DSC ANNUAL PROJECT: STUDENT VOICE

CONTENTS

AIMS

The aim of this report is to....

1. Analyse student voice communication methods

2. Analyse student voice processing

3. Analyse student voice equality

4. Review the efficiency and structure of the DSC and Student Representative roles

5. Review the efficiency of Student Representatives' feedback gathering methods

6. Examine the efficiency of the current system re garding acting on students' suggestions, issues, and concerns

7. Recommend improvements to the current system and provide alternatives using evidence collected through various research methods

INTRODUCTION

Responding to the collective voice of the student body is a fundamental task that Goldsmiths University must undertake. From pastoral to academic considerations, a dialogue between the students and the college is vital for the wellbeing of students, staff and the successful running of the institution. In 2014, the Departmental Student Coordinator (DSC) Annual report entitled 'Student Support', highlighted the need for a reorganisation of student service options, however, the dialogue between students and their departments is still an area in need of reform.

Issues affecting current communication methods between departments and students are on-going and can be seen on most courses. According to research outlined in this report, students are unsatisfied with the methods of departmental communication offered to them. Moreover, there is dissatisfaction with the Student Representative and the DSC framework, with many students feeling that the system is flawed. It is important here to make a distinction between the Student Representative and DSC role. A student rep is a student who has been voluntarily elected by their programme or department to communicate the views of their cohort to the College and the Students' Union, by working closely with their DSC. DSCs however, represent their department and, as a paid position, are selected by the Student Union through an interview process. Their tasks include; attending departmental meetings, conducting research, writing reports, and supporting Student Reps in their work in order to ensure that students' voices are heard at every level of College decision making. Student representation, particularly in departmental meetings, is imperative for the resolution of the diverse issues that arise across the University and this is one of the many tasks DSCs tackle. Many issues require rapid attention and fall out of the modular feedback form jurisdiction. However, DSCs are often unable to provide accurate feedback due to poor communication with Student Reps. With little incentive and support, Student Reps are frequently absent and unresponsive. As they have become a key part of the student support framework, this is an area in need of attention.

The following report analyses the current suitability of the Rep/DSC system and provides alternative dialogue options. While the current DSC system remains healthy, the issues lie in student Rep's communication and reliability. More must be done to ensure that students and departments can communicate, which in turn will ensure that the creative and innovative course contents that the University prides itself on can be fully engaged with.

METHODOLOGY

Two methods of data collection were employed for the report; an online survey (put to all students) and interviews that were specific to our area of research. This led to gathering a range of quantitative as well as qualitative data, providing a richer foundation of research, allowing us to draw informed conclusions regarding our initial aims.

Quantitative data

An online survey was circulated to all Undergraduates and Postgraduate Goldsmiths students via email, and 1,322 students responded in total. In this survey, we put forward 5 key questions to students that focused on the topic of student representation and feedback systems. These questions were devised in such a way that the answers would not be limited to yes or no answers, thus many questions were open response questions as well as grade scale questions.

Qualitative data

After receiving the results from the survey our group came to the decision that we needed to conduct one to one interviews to get a more holistic overview of the representative system in Goldsmiths. The survey was directed solely at the student body. Our interviews were directed towards departmental staff, student representatives and DSCs. We wanted to hear how the people embodying the representative system are experiencing their role, as well as how university staff perceives the 'student representative' and how much emphasis they put on the feedback that gets passed on to them. By conducting these interviews, we were then able to build case studies that would inform our final suggestions.

Questions asked to Student representatives:

- Why did you volunteer to be a Student representative?
- Were you aware that there was training for the role?
- Would an incentive, such as a bursary, engage you more in your role as a Student Representative?

- Do you think there was enough instruction from your department or the DSC for you to actively take part in student representation?

- When a student approaches you with a problem, do you feel you know what procedure is appropriate for you to take?
- What impact do you think your role has had?

- Let me know if you have any general feedback or ideas that you would like to add.

