



Workshop 5 notes: The course rep role

Introductory guidance

This is part of a series of six workshop templates introduced in a separate guide: [Exploring student engagement with academic staff: user guidance](#). Please refer to that document for general introductory guidance on organising these discussion workshops, including steps to take before and after the event.

About this workshop

This workshop aims to generate understanding among staff of the role of the course rep and how to work with them in enhancing the learning experience.

The content in this workshop includes the following sections:

1. Understanding the course rep role.
2. Shaping the course rep role.
3. Engaging course reps in committees.

The activities in these sections could be used in different ways:

- As single exercises or as part of a larger activity.
- Adapted for multiple formats such as discussions in meetings, briefing notes, webinars, or indeed a participative workshop.
- In either course or faculty team contexts or in cross-institutional forums.
- In staff groups or in mixed staff-student groups.

Each section is outlined in the paragraphs that follow.

Further reading to aid your preparation






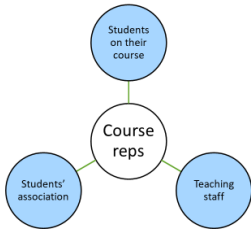



- Bogdan, I. C. 2021. Miro Board as a Method of Collecting Feedback. <https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/resource-item.php?item=280>
- Bols, A. T. G. 2017. Enhancing student representation. *The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 3(1), 81–89. <https://doi.org/10.21100/jeipc.v3i1.585>
- Carey, P. 2013. Representation and student engagement in higher education: A reflection on the views and experiences of course representatives. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 37(1), 71-88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2011.644775>
- sparqs. 2020. Preparing your course rep system and recruiting your reps during COVID-19. <https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/COVID-19%20Course%20Rep%20Systems%20Resource.pdf>
- sparqs. 2020. Course rep recruitment resources. <https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/resource-item.php?item=270>
- sparqs. 2020. Five Top Tips for Supporting Course Reps during COVID-19. <https://venngage.net/ps/HsLhESBhwJs/top-tips-for-supporting-your-reps>
- University of Strathclyde Students' Association. 2020. How to be an Effective Rep Online. <https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/resource-item.php?item=261>



1. Understanding the course rep role

It is important, for staff to be able to work effectively with course reps, that they fully know what the role is about. This can include its function, job description and the training provided.

A discussion prompt to get staff views about the purpose of the course rep may be an informative process to understand the perceptions (or mis-perceptions) staff may have, and this can then inform later work. Therefore, elements of the following content could form an ice-breaker for later activities in this document or could have value in themselves as the basis for a short standalone session.

<p>A "blank sheet" brainstorming exercise</p> <p>Where participants can express their own views without prompts.</p>	<p>What do you think is the role of the course rep? </p> 
<p>Prompts with keywords</p> <p>Where participants should build on concepts such as "representation", "partnership" or "enhancement" to state what they think the purpose is or could be.</p>	<p>What is the purpose of the course rep in contributing to... </p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="border: 1px solid gray; padding: 2px 10px;">Representation</div> <div style="border: 1px solid gray; padding: 2px 10px;">Partnership</div> </div> <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;"> <div style="border: 1px solid gray; padding: 2px 10px;">Enhancement</div> </div> 
<p>Channels of communication</p> <p>Looking at the three groups that a course rep might communicate with [do a triangle with students, course team and the SA] to try to identify the purpose of communication in each direction.</p>	<p>Why should course reps communicate with... </p>  
<p>Commentary</p> <p>Using the existing course rep job description, generate a discussion about what staff think about this and where they feel their role interacts with, supports, or depends on, particular tasks listed.</p>	<p>The course rep role description </p> <p>[Insert or share the role description or person specification for course reps at your institution.]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where does this role link with yours? • How can you support the tasks of reps as described? • How should you be benefitting from the role as described? 



Understanding course rep training

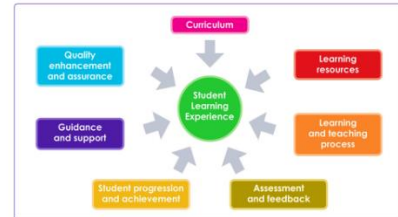
Often, one of the best ways of learning about the role is through an insight into the training. You could share the core messages of the training and ask staff to think about what this means for them. At the core of sparqs' introductory Course Rep Training is the SLE diagram and ABCD, and how they equip reps for partnership: these could be good prompts for reflection – how much do staff get feedback across the SLE elements? Is feedback always ABCD? What could be done to improve this? Link this to workshop 1. What might staff do with suggestions from students across the SLE that are ABCD-compliant, and how might they incorporate it into their evaluative and reflective activities to improve learning and practice?

How we train course reps 

[Insert a summary of course rep training, or use the SLE and ABCD diagrams that follow.]

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The Student Learning Experience 



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A reminder of the ABCD 

- A. Accurate.** Truthful, specific, supported by evidence.
- B. Balanced.** Positive feedback, not just negative.
- C. Constructive.** Can you suggest solutions?
- D. Diplomatic.** Tactful. Avoid blaming individuals. Focus on learning.



