

Student Academic Representation Review

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Contents

- [Executive Summary](#)
- [Introduction](#)
- [Student Views](#)
- [Faculty/Department Views](#)
- [Consultation](#)
- [Timescale](#)
- [Proposed Changes to Regulations](#)

Executive Summary

At its meeting of 18 July 2019, GBEC approved a review of academic representation, to be carried out by Cambridge University Students' Union (CUSU), the Graduate Union (GU) and the Education Quality and Policy Office (EQPO). This took place throughout the 18-19 academic year and details of the review and feedback received are below.

The following proposals are made in response to this review:

1. That the University aligns student representation with subject roles, rather than the current organisationally-driven structure;
2. That the list of available subject roles be drawn up yearly in conjunction with faculties, and published by Notice; this list would include a mapping of each course to the available subject roles to which students may stand and vote;
3. That the electoral process be managed jointly by CUSU, the GU, and EQPO, with CUSU establishing a permanent member of staff to work with an Officer in EQPO and the elected Union sabbatical Officers;
4. That CUSU and the GU have a recognised role in the promotion, training and support of subject representatives;
5. That the current restriction of a maximum of four student members on a Board is removed, replaced with a minimum of two and numbers to be defined by each body as it deems appropriate;
6. That restrictions limiting student eligibility based on course and year of study, College fellowships and sabbatical office be removed;
7. That the above changes are instituted with effect from 1 October 2019.

Introduction

Drivers for the review:

- Student feedback from surveys and focus groups conducted by CUSU/GU indicated a lack of clarity of the organisational structure and the different levels of representation.
- Student feedback from surveys and focus groups conducted by CUSU/GU indicated a lack of engagement with the electoral process and incentive to run. Turnout for elections is on

average quite low, ranging from an average of 6% for School Council elections up to around 30-35% for Faculty Boards. The average voter turnout of institutions polled was around 18%.

- Anecdotal feedback from Faculties and Departments indicated that the electoral process was poorly understood and felt to be overly restrictive and bureaucratic.

CUSU and the GU managed liaison with students, and EQP managed liaison with Faculties, Departments and Schools. In addition, EQP liaised with the Student Registry regarding the current process for generation of the electoral rolls. Surveys were undertaken in the Long Vacation and the Michaelmas Term, and a consultation on the resulting proposals undertaken in May 2019.

Student Views

During the Long Vacation of 2018, CUSU conducted an online survey of academic representatives from previous years. 46 responses were received. Of those respondents, 38 were representatives during the 2018-19 academic year. Responses were received from student representatives in all schools except Clinical Medicine, and from students who were representatives during all years of study. The survey was targeted at faculty-level representatives, but a number of responses were received from other types of representative, including those at department or Tripos part level. Some responses suggest a lack of understanding of the different levels of student academic representation. CUSU also held a focus group of incumbent representatives during Michaelmas term 2018.

63% of respondents were selected in formal election process. Of the rest, almost all were selected informally. This is likely either because elections were not held for uncontested roles, or because elections are not used as the selection process for some informal representative positions at department or Tripos part level. Of those for whom there was an election, one third of respondents were the only candidate. Overall, 60% of representatives were selected in contested elections. Focus group participants claimed there was generally perceived to be little engagement with elections or incentive to run, and turnout was understood to be very low.

There was also inconsistency in how clearly representatives reported understanding the role before selection. 59% of survey respondents reported that the duties of the role were clear or very clear before they ran to be a Faculty Rep, against 41% who responded neutrally or said that the role was unclear. After selection, 53% reported being given an outline of the role, while 40% believed that they had not been. These varied between introductory conversations and formal documents.

Student understandings of what the role consists of varied, with some identifying the formal role in governance processes as important (e.g. *“sit on a variety of different committees”, “represent student concerns on the Faculty Board”*) and others choosing to highlight more informal representation and student-facing activity (e.g. *“Understand and relay the concerns and desires of the student body”, “advocating on behalf of specific students and connecting them with relevant staff where appropriate”, “leading and establishing student/staff collaborative projects”*).

