding about the organisations, but also getting issues solved. There was some hesitation around the content of the meetings with Students' Union staff, where some Department Reps felt that their monthly reports could just be submitted via email and these meetings could be used for welfare, wellbeing, and general support in the role.

The appendix has a list of all the meetings that each Department Rep that was interviewed mentioned and, in their opinion, how valuable their attendance at each meeting was.

College Officers

As mentioned, all three College Officers attended a focus group to discuss the Representation System. They were asked to share how their opinions of the Representation System, their roles working with Department Reps, and where they thought improvements could be made.

Communication with Department Reps

All College Officers kept in regular contact with their Department Reps using WhatsApp (and this was also mentioned by the Department Reps as well); this was seen as the best way to have informal conversations with their Department Reps, but also used as a mechanism for collecting feedback from Departments. At times, College Officers would use email with their Department Reps, but this was normally for more 'serious' issues, which needed to be sent on to University staff. Generally, the College Officers were very aware of not bombarding their Department Reps WhatsApp chat with too much information. College Officers would also regularly have virtual meetings with all, some, or just one of the Department Reps, dependent on support needed.

Interestingly, College Officers felt that their roles helped to bridge communication or opportunity gaps between Department Reps and University staff. At times throughout the academic year, the College Officers were invited to meetings that they felt were more appropriate for their Department Reps to attend instead of them, so they would pass this invitation on (and also encourage their Department Reps to attend by telling them how important and privileged opportunity it was for them to attend meetings with some of the most senior University staff). College Officers also felt that they would find opportunities for their Department Reps to get more involved. As was mentioned in the section on Department Reps, Reps felt that College Officers would, at times, invite them to meetings with little notice. This was difficult for Department Reps to navigate whether they absolutely needed to attend these last-minute meetings. Most often, Department Reps were unable to attend last-minute meetings due to clashes in their schedules.

Department Rep Accountability

Although none of the College Officers felt that they specifically 'treated' any of the Reps differently if they were paid or unpaid, there was an underlying managerial tone that College Officers had with Department Reps compared to Course Reps or part-time Reps in the Students' Union. As one of the Officers stated, *"I think accountability is a really good way of looking at this. Essentially, the part time reps, we are not really to hold them accountable. The student union council is, whereas the department reps, we are essentially the ones that hold them accountable. So, that I think is where the distinction is and that's where, I think, the relationships should be formed."* Only one of the College Officers, who felt that they had the most community feel within their group of Department Reps, stated that they had not spoken to a Course Rep. They would delegate this task to their Department Reps, viewing them more as specialists within their Department and would ask for opinions of Course Reps through their Department Rep. The other two College Officers had spoken to both Course and Department Reps to understand student views throughout the academic year.

University staff relationships

As Department Reps mentioned, the relationships with University staff were crucial to the College Officers and the Representation System working effectively. A College Officer mentioned that they *"... can't do anything without the staff in* [my College]" and this was felt by the other College Officers. Despite this, they felt that sometimes staff did not fully understand their or the Department Reps roles fully and suggested that this be made clearer to staff, so that they could work more effectively together.

Building on the Representation System

When asked how they think the Department Rep roles could improve, College Officers had varying opinions. One believed that they should be encouraged to undergo additional training on issues linked to equality and diversity (e.g. Race Equality Charter work, BAME attainment gap) and that this would help Colleges to progress. Another believed that Department Reps should be able to attend even more meetings, should be allowed to work even more hours. Comparing unpaid Rep to paid Reps, one College Officer said: *"If there was no money, I think there'd be more effort made by them because, I've had some stories of them being Department Reps before, they were more effective. But now that there is money, they are limited to hours that they could do."* As previously discussed, some of the most engaged and effective Department Reps believed that they had worked over their allowed hours for a week, but opted to not get paid for all of their contributions. The third College Officer believed that an effective Department Rep was not about the hours they put in or the

number of meetings they attended, but for University and Students' Union staff to have a very clear understanding and acknowledgement of the best use of their time.

Sheffield Hallam University staff

In total, 23 University staff members took part in either a focus group or filled in a short questionnaire sharing their thoughts on the Department Rep roles and the Representation System. Of the 23 staff members: 7 were from the College of Social Sciences & Arts; 5 were from College of Business, Technology & Arts; 5 were from College of Health, Wellbeing & Life Sciences; 2 were Heads of Learning & Teaching Enhancement at SHU; and 4 were from the Directorate of Student Engagement, Teaching & Learning at SHU.

