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Title	The role, value and impact of academic representation: institutional and students' union perspectives
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Student academic representation (SAR) is a common element of both institutional governance and wider approaches to student engagement in the UK Higher Education (HE) sector. It is integrated within expectations and indicators around student engagement in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (QAA, 2012), the NUS (2012) Manifesto for Partnership and TSEP's (nd) principles for student engagement. It is also an area of practice and policy that is a focus for collaboration between HE providers and their students' unions, associations and guilds, with functional benefits for universities, developmental benefits for students, and social benefits for wider society (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). However, the way representation systems are perceived to function in practice is varied and highly contextual, and has received comparatively little scholarly study (Carey, 2003). Previous studies indicate differences in perceptions of the role and effectiveness of representation between institutions and their students' unions (Little et al, 2009) and a lack of clarity around the role of representatives (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009)

The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) champions and develops student engagement practice in the English higher education sector. Through our work, we provide expertise and insight, bringing together established and emerging knowledge and practice in order to equip student engagement professionals, practitioners and decision-makers across the sector with the knowledge and skills they need to make a success of student engagement in their context. With a history of work supporting student engagement in quality assessment and development of learning and teaching, TSEP have observed the continued central role of SAR systems in these processes. We are interested in current perspectives on their role and value and understanding how these systems have evolved in the context of developments in student engagement theory, policy and practice in recent years. Whilst acknowledging the excellent work going on in other nations of the UK around SAR, this research focused specifically on the English HE sector; reflecting TSEP's area of focus and current funding arrangements from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

This study focuses on SAR at the system level: exploring the perceived role, value and impact of student representation from both institutional and students' union perspectives. Whilst these stakeholders may have different expectations and perspectives on SAR, the continued success of representation systems is rooted in collaboration between the institution and their student body and balancing these diverse expectations and perspectives. As SAR is played out in very different institutional contexts across the HE sector, the participating institutions and students' unions were selected to reflect a range of diverse perspectives, including: different mission groups, geographic location; size of institution; and, an articulated interest in working with TSEP or developing their SAR system.

The purposes of the research were to:

- Provide an insight into a range of institutional and students' union perspectives on the role, value and impact of SAR;
- Provide insight into innovative and developmental practices in SAR in students' unions, associations and guilds;
- Inform the development of TSEP's work and resources to support students' unions and their institutional colleagues.

To achieve these aims, the research comprised a literature review and a two-phase qualitative research study. This paper addresses the qualitative research study and its findings. The first phase involved four telephone interviews with individuals considered to have expertise and a national perspective on student representation. The findings from these 'expert interviews' helped to refine the focus of the second phase of the research and provided a sector level/national perspective to complement the institutional and students' union perspectives.

The second phase of the research involved a small scale qualitative study with 5 institutions and 6 students' unions. The approach drew on case study approaches (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Yin, 2003) to capture in-depth contextual insight into perspectives and practices. For each students' union and institution three sources of information were collected:

- A short pre-interview questionnaire sent to the lead students' union participant to gather information on the operational aspects of their SAR system.
- Analysis of two pieces of documentation relating to their SAR system, to allow comparison between the formal articulation of the role, value and impact of SAR systems and how these are understood in practice.
- Interviews with senior staff with responsibility for SAR in the participating students' union, and senior institutional staff with responsibility for student experience/engagement. These were conducted separately, with up to two participants per interview, to allow comparison between institutional and students' union perspectives. Each interview was conducted by two interviewers (the lead researcher and a TSEP colleague).

The data collected were synthesised and analysed to explore common themes and differences, both within and between cases, and illustrative examples from practice.

The research findings provide insight into the perceived role, value and impact of SAR and where there are convergent and divergent perspectives between institutions and their associated students' unions. Topics explored through the research include how the effectiveness of representation is evaluated, how representation systems are being developed to meet the needs of diverse students and the changing HE sector, and how representation informs and drives change. Implications for practice and policy will be explored at the HEP and sector level, as well as considering how TSEP and other sector agencies can support the development of SAR.

The presentation will be relevant for those with responsibilities for, or an interest in, working with SAR systems in the enhancement of learning and teaching and the student experience.

References

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