Providing training for student representatives does not appear to be standard practice amongst institutions: 85% reported that they had not received any training from their Faculty, Department, or equivalent. CUSU currently delivers training for academic representatives on an unofficial basis, which 36% of respondents had attended. This training was valued by those who received it, with 79% of respondents rating it either useful or very useful. One third of respondents had received some form of guidance from their predecessor. Focus group participants too said that training was useful and that the Students' Unions are well placed to deliver it. Opportunities to meet representatives from other institutions were also thought useful and seen as a benefit of coordinated support and training.

When respondents were asked to rate how able they felt to participate in formal meetings on a scale from 1 to 5, where 5 indicated “Completely” and 1 meant “Not at all”, 40% of answers were 3 or lower.

Reasons given were a roughly even split between a lack of familiarity with the format, a lack of confidence, and not feeling listened to or respected. Open-ended responses to this question often indicated that students felt excluded (e.g. *“it can be very daunting at first to sit around a table with a number of professors and feel able to voice an opinion”*, *“Often time was very tight at meetings, so I felt adding my thoughts was an inconvenience”*) but just as often students saw themselves as not usefully adding to conversations. (e.g. *“Once you get used to [the format], not speaking in meetings is due to not being able to add best to the content, rather than because you don’t want to”*, *“We had fairly minimal feedback to relate and I don’t feel like my off the cuff impressions would make for particularly helpful responses”*)

There were several further open-response opportunities for comment in the survey of representatives and focus group. Notable themes emerging from this and the focus group were:

- Lack of understanding of governance structures, including a desire for training including *“explanation of the committees and processes...necessary to help achieve your aims”*
- A strong message from the focus group participants was the need for means of contacting the students in a constituency. Representatives often did not have access to mailing lists, or had to communicate with students via Faculties who would often alter the tone or content of their message. For representatives to the Councils of the Schools, these mailing lists do not exist.
- The issues facing undergraduate and postgraduate representatives were seen as being broadly similar, but it was seen as more important to have a well-functioning representative system for postgraduates, who often have closer ties to their Department or Faculty than to their College community and representatives.
- Many responses included frustration that student representatives were treated as if they were supposed to provide *“a student opinion rather than **the** student opinion”*; representatives often expressed a desire to consult students on issues or bring issues that students had raised with them to meetings, but were unsupported in doing so and were instead used simply as a feedback mechanism for issues raised by the School, Faculty or Department.

Faculty/Department Views

During Michaelmas Term 2018 all Faculty Boards and equivalent bodies were sent a survey requesting details of:

- Their views on the current process for electing student representatives
- The types of roles available, and how available roles were promoted to students
- Training provided, and handover between reps
- How they liaise with student representatives, and how representatives liaise with the student body

21 responses were received.

Overall, faculties and departments felt that student representation was valued. 19 respondents (90%) answered yes to both survey questions: *Do you feel the current representative system enables student representatives to engage well with the roles* and *In general, do you feel that your Faculty Board representatives actively contribute to the work of the Board* (1 no, 1 no response).

The majority of respondents (81%) elect both formal Faculty Board representatives and informal subject or year representatives. These informal roles vary widely in structure and organisation, but most reported that students identified more closely with the informal roles than the formal. This appears to be a central issue in many areas, with comments suggesting that it causes confusion on the part of students (lack of visibility/understanding of the formal roles, lack of clarity about who to contact about what, overlap of duties resulting in gaps in provision and feedback). These informal roles are

managed entirely in-house by faculties and departments, some operating a first-come, first-served system and some a formal election process.