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Promoting the course rep role

Teaching staff can be the best ambassadors for the role of course rep when it comes to electing them at the start of the year. sparqs provides lots of materials about promoting the role, and you can spark useful discussion with teaching staff by looking at two of them:

- [2020 recruitment leaflet](#), telling students about the importance of the role at this time of change and uncertainty.
- [A three-slide introduction to the role](#), which can be shown in classes or indeed adapted to be VLE text, a leaflet or other formats.

Ask staff to reflect on these two resources. In particular, ask them to identify successful actions from course reps in the past year: what examples can they use as encouragements to the new cohort about the value and impact of the role? How can staff themselves exude enthusiasm for the role and demonstrate how valuable they have found working with them?

Promoting the course rep role 

- Have a look at sparqs' resources [here](#) and [here](#).
- What successes from last year can you share about the course rep role in your institution, department and course?





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2. Shaping the course rep role

The nature of partnership means not just teaching staff working with course reps, but also having a stake in the nature of the course rep role. Therefore, as the course rep role is reviewed (perhaps on an annual basis), there is scope for staff to play a key part in that process.

The following slides could be the basis for staff discussions (with course reps or in parallel sessions) to reflect on the course rep role.

<p>Complete the sentence</p> <p>There are two sentences that you can ask staff to complete that generate very powerful ideas about their perception of, and ambition for the course rep role:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I love it when course reps..." • "I wish course reps..." <p>Both sentences are based on positive premises, encouraging staff to speak constructively about the course rep role. The first sentence can help create a picture of what a good baseline expectation about the role might be, and the second sentence creates ideas for enhancement. Answers to both can be combined with answers from reps themselves or the students' association. Prompts, if required, could encourage staff to think about both basic tasks (turning up to meetings) to approaches (suggesting creative ideas).</p>	<p>Complete the sentences </p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="border: 1px solid blue; border-radius: 50%; padding: 10px; text-align: center; width: 150px;"> <p>I love it when course reps...</p> </div> <div style="border: 1px solid blue; border-radius: 50%; padding: 10px; text-align: center; width: 150px;"> <p>I wish course reps...</p> </div> </div> <div style="background-color: #00a0e3; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;">  @sparqs_scotland </div>
<p>A year in the life of a course rep</p> <p>A great way to critically reflect on the course rep role is to consider its cyclical nature over the academic year. This exercise could be synchronous (in a meeting) or asynchronous (conducted over a few days).</p> <p>Firstly, create twelve sheets (perhaps flipcharts on a large round table, or slides in a shared document) – one for each month. Firstly, ask staff to write down what happens in each month relating to course reps. You could use the following headings as prompts at the start, or as classifications for the answers afterwards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The election process. • Quality activities. • Research and communication. • Students' association activities. <p>Secondly, mark the points where staff might have a role in the events of each month, and try to agree what is required for this. For instance, staff might need to give reps an opportunity to speak to course mates in classes, make time to listen to reps, or develop constructive responses to the ideas and suggestions offered by reps.</p>	<p>A year in the life of a course rep </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What happens (or should happen) in each month of the year with course reps? Think about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Term dates and teaching timetables. – Meetings. – Quality processes. • Add in where staff (should) have a role in this. <div style="background-color: #00a0e3; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;">  @sparqs_scotland </div>



Creating a course rep job description

If you want to create or revise a job description for the course rep role, these headings and explanations could be used to generate ideas. Responses from staff could be aligned with, or generated alongside, those of reps themselves or the students' association. Throughout, it is worth thinking about whether, and how, the role might vary between circumstances – such as departments, campuses, or different levels or modes of study.

Creating a course rep job description



- The overall purpose.
- The tasks.
- Who you work with.
- Who supports you.
- How much time is involved.
- The skills you need.
- The skills you gain.
- What you might do next.

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The overall purpose	How would staff sum up the role in a sentence? This is a useful measure of how confidently staff could describe the role to their students or new colleagues.
The tasks	What do staff think are the individual tasks? They might involve communication or attending meetings. This creates a detailed understanding of the role.
Who you work with	Reflecting on the different points of communication (teaching staff, students, the students' association) illustrates the importance of the role to partnership.
Who supports you	Though there will be some overlap with the above, this is about sources of help and guidance, such as heads of department or the students' association.
How much time is involved	When staff are confident about this, it helps set expectations for all. You might encourage complex answers here (for instance, it varies across weeks).
The skills you need	Where does the balance lie between making the role feel accessible to any student, and ensuring that people are broadly competent in it?
The skills you gain	What do staff see as the personal development potential in the role? Course reps may engage with formal meetings or regulations for the first time.
What you might do next	Similar to the above, impactful course reps could be encouraged to move on to other roles, such as faculty rep or quality reviewer. Do staff know about these?





3. Engaging course reps in committees

A core part of the course rep role is to sit on committees at the course level – these might be called programme boards, course committees or student-staff liaison committees. Essentially, this will be the forum where staff and course reps (and possibly other students) on the course get together to discuss the learning experience, analyse student feedback, and create ideas for enhancement. They may also be the same meeting at which individual student progression is discussed, in which case student reps should withdraw for this part of the agenda.