Effective Department Reps

Generally, staff felt that the Department Reps that were the most effective in the roles or where staff had positive working relationships were with Department Reps that were proactive, self-motivated, professional, and worked collaboratively with staff. Across all staff that had a positive experience with their Department Rep, they felt that these Reps had a tone of professionalism and preparedness in their role; they were prepared for the day-to-day work in their role as a Rep, but also willing and ready to work on projects to continue improving the student experience. Whilst not every Department Rep was able to be involved in a project this academic year, some did: review of the National Student Survey within their Department, attendance within Courses, student engagement, amongst others. Nearly all staff that had a positive experience with their Department Rep described themselves and their Department as being 'lucky'.

There were, however, staff that felt that their Department Rep was not performing at the level they would have liked or did not engage with the role at all. Where Department Reps did not work well, staff felt at a severe disadvantage compared with other Departments where it was working well. Additionally, because there was only one Department Rep per Department, this meant that staff were reliant on one individual for this role and if that individual did not engage with the role, their entire Department had missed out. Furthermore, staff felt that the most disengaged Department Reps did not represent all students in their Department, but instead had a narrow understanding of issues affecting students and might have been representing a select few students that they knew.

Staff also discussed the slow disengagement of Department Reps as the academic year continued; there were some Department Reps that were very involved in Semester 1, though this changed throughout Semester 2. There was a general consensus throughout Colleges that this was because Department Reps tended to be final year, undergraduate students, which meant that Semester 2, these students were more focussed on their course than their roles. One member of staff suggested that Department Reps should be recruited in line with the calendar year (January to December) rather than the academic year (September to August), allowing second year, undergraduate students to become Department Reps in January, through to their first semester of their final, undergraduate year.

Communication

Staff used various methods of communication and this was inconsistent, even within Colleges. Generally, though, the most effective forms of communication were:

- Emails, to discuss something urgently or to schedule meetings.
- Formal meetings with Head of Department, Student Experience Lead(s), or Head of Academic Quality, dependent on who was providing support to the Department Rep, at least once a month (though some staff met fortnightly).
- Zoom meetings, to have an informal catch up and these were normally with whomever provided direct support to the Department Rep and the Department Rep themselves.

Although there were no ineffective ways of communicating with Department Reps, staff that had engaged Department Reps shared that more personal, informal methods of communication (e.g. WhatsApp or meeting in-person at a café when allowed within government restrictions due to Coronavirus) worked well. In contrast, staff that had unengaged Department Reps would email and telephone, with little to no response. This is very likely, however, due to the Department Rep's engagement level, rather than the method of communication used.

There was a discussion amongst staff about the effectiveness of WhatsApp as a means of gathering student feedback between Course Reps, Department Reps, and College Officer. Whilst the University would have liked there to be a formal platform where Reps and Officers can come together, in practice this has not yet worked. Some staff felt strongly that this platform should exist, to enable a conversation. Furthermore, staff feedback on meetings that Department Reps attended was generally positive, though as identified within the section on Department Reps the types of meetings that they attended varied by College.

Staff also felt that, though Department Reps would raise issues, staff were not always the best at 'action-ing' those within their areas. This was echoed by some Department Reps as well; where they felt that meetings were not essential for them to attend (e.g. College Student Board, Department Student Board), this was because there were no actions recorded or practical next steps which were made clear to the Department Rep. As staff also suggested, circular conversations are something that many are guilty of and that this requires a cultural change within the organisation to address. In addition, there might be some issues which can be agreed and 'ticked off' at the meeting, rather than recording as an action for later. This might help Department Reps to understand and see purpose in these meetings.

The role of Course Reps

There was a discussion in all Colleges about the intrinsic role of Course Reps. Staff felt that, even with the engaged Department Reps, Department Reps struggled to gather a wide range of feedback. Without the regular involvement from a Course Rep in all courses in a Department, the success of the Department Rep is already hampered. Staff had various ideas of how this could be improved and some notable ones were: a video shown at Course Rep training of the Department Rep discussing the importance of the Course Rep role or an online tool for discussion between Course and Department Reps. Generally, staff felt that Course Reps might not fully understand their roles within the whole the representation system at Sheffield Hallam and that communicating this with Course Reps at the onset might help to mitigate issues of gathering feedback.