Responses to the operational side of elections was mixed, with 66% reporting that they felt the electoral process worked well overall. Negative comments were generally about timing of elections, errors in central roll generation, and difficulties engaging students. 62% felt that the timing of elections was appropriate, with most Departments reporting that Michaelmas meetings were often without representation and so earlier would be more suitable; however, many acknowledged that earlier elections may not be feasible in other ways:

"It's not ideal because we spend Mich term without a full set of reps, but it's hard to see how it could be brought forward as student rolls wouldn't necessarily be final and students wouldn't know much about each other for voting."

"This is likely the best time, though appointing from Dec-Nov means (potentially) final year students can't attend all meetings, possibly needing bye-elections and disjointed terms. Moving the elections earlier in term would solve this, but likely result in fewer volunteers for reps as they are still settling in to Cambridge."

"... the first couple of meetings of Michaelmas term are almost always bereft of student reps because they have either left, or moved to the next year and seem to think their term is over."

Faculties were asked how well they felt central generation of the electoral roll operated, and which schemes were used for elections as outlined in University Ordinance. 62% of faculties felt that central generation worked well, but free text comments noted that there were often errors or that data had to manually manipulated to ensure that students were correctly placed. Some of these errors resulted from misunderstanding the definitions of eligibility outlined in Ordinance. Of the 11 electoral schemes available, only 5 were reported in use. Some of the schemes reported in the survey do not tally with records held by the Student Registry upon which the electoral rolls are generated, which may also be a cause of roll errors. Some responses commented on whether the roll was necessary or not, given that the majority of areas know their students already or could extract the information from CamSIS.

Incoming representatives are generally not provided with training by the faculty or outgoing representatives, although almost all make an effort to engage with the students to ensure they are aware of process and key contacts. Only 29% of responding faculties provide training for incoming representatives. 57% have a designated liaison officer to meet with them, varying in roles from the Faculty Board Chair or Secretary to Teaching Administrator or Head of Department. There appear to be little to no formal processes for handover between students, with only 38% of faculties knowing that outgoing reps provided information to their successors.

This lack of training is reflected in responses to the question *What do you understand the role of the Faculty Board student representatives to be*. These responses generally revolved around providing the student voice or providing feedback on changes, or representing student interests. However, in addition some responses picked up lack of student clarity and shared understanding of the role:

"Initially, students expect more substantial agency and engagement. However, they subsequently come to see their role as a less active one, concerned more with 'monitoring' than influencing. ... The nature of the business being discussed (particularly at Council) is such that students often do not feel they are in a position to comment (either due to lack of direct relevance, or lack of information). There is therefore a risk that reps could become disillusioned, as the perception could arise that student representation on Faculty Board and Council is a 'box ticking' exercise. Reps don't necessarily appreciate, before undertaking the role, that being a student representative on a

strategic body such as Faculty Board or Council, differs to being a representative on a Tripos course committee.”

Consultation

After reviewing the responses to the initial surveys of students and staff, the Education Officer from CUSU, the GU President, and an EQPO Officer considered appropriate solutions to the issues raised. A set of proposals were drawn up and sent to Faculty Boards for consultation in May 2019 (GBEC minute 543.5.10 refers, 8 May 2019).

The proposal outlined the following changes:

- Replacing the current system of Faculty Board representatives to align representation with subject disciplines, rather than organisational structure. The list of subject representatives would be drawn up in conjunction with Faculties and Departments, and would replace the current schemes specifying numbers/levels of representatives on each body with a more flexibly defined system.
- Mapping courses to more than one subject representative role, enabling students to be considered eligible to stand or vote for election in more than one discipline.
- Proposing the introduction of multiple roles within a subject, for example electing up to five undergraduate students; this would provide a pool of representatives, serving to increase availability and accessibility of representatives for both staff and students. This pool could serve to populate committees at multiple levels across the Faculty, Department, and School level.
- Removing the current requirement to have not more than four student members on a Faculty Board, and to introduce a minimum number of two, enabling Faculty Boards to choose student members in class f from among the subject representatives as they deem most appropriate.
- Siting the organisation and administration of subject representative elections with CUSU and the GU, removing the administrative burden from Faculties and Departments and providing clearer identity and coherence to the overall representative structure.
- For CUSU and the GU to have an institutionally recognised role in training and support of representatives.