Questions asked to Academic staff:

- Do you consider Student Representatives to be part of the decision-making within the department?
- Do you think Student Representatives are necessary?
- What suggestions would you make to improve their role?

Q1

Please indicate your agreement with the following statement; I feel like my opinion as a student is being listened to and acted on by the university and my department. Answered: 1012. Skipped: 310.
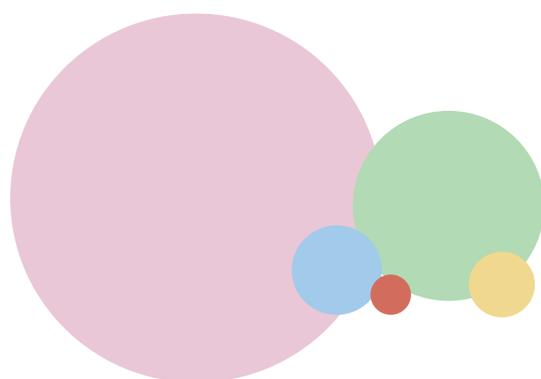
8.70%   Strongly agree
25.20%   Slightly agree
48.91%   Neither agree or disagree
11.86%   Slightly disagree
5.34%   Strongly disagree

Whilst there's a general view that the university and departments do act on students concerns and issues (33.9% of students agreeing with this question), most students (48.91%, answered 'neither agree or disagree'.) This is worth noting as the university and departments could do more to convince these students that they are actively working to address students' problems.

"I don't voice my opinion"

"Haven't specifically expressed any opinions"

"I haven't really needed to put forward an opinion as yet"

"I haven't tried to voice my opinion"

"I have not voiced any opinions"

Q2

"Anonymous feedback boxes. That get answered."

"More regular anonymous surveys"

**"Maybe create a platform where people can address issues anonymously, and one by one."**

"Fully anonymous surveys which do not have to be clicked from the student intranet"

"A designated feedback relay structure"

Of the 572 that answered, some students also felt that it was necessary to have regular "feedback on changes that have been made in response to the points brought up" so that students know when their concerns were being listened to. This addresses the issue of student apathy specifically, encouraging students to be active and engaged with their course.

Q3

The issues I share with my department are solved in a timely way. Answered: 1,012 Skipped: 310
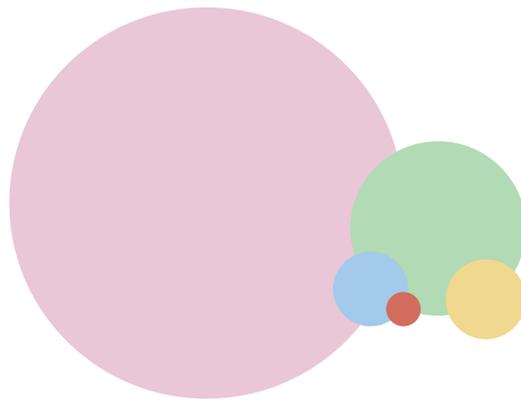
- 10.57%   Strongly agree
- 23.12% Slightly agree
- 51.88% Neither agree or disagree
- 9.88% Slightly disagree
- 4.55%   Strongly disagree

Out of the 1012 students that answered this question, the consensus was that their department are efficient in solving student's issues (33.69% agreed or strongly agreed), the recurring theme from the comments that seemed to give students this positive view of their department is that department staff are quick with their email replies and receptive to student's concerns.

Whilst, most students were neutral (51.88% said neither agree, nor disagree), it is noteworthy that most comments for this question stated that it was either "not applica-ble" meaning they didn't have any issues to raise.

For those that disagreed, common complaints were about timetabling issues, not getting any solutions to their issues, and/or emails not being answered.

