

January 2021 (original research carried out November 2019).
Faculty Education Committee.

Education Officers report on SVRs and Q.26 of the NSS.

Introduction:

Question 26 of the NSS reads: “**The Students’ Union (Association or Guild) effectively represents students’ academic interests**”. Historically, Keele has tended to score poorly on this particular question and so I have sought to find out *why*. The following report covers feedback gathered from Student Voice Representatives (SVRs) in 2019, our own statistical data, and admittedly some informed guesswork. I asked over 100 Natural Sciences SVRs if they could think of any reasons for the universities perceived “low SU representation” / “lack of representation of students’ academic interests”. I have summarised these responses into 5 general themes with specific subsections where applicable. This report then concludes with some broad recommendations.

Whilst this feedback was only gathered from reps within the Natural Sciences, I do think it is generalizable enough to share with the other faculties as I do not think there is a single school who already fulfils every recommendation made in this report.

General themes and recommendations:

1. Issues with the SVR system:

1.1: Lack of faith in the SVR system:

The first and most obvious issue that came to light was a general lack of faith in the Student Voice Rep system. This should be perhaps one of the most obvious ways in which the Students’ Union *represents students’ academic needs* and yet this remains one of Keele’s lowest scoring areas. Whilst it is worthy of note that Keele still ranks in the top 10 nationally, we should always seek to improve. Reasons for this lack of faith with the Student Voice Rep system fell into five broad categories; awareness of the SVR system; awareness of the *purpose* of the SVR system; cohort sizes; feedback from Student Staff Voice committees; and Lead Voice Representatives.

1.2: Awareness of the SVR system:

Whilst many first year respondents reported that they felt there was little issue with the awareness of SVRs (as these had been introduced at the start of the year), SVRs in other year groups reported feeling as though their presence often faded into the background as the years progressed.

Recommendation: At the beginning of each semester, students should be reminded during lectures who their SVRs are (i.e. include a slide in introductory lectures with

contact details/ include a slide later in the term *after* an SSVc to allow SVRs to update students on issues raised).

1.3: Awareness of the purpose of SVR system:

Many Student Voice Reps raised the issue of students often raising “unsolvable”, “academically irrelevant” or “staff specific” feedback that couldn’t effectively be acted upon during SSVcs. Examples of this included expressing dislike of certain lecturers, asking for improvements to on campus accommodation, or “fixing parking”. Obviously this is not feedback our SVRs can necessarily report back to staff and even if they do, there is little that can be achieved. This subsequently leads to students disengaging with the SVR system as (by virtue of their feedback going unreported or consistently ignored) they believe that there is little that SVRs can *actually* achieve.

Recommendation: Internal “you said we did” documentation should be shared with all students on the course and should be updated annually to reflect the new achievements of SVRs. It is also worth raising awareness of where else students can register feedback not suitable for discussion in SSVcs (e.g. other complaints procedures or with the SU directly). Staff should also encourage SVRs to attend training as appropriate topics for discussion are covered in the SU training sessions.

1.4: Large cohort sizes:

The aforementioned issues are particularly relevant to SVRs on courses with high student numbers and teaching group sizes. One SVR noted “It’s a bit hard to not only ensure you’re engaging everyone in feedback, but that everyone is actually made aware of the changes their feedback is making”*. On larger courses it is unreasonable to expect just 1 or 2 reps to be able to talk to every student in their cohort.

Recommendation: As large cohort sizes are often unavoidable, the Students Union will continue to encourage the use of online feedback collection (and SVRs and SSVc’s responses to said feedback). In the long term, we would like to see SVR specific systems imbedded into the Keele app. In the time being, if your school would benefit from having *more* SVRs we will gladly increase available candidate slots upon request.

1.5: Feedback from Student Staff Voice Committees:

This is perhaps one of the most essential areas of improvement necessary as it was *consistently* reported across all schools within the Faculty that feedback from SSVcs was not reaching the entire student population as intended. Currently, whilst some schools are uploading minutes from SSVcs for students to see, it can be difficult for students to find. One SVR explains “-it’s on the KLE, under module code WHAT-3005-2019-SEM1-A, in folder course information, sub-folder etc, sub-sub-folder etc, sub-sub-sub folder SSVcs, and *even then* only when you download the minutes do you actually have any idea what you’re looking at! And that’s if you know what SSVcs are at all...”*

Recommendations: Reduction in the amount of jargon and sub-folders to necessary for students to know how their feedback has been acted upon by circulating the minutes of SSVCs *directly* to students via email would make it clearer to students how their feedback is being listened to. Key action points from meetings should also be displayed on school notice boards.