19 responses were received to the consultation, from 18 Faculties and 1 Council of the School. In addition, responses were received from two School Council student representatives; the students did not respond to the consultation questions per se and so are not included in the statistics below, but their comments have been considered and included in the resulting recommendations.

Responses to the consultation were mixed, but in general there was support for the proposed model.

Concerns raised and responses

Do you agree with the proposal to move away from specified Faculty Board (or other body) representatives and to a system of multiple subject representatives upon which the Board (or other body) may call?

The majority of respondents supported the primary proposal to align representation to subject discipline rather than committee, but the difference was marginal (53% in support). However, of those who did not support the proposal, a number of comments were made which we feel to be manageable within the proposed model:

- Many responses which did not support the proposal were from non-departmental faculties who cited limited impact or concern that establishing multiple subject representatives would not be

appropriate for them. This could be accommodated in the proposed system, as non-departmental areas which do not wish to recruit multiple subject representatives would be able to maintain their current structure.

- Others reported that they had specific locally-organised systems that worked well for them, and were concerned that the proposals could disrupt these. Since the subject representative list would be specified in consultation with faculties, minimal change to well-functioning local systems would be possible under the proposed system.
- Others were concerned about the definition of “subject”, in particular with regard to joint Triposes or where representatives are currently structured by programme. As above, this can be accommodated flexibly within the proposed system, since which representatives a Faculty chose to elect would be agreed with the Faculty and could be reviewed annually.
- A number of responses raised concerns about what the process would be for selecting representatives for different committees from a pool of reps, as well as lack of coherence and complexity of communication. We accept this concern but feel that the proposed system introduces flexibility to allow for deputising or rotation if desired, but do not require this as standard. It is not the intention that committee attendance should become *ad hoc*; instead, roles for election would be established in consultation with the Faculty with a predetermined plan for committee attendance.

We therefore feel that, although the majority in favour is slim, there is insufficient evidence that the proposal would be detrimental to those opposed, and it should be taken forward.

However, in taking these comments into account we do propose to exclude School representation from the overall proposal. The School response, as well as a number of requests for clarification received on the consultation document, indicated concerns about integrating the move to subject representatives with the selection of representatives to the Councils of the Schools. We agree with these comments and accept that the process of selecting attendees for School-level committees from a large pool of subject representatives might be unduly complex. It is therefore proposed that Council of the School representatives remain a separate defined role as under the current system, but included in the scope of changes to elections and elected at the same time as Subject Reps.

Do you agree with the proposal to permit students on interdisciplinary courses to stand or vote for multiple subject representatives?

The majority of respondents agreed, or had no objection, to this proposal (53% yes, 32% n/a). Some raised concerns that the numbers of students may be small enough to make this cumbersome; this would have to be reviewed in more depth when agreeing the roles available.

What impact do you feel the change would have on your Board's (or other body's) engagement with student representation?

For those responding positively to the proposal overall, responses to this question reflected on the potential to increase engagement and clarity, as well as closer co-ordination of the variety of representation. For those responding negatively to the proposal overall, responses here reflected risk that growing the pool risks poor communication and loss of engagement.

As above, there would be no requirement to have a wide pool of representatives in areas where this is not desirable. Risk of poor communication should be mitigated by the creation of a system which is sufficiently clear to students so that representatives can be held accountable by their constituencies. An additional safety net is provided by the Student's Unions' involvement.

Should the list of subject representatives be defined in Ordinance, or kept more open to be published yearly?

All of those responding to the consultation either agreed that this be flexible and published yearly by Notice, or had no comment (63% yes, 37% n/a).