Recruitment & Training of Department Reps

Furthermore, there were general discussion in all Colleges, particularly upon hearing others positive experiences with Department Reps, on recruitment and training of Department Reps. There were two Departments that had particularly negative experiences with their Department Rep (within two

different Colleges). Though, there were also University staff that had a relatively positive working relationship with their Department Rep who felt that the recruitment process could still be improved. Some suggestions for this included:

- Begin conversations on and work plan in recruitment earlier with University staff to ensure that the role is promoted to the right students. There was a general feeling from every College that recruitment in 2020 was rushed and, because of that, staff felt they had little involvement in the process. Staff would like to be used as a resource that the Students' Union can utilise to promote the Department Rep roles to the more widely.

- Utilise previous Department Reps to promote the Department Rep roles to students through video. This might encourage students to see the benefits of doing the role. This video could also be used to Course Reps to encourage them to give feedback, with University staff to encourage buy-in, and understand their roles in Representation System at SHU.

- Recruit for more than 1 Department Rep per Department, especially for Departments that are larger cohort of students. Also, consider how the feedback gathered by some Department Reps will differ by course (i.e. the postgraduate experience being different from the undergraduate experience). For a Department with a large amount of international students or postgraduate students, having a Rep from those might be useful in understanding the experiences of these students.

- Consider the recruitment methods ability to correctly identify students that are best suited to the roles. As discussed above, the most effective Department Reps were approachable, proactive, and professional. Being able to work with both students and staff is a key element to this role.

Nearly all staff that participated in the review would like their Department Reps to be allocated more hours, so that they can be even more involved in meetings or projects where listening to the student voice is important (similarly, as discussed previously, the most engaged and effective Department Reps would work more than their allotted hours, opting to volunteer their time rather than be paid). Additionally, staff participants were concerned about the way the Department Reps will be recruited in the future and would like to be more involved, especially for promoting the role to students more widely than was done previously.

Conclusion

We can now return to the initial questions at the start of this document, and consider, based on the above analysis, to what extent the changes to the Representation system have been effective in their aims:

Do College Officers, Department Reps, and Course Reps feel part of a community with a collective goal? To what extent has this community enabled them to work together to improve the student experience in their respective areas? How has this community been influenced by their College Officer or Department Rep?

There is promising information here: College Officers and Department Reps were predominantly positive in their evaluations of their relationships and their partnership working. There could be some work done to clarify boundaries for College Officers, acknowledging the limited resource available for Department Reps. Similarly, the high awareness of the Department Rep among Course Reps is very promising – while this has not been measured before, anecdotally this is likely to be a significant increase in awareness and will be monitored moving forward. The Course Reps who responded to the survey also felt that the Department Rep was, in general, a useful contact for solving issues.

Are the processes in place suitable and appropriate for effective communication between the student body, Course Reps, Department Reps, College Officers, and staff, and vice versa?

Within this complex network of communication, there were several successful elements: College Officers and Department Reps generally communicated well, as did Department Reps and their assigned University staff. However, Department Reps, with some exceptions, were often frustrated with the level of engagement they got from Course Reps. More work can be done here to ensure that Course Reps are aware of the Department Reps' role, and that they are encouraged to have a working relationship with them, right from the start. There is also the issue of communication between University and Union staff around Department Reps – this has been the source of some confusion at times, in relation to the organisation of recruitment, and questions around line management and performance management. This can also be revisited.

To what extent has the perception of student representation improved as a result of the changes to Department Rep roles and the College Officer structure?

While it is difficult to draw a conclusive answer from this research, the vast majority of feedback relating to the changes has been positive. In the areas where this has not been the case, we should look to draw best practice from more effective areas in order to make improvements. This includes better systems for managing instances when Department Reps underperform. Anecdotally, University staff felt that the role of Department Reps occupied an ideal space between looking at student concerns at a very high level (through College Officers) and very granular level (through Course Reps). More work likely needs to be done to explore the perception of student representation with students that are not in representative roles.

How effective were College and Department Student Boards and how have they contributed to understanding students' experiences?

Recommendation 4 discusses, and the appendix displays the meetings that Department Reps normally attended and Department Rep opinion on the usefulness of these. Understanding whether these meetings proactively and productively worked to understand, and in turn improve, student

experiences likely still need to be reviewed. This review found that these meetings were run differently within each College. While much of the feedback around the Boards has been positive, more can be done to ensure they are productive use of time, particularly with better Course Rep attendance in some areas.