1.6: Lead Student Voice Representatives:

Engagement with Lead Voice Reps in the Faculty was good both last year and this year (2018/19 and 2019/20), with several very strong Lead Voice Reps and applications for the Lead Voice Rep position in every school within the faculty. During their training, Lead Voice Reps are informed of their greater ability to ensure changes are happening to courses within their schools, however the extent to which this is *actually true* varies greatly across schools and faculties. Some schools invite their LVRs along to SECs and some do not, some have LVR specific meetings and some do not, and some LVRs are receiving the minutes of SSVCs within the school and some are not.

Recommendation: Ensure that your school is engaging with your LVR(/s). I can invite them along to FECs when relevant - but it would be most beneficial for schools to be interacting with LVRs directly. If schools *are* already having LVR specific meetings this is good to hear although it should be ensured that these meetings are not composed of 1 student and 7 staff members as this can be rather intimidating! Instead more reps or less staff should be invited to ensure a balanced staff to student ratio.

2. Social tendencies:

2.1: Lack of communication between peers:

For some courses, it was reported that there was a significant lack of communication between peers, not just between students and voice reps. Some voice reps felt as though they represented a particularly “anti-social” group of people and admitted that some students no matter how hard they try, just didn’t *want* to talk to their peers and definitely didn’t want to “make a fuss” by reporting issues to voice reps.

Recommendation: There are few meaningful recommendations that can be made here as there will always be “hard to reach” students, however the importance of building a sense of community into a course cannot be understated. Allowing students the chance to talk to their peers, whether this be during group induction projects, quick 5 minute discussions in class, or course specific social/study societies can be really beneficial to students overall experience of university - and relating back to the topic of this report, would also make gathering student feedback a less laborious task for SVRs and staff alike!

2.2: Course structure:

Some SVRs theorised that the differing workload of different courses may be detrimental to the effectiveness and awareness of SVRs in some cases. As the term progresses and deadlines draw nearer, SVRs reported that many students are keen to “get their heads down and get on with it”*, and don’t *have* to communicate with their peers if they don’t want to (unless they have compulsory weekly seminars to attend).

Recommendation: As suggested above, allowing students the chance to talk to their peers, whether this be during group induction projects, quick 5 minute discussions in class, or course specific social/study societies can be really beneficial to students overall experience of university - and relating back to the topic of this report, would also make gathering student feedback a less laborious task for SVRs and staff alike.

3. Helpfulness of lecturers:

3.1: Helpful staff:

A surprisingly pleasant piece of feedback was received (amongst the drudgery of the rest of this paper) that staff were incredibly proactive and helpful in terms of receiving and reporting back on student feedback.

Recommendation: Keep doing what you’re doing helpful staff! If many of the issues raised in this paper seem irrelevant to you or the examples of best practise given at the end of this paper sound like you or someone you know, then keep up the good work! Know that the students really appreciate what you do!

3.2: ‘Unhelpful’ staff:

In contrast to the above however, there are of course certain staff members who seem to resent the idea of student feedback. One Voice Representative recalled a particularly problematic meeting that they had attended last year, where staff present *complained* about the presence of first year SVRs during their meeting - which *massively* dissuaded the students present from volunteering their time and feedback again.

Recommendation: Please do not do this! And remember to signpost students to their SVRs/ LVRs/ Education Officer when relevant.

4. Module feedback forms:

Several SVRs raised this with me, and I think they raised an excellent point. At the end of a semester, students are asked to complete module feedback forms and provide additional commentary on how they feel the module was. This is perhaps **the** biggest way in which module specific feedback is given by students, and yet students often never see the impact of their feedback. If the feedback given is used to improve the module the following academic year, it is *too late* for those students to possibly know about this unless they resit the year or happen know

students in the year below. From a student's perspective, this can look like their feedback has fallen on deaf ears - especially if in the following academic year, many of the issues students raised in their module feedback forms remain present in other modules taught by the same staff.

Recommendations: Share (a diluted version) of this feedback with students (again, emailing it out directly rather than hiding it in sub-folders on the KLE) and action plans on what will be done to address this feedback. This feedback is already used internally to make improvements, so why not share it with the students too?

Furthermore, I'd *really* like to see this feedback shared with the following years SVRs. If it was raised in module feedback forms during the previous year that feedback on assignments was unhelpful, then the incoming SVRs will be aware of this and more proactive in monitoring this. They will know to ask students if their feedback has been helpful, rather than having to wait for the situation to arise later in the term, only for the issue to then be reported at SSVc where the previous years SVRs tell them that "it was an issue last year too". Moreover, if the feedback from the previous year's module feedback forms has been acted on, then SVRs can make students aware of this - where they might otherwise not have known that student voices lead to the improvement of feedback on their module.

5. Lack of understanding of what SU offers students (other than nights out!)

This is a piece of feedback that dogs the entire university, and something we are constantly trying to make students aware of. One of the simplest ways for us to make your students aware of what we offer, is for the Students' Union to have a presence during your welcome week (or later in the semester if preferred). I have attached [here](#) an example of a presentation we gave to a number of schools during the first week of the semester, and we would be more than happy to do this for any school that wanted it.