Do you agree with the proposal to remove the limit on having more than four student members of a Board, enabling each Board or other body to determine its appropriate number of representatives?

89% either agreed with or had no opinion on this proposal (68% yes), although comments varied on whether Boards would take the opportunity to increase representation.

Do you agree with the proposal to site the organisation and administration of elections with CUSU and the GU?

This proved to be the most controversial of the proposals, with 69% of respondents disagreeing.

- There were some concerns about undermining local recruitment of candidates and local sense of community, as well as about level of actual engagement with CUSU and the GU by students in some faculties. It is not proposed that any of the changes should limit local promotion of elections which would be supplemented by the Students' Unions, who would also continue to provide template materials for faculties and departments to support the promotion of elections, as at present.
- Concerns were raised about accuracy of electoral rolls. CUSU and the GU conduct a verification process on rolls they receive from the Student Registry, and the integrity of their elections receives oversight from Council via the Council Committee for the Supervision of Students' Unions. Many of the proposed changes to Ordinances, intended to introduce greater clarity for students, will also remove the cause of the majority of errors in the electoral rolls. Rolls can be made available to those areas wishing to check them independently, though it is anticipated that the majority of issues will be resolved in advance of roll generation when producing the Notice each year.
- Some faculties raised worries about rapid turnover in the Students' Unions in maintaining the system. It is proposed that the Unions' role in elections would primarily be conducted by a permanent member of staff, who would work with elected officers and with EQPO in order to ensure continuity in the electoral process.
- NB many faculties already operate their elections via CUSU's online voting platform, so in practice there would not be a significant change to the process except that CUSU would take responsibility for receiving and checking electoral rolls from the Student Registry, and populating ballots on the online platform.

We therefore suggest a change to the initial proposal to address these concerns, so as to jointly site the administration and organisation of elections with CUSU, the GU and EQPO. This would not restrict those faculties wishing to promote the roles or to take a greater hand in the process from doing so, but would enable the University to shoulder the bulk of the administrative burden and provide students with a clearer and more cohesive overall structure for representation. A proposed distribution of roles is outlined below:

Joint

- Establish subject representative mapping with faculties before the beginning of MT
- Publish annual Notice in the Reporter by early October, specifying a mapping of courses to subject reps
- Set up mailing lists for election and for use by elected representatives post-election

CUSU & GU

- Primary point of contact for students about the representative system
- Create and distribute promotional materials to faculties and departments
- Promote elections to students (in collaboration where desired)
- Provide support for students running for election
- Receive and verify electoral rolls from CamSIS via Student Registry
- Administer voting platform
- Induction training for reps
- Ongoing programme of support and networking for reps

EQPO

- Primary point of contact for faculties and departments about the representative system
- Communicate with faculties, departments and schools about changes to the representative system
- Support faculties, departments and schools in best practices working with student reps
- Manage Council of the School student representative elections, as at present

Do you agree with the proposal for CUSU and the GU to have an institutionally recognised role in inducting, supporting and training student representatives?

This proposal was welcomed, with 74% either agreeing or having no opinion (68% yes). One response indicated a desire to avoid a “them and us” approach and to ensure that a collaborative approach is maintained. It is hoped that siting central co-ordination of the representative system jointly between the Student’s Unions and the University indicates such a commitment. Increasing the Unions’ involvement with the election process will assist in this, by helping to promote the roles effectively prior to the election, and ensuring training can be arranged for representatives in good time following the election.

In responding to the overall proposal, students made a number of suggestions for improving the clarity of communication which reflect comments from the CUSU-led student focus groups. In particular, students highlighted a lack of established formal methods for communicating with the student body, rather than expecting this to be set up by reps or funnelled through Faculty administrators. This will be taken forward as part of the CUSU and GU training and by EQPO as elements of best practice to support student representatives. It is anticipated that mailing lists for each cohort of students eligible to stand or vote for a particular subject representative will be set up and retained for use by the elected representatives.