Recommendations

On the basis of these reflections, the following recommendations are suggested to improve the Representation System at Sheffield Hallam:

Recommendation 1: To review recruitment and induction of Department Reps, including the skills needed for effective Reps and training offering.

Some University staff felt that there was a lack of clarity around the recruitment process for Department Representatives this year. Communications around this process should be improved. Similarly, some Department Reps felt that the understanding of the role that they had applied for could have been better. To improve this, the Job Description & Person Specification of the Department Reps can be improved, and training enhanced to reflect the experiences of this year's Department Reps. Furthermore, Department Reps felt that more can be done at the handover stage, to ensure that their efforts and knowledge from the year prior are shared with incoming Department Reps.

Recommendation 2: To develop the ongoing support of Department Reps from SU staff, University staff, and College Officers, with clear communication channels and areas of responsibility for each.

Nearly all the participants (College Officers, Department Reps, University staff) discussed the need for the Department Rep roles to have more clearly defined line management and reporting channels. Some university staff stated that they were unaware of who line managed Department Reps to discuss their performance. Department Reps should be provided with clear objectives and goals that would allow stakeholders to identify strong and weak areas, and, where necessary, to consider removing a Department Rep from their role. As discussed, the most effective Department Reps are those that proactively took responsibility of their role and passionately worked to make sure that the collective student voice was heard in their Department. In addition, Department Reps felt that University staff were not clear on what the role of the Department Rep was (though this tended to be staff that did not work closely with Department Reps). There should be clear communication channels or meetings between the Department Reps, permanent Students' Union staff, College Officers and University staff, and all stakeholders should be aware of the regularity and purpose of those meetings/channels.

Recommendation 3: To promote the Department Rep roles to Course Reps and University staff to encourage involvement and understanding of their role in the Representation System.

Although the Course Rep Survey identified that 81 percent of respondents were aware and knew how to contact their Department Rep, it might be likely the Course Reps that completed the survey were the most engaged in their roles and would, therefore, have been more likely to know who their Department Rep was. In addition, throughout the Department Rep interviews, participants expected more Course Reps to be involved and that the attendance for Department Student Board meetings,

a key meeting used to gather Course Rep feedback was, at times, very low. As some of the Department Reps said, in those instances, the meetings are 'utterly pointless.' University staff also felt that feedback gathered from Course Reps was not wide ranging and that Department Reps likely only gathered feedback from the same very engaged Course Reps. There should be more opportunities, particularly towards the start of the year, for Department Reps and Course Reps to meet and get to know each other, and, once recruited, Department Reps should be promoted more heavily to Department staff, and to students within the Department.

Recommendation 4: Review the effectiveness and impact of Department Student Boards, including where this information is disseminated and how these processes create effective change for students.

Similar to Recommendation 3, the feeling of success of Department Student Boards varied by College and, as the table in the appendix displays, Department Reps from Health, Wellbeing & Life Sciences were more likely to feel that these meetings had a clear purpose for their role and that they worked well in practice. Department Reps also suggested during their interviews that they would like to attend Student-Staff Committee Meetings, particularly those for some of their largest courses, would give them a better understanding of issues that the students in their Department are facing. This would also help the Course Reps by reducing the number of meetings they have to attend as well.

Furthermore, one area that staff felt could be improved was on the actions from Department Student Boards, ensuring that these are completed and shared with the Department Reps. Similarly, Student Representation Steering Group has an operational role in running of the Representation System in partnership, and the Student Voice Group has a strategic role in exploring, debating and responding the student voice work across the university. More should be done in the next academic year to ensure that any meeting currently in place which listens to students' feedback is effective in its processes.

Recommendation 5: Increase the resources available to deliver the Department Rep project.

As mentioned above, £10,000 was initially budgeted for this project, and it quickly became clear that this was insufficient to cover some of the work being done by our more effective Department Reps. While negative for the respective Departments, the resources saved from Reps who did not engage allowed us to operate the project within our increased budget of £15,000. If all Department Reps were to complete the same number of hours as our most engaged (and one of the most highly spoken of) Department Reps, the annual cost of the project would have been £20,074.96 – and even then, we are confident that this Rep significantly under-reported their hours worked. If all Department Reps worked the average number of hours worked in the HWLS College (the most consistent in terms of hours worked), the cost of the project this year would have been £16,723.41.

The general consensus among College Officers and University staff is that the work of the Department Reps is highly valuable - Department Reps, as one member of staff said, are the 'sweet spot' for student representation at SHU - and all would like to see a significant increase in their output. However, many recommendations presented here would require an increase in the budget for this project. Additionally, increases in national minimum wage will also increase the cost of this project.