Link:

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1kXvHQapiAKBQkkR9dLtCEmCEGbUDX4ggjODcnQaQUPs/edit?usp=sharing>

SVR engagement:

Engagement varies considerably between schools.

Whilst there are usually a decent number of vacancies within every school, engagement rates are better than it first appears. Many vacancies are usually in very small PGT programmes or specific dual honours routes where it is especially challenging to recruit reps and these positions often remain unfilled.

That said however, it is clear that some schools regularly perform better at both attracting candidates and recruiting reps at the second stage. Ideally, the majority of positions should be filled by promotion of the election in the first instance, rather than schools recruiting reps themselves.

There are a total of 534 Rep positions available and we do not expect to fill all of these due to a significant number of these vacancies being in programmes where there are fewer than 10 students. We usually anticipate a total of around 400 Student Voice Reps.

Broad recommendations:

What a school that champions Student Voice could look like:

- At the start of the year, the school invites the Students Union to give an introductory talk to first years. For other year groups, students are reminded of the SVR system and elections timeframe (we will circulate this to you nearer the time!)
- During Students Union elections (for both SVRs in September/October and Officers elections in February/March), remind students during sessions to participate either by voting or standing themselves, if your school is at risk of underrecruiting SVRs, you will be notified.
- When SVRs are in place, use doodle polls (or another similar platform) to allow SVRs to select the best time for SSSC meetings to take place to ensure SVRs with other obligations still can attend.
- **Most importantly** once feedback has been received, **respond to all** of it - even if it is merely explaining why the school cannot “fix parking”, directing students to more suitable places to give this feedback would help students who feel their voices are unheard.
- After SSSCs, circulate minutes from the meeting and responses to it from relevant staff as soon as possible back to SVRs. Once the minutes and responses have been approved by reps, upload this document to the KLE in an accessible place and **email it** to the wider student cohort.
- Once changes have been put in place, **give SVRs opportunities to tell people about them!** Include a “your student voice has lead to...” slide at the start of the lecture, put it on your school notice board, encourage reps to put a poster on the door of your lecture theatre or do an interpretive dance about it! Whatever works, just make sure students know! Everything else we do isn’t reaching the students if we fall at the last hurdle.
- Rinse and repeat, if you think the system needs tweaking contact with me at su.educationofficer@keele.ac.uk or the SU voice department at su.voice@keele.ac.uk

More online outlets for feedback to be given and received:

This is something we hope to eventually see in the Keele app, but as this is likely to be after my time as Education Officer, in the time being I’d really love to see more Voice Reps utilising free software like Google forms and Outlook to gather and give feedback. Based on the findings of this report, I will of course continue to encourage SVRs to do this.

Module feedback forms feedback!

This is now something I am incredibly passionate about.

Without repeating my above recommendations too much, I know that schools already respond to module feedback forms internally, but issuing responses to the cohort of students that gave it could really improve the prevalent feeling that staff “don’t listen”*.

Furthermore, passing on this feedback (and the feedback to the feedback) to the following years SVRs could be a really beneficial way to ensure that feedback is acted upon and that the course is continuously improving rather than stagnating. This would also inspire SVRs as they will be more aware of the positive changes that have happened on their course because of the power of (and how much staff care about) Student Voice.

The Students Union can tailor Voice Rep positions to your needs:

We'll do it if you just ask! There are some small programmes in this school and we would be happy to merge some SVR positions if this would be beneficial for students and the school. The system needs to work for individual programmes and we are happy to add, take away, merge or amend positions in partnership with schools, but we won't know to do this unless you tell us!

SU induction talks should be factored in to induction week

It is possible that the Students' Union delivering a talk which featured the Voice Rep opportunity may have factored into Students engaging in the system as the schools that exposed *all* students to this talk were often the best performing in terms of SVR nominations. We would recommend that all Schools factor the Students' Union talk into inductions.

Schools need to disseminate information provided from the SU in ‘Tools for Schools’

All schools receive the same information before the start of term detailing the process for electing representatives. Schools who communicate frequently with the SU and pass Tools for Schools on to their colleagues consistently perform better than those who do not. As an example, Life Sciences remain very up to date with SU communications and have consistently filled SVR positions for the past 3 years. It is very disappointing to hear from an academic 2 weeks into the election that “the SU has not included this programme” or “when will reps be elected” when the information was provided to the school in the first week of September. The Students' Union is administering over 500 possible rep positions, during Welcome Week, and we do not have the time or resources to chase individual schools. Additionally, we do not know what information we may be missing from schools, unless you tell us.

Schools need to keep the SU and Quality Office up to date with “School Champions”

We need to be made aware of who we need to pass Tools for Schools and SVR information on to within schools. This is usually the school manager and an administrator but we are happy to include other staff if this works best for your school.

**All students quoted in this paper will remain anonymous.*