Do you agree with the proposed alignment to a single election date, combined with existing CUSU/GU elections in which students will already be participating?

Responses were entirely split: 37% yes, 21% n/a, 42% no.

- Responses reflect concerns raised in the Michaelmas survey that holding elections in November is not desirable from the Faculty perspective, as Michaelmas meetings are missed. However, as noted in the survey it is unclear that earlier elections would be feasible with regard to ensuring that students are able to engage with the roles. A few responses suggested that having elections earlier in Michaelmas would allow for better engagement; students consulted by the Unions felt differently, saying that earlier elections would discourage some, in particular those on one year courses, from running. There are also issues around the generation of electoral rolls, since the complete data are only available from CamSIS after the division of term.

- There was support for a longer window of voting to increase participation. This would be the intention under the proposals, as is the case for current SU administered elections.
- There was general support for the idea of single time for elections, with some exceptions.

We therefore propose to establish a single window for elections in the second half of the Michaelmas Term, noting that the proposal to bring together administration of the elections would make it easier to change the timing in future if desired. This process would be kept under review. As noted above, the proposal does not restrict those areas wishing to arrange informal representative roles earlier in the Term.

Timescale

If these recommendations are approved, Regulation changes as summarised below will be proposed by Grace; if unopposed, these will take effect from 1 October 2019. Over the summer, EQP will contact each Faculty Board to agree the appropriate list of subject representatives; this list will be published in the Reporter at the start of October. This Notice will also include the proposed date for election and close of nominations.

CUSU and the GU will provide promotional materials, as at present, circulated by mid-October.

The Student Registry will provide CUSU/GU with the electoral roll on 10 November. CUSU and the GU will then allocate eligible students to subject representative roles in line with the published Notice.

Voting will take place in mid-November, in line with the published Notice.

Proposed changes to Regulations

1. Changing 1(f) of the [General Regulations](#) governing the Constitution of Faculty Boards, to reference subject representatives instead of students in the Faculty.
2. Changing Regulation 2 of the General Regulations so as to remove the upper limit on student members and institute a minimum of two.
3. Changing Regulation 1 of the [Classes of Faculty Board Membership, Elections and Periods of Office](#) so as to remove the specified numbers in class (f) from the table in Schedule I, and to permit each Faculty Board to determine an appropriate number in line with Regulation 2 of the General Regulations.
4. Changing Regulation 9 of the Classes of Faculty Board Membership, Elections and Periods of Office so as to draw members in class (f) from the subject representatives elected in accordance with the Election of Student Subject Representatives.
5. Changing the Regulations governing the [Election of Student Members of Faculty Boards](#) and other Bodies as follows:
 - a. Amending the title of this section to “Election of Student Subject Representatives”;
 - b. Assigning responsibility for these elections to CUSU/GU within their overall electoral scheme;
 - c. Defining available subject representative roles and the courses which map to each role by Notice, published by CUSU/GU by 20 October each year;
 - d. Electoral rolls will continue to be centrally generated but will be provided to CUSU/GU in line with existing CUSU/GU roll dates at the Division of Michaelmas Term;
 - e. The Returning Officer will be nominated by CUSU/GU;
 - f. Amending the [Rules by the General Board](#) in accordance with Regulation 11 so as to:
 - i. represent the subject scheme;
 - ii. remove the restriction on standing for more than one body;

- iii. removing the ability of CUSU sabbatical officers to be included on the roll;
 - iv. removing the restrictions on graduate student eligibility for inclusion;
 - v. removing the definitions of 'undergraduate' and 'postgraduate';
 - g. Removing the Procedure for allocation to electoral rolls for NST, MedST and VetST students as allocation to these subject representatives will be defined in the yearly Notice.
6. Amending the table in Schedule I so as to remove category (f).
 7. Removing [Schedule IV](#)
 8. Removing [Schedule V](#)