Q4

Would your department benefit from a more regularly monitored, and anonymous, online feedback platform? Answered: 1,012 Skipped: 310
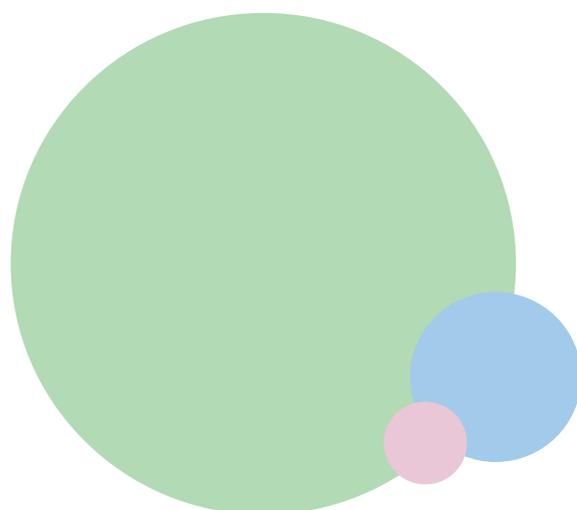

🟩	YES	66.50%
🟪	NO	10.97%
🟦	DON'T KNOW	22.53%

66.5% of students who answered said 'yes', and several have made a case for a regulated, anonymous feedback platform to "further encourage students to give feedback", therefore demonstrating that most students feel that it would be beneficial to have a 'safe' area for them to voice their concern.

Q5

Do you worry about giving feedback to your academic department because it might affect your relationship with staff?
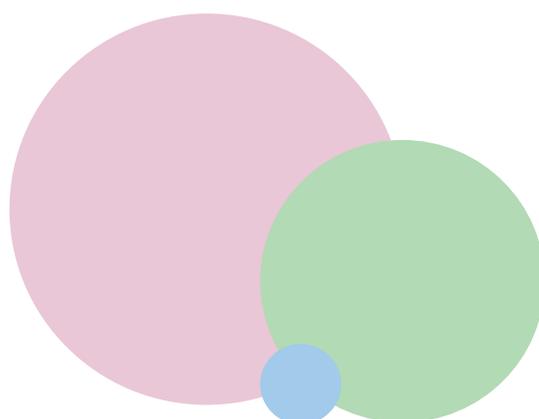
YES   37.45%
NO   51.88%
DON'T KNOW 10.67%

37.45% of students answered 'yes' compared to 10% 'no', further reinforcing the need for anonymity when bringing light to an issue. The majority answered, 'don't know' again, due to several students that yet to voice their concerns or opinions.

INTERVIEWS & FINDINGS

After conducting interviews with student representatives and staff members across four departments (Theatre and Performance, Politics, Media and Communications and the Institute of Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship), we found recurring patterns had emerged in the response to questions asked. This then allowed us to find specific areas in which the Student Representative role could be improved upon. The following outlines the issues drawn out from our research interviews;

The fundamental problem of recruitment

To begin with, answers from student representatives and staff members alike, highlighted issues around the recruitment process of student reps. While several students acknowledge that their initial motivation for volunteering to be a student representative was to meet new students and improve the student experience, the majority admit the complete absence of any volunteers led them to take up the position.

Student representatives' misunderstanding of their own role

Responses from the Student Representatives illustrated a misunderstanding of the Student Representative role itself. According to interviewees, this is due to the absence of a formal, structured, student representative system. Indeed, while most student representatives have received a brief description of the role (either by course convenors or by their Departmental Student Coordinators), very few of them were aware that the Students' Union provides training sessions. Furthermore, among the minority of interviewees who were aware of the sessions, only one found them helpful; most students expressed the training was incomplete and failed to foster student representatives' desire to commit fully to the task.

Upon reviewing staff responses on that matter, it appears that the misunderstanding of the role can lead to a flawed representation of the student body. According a staff member from the Department of Media and Communications; "it is difficult for student representatives to speak for the whole cohort, and not for themselves, which is probably tied to a lack of understanding of the role and how to take up the charge". Indeed, student representatives often transpire to voicing only their own issues, thus failing to fully voice the concerns and issues of the very diverse student body they are a part of. For that reason, some interviewees among staff members felt student representatives were

not always "the best conduit for accurate information" (Department of Politics).