These may be the first experiences that course reps have of formal meetings or quality systems. Given reps may change from year to year, there will also be a power dynamic that staff must be conscious of: it can be easy for staff to inadvertently dominate proceedings and shape the atmosphere of the meeting.

The following exercises may help staff to reflect on what they can do to support reps effectively in meetings.

<p>Course reps' hats</p> <p>How course reps behave in a meeting, and how staff interact with them, all depends on what the perception is of what the course rep is there for. Remember, course reps' actions or conduct in a committee can be shaped, not just by their own perception of their role or the training they receive, but how others around the table perceive them too. In any case, while staff may have a good understanding of the job description, it may not go into specific detail about behaviour in committees.</p> <p>Ask staff to think about the various possible "hats" or labels on this slide, and the image or connotation they each conjure up in terms of a course rep's conduct in a meeting. Which is the best one for course reps? Which is the least appropriate for course reps? Are there any obvious missing ones? Are there a few that might combine to create an ideal course rep role in meetings?</p> <p>Then, what is the corresponding staff role that complements and encourages that ideal role?</p> <p>Again, this exercise could be done together with, or in parallel with, course reps.</p>	<div style="text-align: right;">  </div> <p>Course reps' hats</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>Witness</td> <td>Representative</td> <td>Shop steward</td> <td>Negotiator</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Diplomat</td> <td>Ambassador</td> <td>Spokesperson</td> <td>Advocate</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Evangelist</td> <td>Auditor</td> <td>Spy</td> <td>Intermediary</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Leader</td> <td>Colleague</td> <td>Apprentice</td> <td>Listener</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Governor</td> <td>Learner</td> <td>Professional</td> <td>Emancipator</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Opinion pollster</td> <td>Interpreter</td> <td>Reviewer</td> <td>Rebel</td> </tr> </table> <div style="text-align: center; background-color: #00a0e3; color: white; padding: 5px;">  @sparqs_scotland </div>	Witness	Representative	Shop steward	Negotiator	Diplomat	Ambassador	Spokesperson	Advocate	Evangelist	Auditor	Spy	Intermediary	Leader	Colleague	Apprentice	Listener	Governor	Learner	Professional	Emancipator	Opinion pollster	Interpreter	Reviewer	Rebel
Witness	Representative	Shop steward	Negotiator																						
Diplomat	Ambassador	Spokesperson	Advocate																						
Evangelist	Auditor	Spy	Intermediary																						
Leader	Colleague	Apprentice	Listener																						
Governor	Learner	Professional	Emancipator																						
Opinion pollster	Interpreter	Reviewer	Rebel																						



Successful meetings

A big part of the course rep role is attending meetings with their teaching and support staff to discuss the learning experience. These could be called Staff-Student Liaison Committees, course committees, programme boards, or many other names. These will operate as forums for discussing enhancement of the learning experience at course or programme level, though sometimes they double up as more formal meetings to review individual student progress and achievement (items for which it is standard for course reps to withdraw). It's important that staff know what the meetings are called, how they work and what their own role in it is.

sparqs' course rep training includes what reps should do before, during and after meetings with staff. These three slides include a summary of the guidance that our training conveys on this. Ask staff to look at this list, and think about the following questions:

1. Do you agree or disagree with any points?
2. How well have you seen reps exemplify these points?
3. Is there anything obvious missing from the lists?
4. If there is a gap between expectation and reality, what might cause it?
5. Most importantly, what can staff do to support or enable these actions?
6. Finally, how much is enabling an inclusive atmosphere for student members in the committee down to just the chair's actions, and how much can all staff participants contribute?

Before meetings



- Check the location and time of the meeting. If you need to arrive late, inform the chair/secretary well in advance.
- Check whether the meeting will focus on any particular topics.
- Gather the views of your classmates. Summarise these so you can give a concise account. Where appropriate, use the ABCD model.
- Do you have any item to add to the agenda (based on feedback from classmates)? Contact the chair/secretary of the committee to request this.
- Read the meeting papers including the minutes (notes) of the previous meeting.
- Ask the students' association for help if there are matters that you do not understand.
- In some cases you might consult with other reps to check if their courses share similar concerns.

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During meetings



- Take a notebook with you. In matters relevant to your course, participate actively in discussions and take adequate notes.
- Arrive on time (whether in-person or online).
- When giving the opinions of classmates, remember the ABCD of effective feedback.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions. Staff will probably use jargon and technical language, and it is ok not to understand something. (But it is less ok if you were not listening!)
- Listen carefully to other speakers, so you can respond or ask questions.
- Support other course reps in the meeting.

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After meetings



- Reflect on your contributions to the meeting. Did you achieve what you intended? What could you do differently?
- Report back to your classmates a brief summary of any relevant outcomes or decisions made. You may be able to arrange a few minutes to speak to the class, if you ask your tutor.
- Check the minutes (meeting notes) when they are sent out. If you believe something important has been missed, you can contact the chair.
- Check if you have any action points. Make sure you do anything you have been asked to do.
- Are there any points that you should follow-up with your tutor or with the students' association?

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