Some University staff, especially those in some of the largest Departments, would like there to be at least two Department Reps; this would help if a student were unable to fulfil their role (so there should always be at least one) or to help if a student becomes very busy and is unable complete everything (this happened in Teacher Education and Health and Social Care courses, where Department Reps were on placement some of their time this last academic year). In addition, University staff would like Department Reps to get more involved in projects related to student voice work. This year, their involvement in these types of projects in their Department was limited due to the restriction on their hours, although the Students' Union was very flexible where necessary in order to allow the more engaged Reps to carry out their work. Increasing the budget would help to either hire more Department Reps for Departments that require more or to allow Department Reps to be more effective in their roles. In addition, as discussed throughout this paper, the most engaged and effective Department Reps shared that they would often work more hours than was budgeted for; this meant that some would not record their hours in their timesheet and accepted that additional work over their hours was deemed as voluntary.

 At approximately 3 to 4 hours per week per Department Rep, this would mean that each Department Rep is paid up to £1177 in total for 9 months of work, 12 hours per month. Therefore, it is suggested that the annual budget for the Department Rep project for the 2021/22 academic year is at least £20,000. This will allow for greater opportunities for ongoing training for the Department Reps, to allow for more time for meeting with College Officers and other staff, and more activities that establish the Department Rep as a key contact for Course Reps.

Appendix A: Department Rep Meetings

College of Business, Technology & Engineering

College	Department	Meeting - beneficial	Meeting - attendance at could be reviewed	Notes
BTE	Computing	• Department Student Board		
	Engineering & Maths	• Department Student Board • College Student Board • Catch up meetings with staff	• Department Student Board • BTE Teaching, Learning and Assessment Delivery Group	Department Student Board attendance with Course Reps was not always good, so made meetings feel 'pointless'
	Finance, Accounting & Business Systems	• Executive & Residents meetings • Catch up meetings with staff	• Department Student Board • College Student Board • BTE Shaping Futures	
	Service Sector Management	• College Student Board • Catch up meetings with staff • Course Review meeting	• Department Student Board • BTE Teaching, Learning and Assessment Delivery Group	

College of Health, Wellbeing & Life Sciences

College	Department	Meeting - beneficial	Meeting - attendance at could be reviewed	Notes
HWLS	Allied Health Professions	• Department Student Board • College Student Board • Department Leadership Team meetings • One-to-one with Students' Union • Catch-up meetings with AHP staff	• Course Leader Sessions	
	Biosciences & Chemistry	• Department Student Board • College Student Board • One-to-one with Students' Union • Department Leadership Team meetings		Department Student Board attendance with Course Reps was not always good, so not always representative
	Nursing & Midwifery	• Department Student Board • Department Quality Board • College Student Board • Department Leadership Team meeting		Difficult to attend all meetings alongside placements
	Sport & Physical Activity	• Department Student Board • College Student Board • One-to-one with Students' Union	• Academic Leadership Team meeting	
	Social Work, Social Care & Community Studies	• Department Student Board • College Student Board • Catch up meetings with staff	• Department Leadership Team meeting	

College of Social Sciences & Arts

College	Department	Meeting - beneficial	Meeting - attendance at could be reviewed	Notes
SSA	Art & Design	• Catch up meetings with staff	• Department Student Board • College Student Board • Department Leadership Team meetings	
	The Natural & Built Environment	• Department Student Board • College Student Board	• Department Leadership Team meeting	
	Psychology, Sociology & Politics	• Department Student Board • College Student Board • Quality Boards • Catch up meetings with staff		
	Teacher Education	• Department Student Board • College Student Board • Department Leadership Team meeting	• Course Development Sessions	Difficult to attend all meetings alongside placements

Appendix B: Diversity Data of Applicants

Looking at information collected on applicants for the Department Representative roles in September 2020, in 12 of the 17 Departments, these was at least one applicant that identified as being from a black, Asian, or minority ethnic background. The five other Departments only had applicants that identified as 'White.' Below are the exact counts of college, gender, and disability status of applicants. As the tables below display, a total of 79 applications were received.

Number of applicants	Count
BTE	32
HWLS	11
SSA	36

Gender	Count
Male	18
Female	55
Unknown	6

Disability	Count
Identified as having a disability	16
Did not identify as having a disability	54
Unknown	9