The issue of student representatives' commitment

As an immediate consequence of the misunderstanding of the role, student representatives' commitment becomes a key issue. Staff members unanimously concur on the fact that student representatives tend not to be easily reachable. Some Student Representatives agree to take up the role however, do not attend any of the relevant meetings scheduled (as confirmed by staff members from the department of Media and Communications and the department of Politics). It is worth noting that, ironically, a substantial number of student representatives who were sought after to be interviewed for this report failed to respond – despite being contacted several times.

The impact of Student Representatives: decision-making, university culture, and participation

Regarding the decision-making process, a variety of responses which don't concur stem from the same problem: the idea of "decision-making" appears to be flawed because, in practice, student representatives only have an advisory function (Institute of Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship). In other words, student representatives can lead to decision-making,

but not be responsible for decision-making per se. For example, on the departmental staff interviewees according whom "students do have a say in the decision-making" highlights this subtle difference, by referring to the specific case of a change implemented in their own departments, where student representatives' feedback served to confirm a change which was going to be implemented, and not to initiate it.

The question of the impact of student representatives does not only have to do with decision-making within departments but also with participation, as evidenced by the responses of both student representatives and members of staff. The latter identify a difference between undergraduates and postgraduates. While they reckon that the student representative system is crucial to monitor the voice of a large (mostly undergraduate) student body, they also highlight the fact that students don't often reach out to students. Staff members' responses are corroborated by student representatives themselves, as two-thirds of the interviewees among student representatives felt they had a very low impact on the experience of their fellow course-mates, specifically because students resort to other ways to solve their problems (close-knit circle of friends, course convenors, departmental staff).

The efficiency of the student representative system

In spite of all the flaws, which both staff members and student representatives identify in the system, the majority of interviewees agree on the potential of the student representative system. The term 'potential' is key here; while half of the interviewees reckon that their function ensures the voice of the student body is being heard, some - mostly postgraduates - still voiced their doubts regarding the actual resolution of problems they flagged up. In this case, the specificity of the postgraduate experience and the undergraduate experience comes into play; while the latter might have the chance to assess the progress made on the issues they raised, full-time postgraduate student representatives will not have that opportunity.

A lot of the answers evidenced that student representatives and staff members were questioning the efficiency of the student representative function, specifically the student representatives' general impact, and commitment to their role. Nevertheless, the student representative system is necessary for maintaining democracy and equality within a university.

CONCLUSION

For reasons outlined in the data from this report, the student representative role is an inefficient and unsatisfactory tool for students to voice their pastoral and departmental feedback. This is due to the framework surrounding the training and support for the role being deeply flawed. Whilst, the overall opinion of the student representative system is one which Goldsmiths cannot do without, and from which Goldsmiths would benefit more from if only it got rid of the two main problems undermining its efficiency; namely commitment to the role and the lack of formal organisation of the representative system.

This lack of formal organisation of the student rep system stems from the complete lack of any volunteers that led current reps to take up their position. Consequently, this ends up with students that are not completely interested/invested in the position and leads to a lack of commitment from the reps. This lack of commitment is evident in how the student representatives tend not to be easily reachable and don't regularly attend meetings scheduled (e.g. the student staff forum). This ultimately means that the students' issues are not addressed or brought up in these meetings.

So, with DSC's having to rely on reps to support students at times when they may be unavailable, a reformed system taking both roles into account is required if the university and department wish to be perceived as attentive to student concerns and issues. It's worth noting that the differing student experiences of postgraduate and undergraduate students must also be considered when reforming these roles.

SUGGESTIONS

DSCs

We propose that DSCs take more control over the reps, starting from them being responsible for their training. Our research showed that current reps who attended the training conducted by the SU didn't find it useful. We think that completing the training within each department will create a sense of community and stronger communication networks between the DSC and the reps from the beginning of each academic year.

Secondly, we want to propose that the Department leader attends this initial meeting so they can brief the reps on what is it that the department expects from them. In this way, we believe that reps will show a stronger commitment to the role.

Lastly, we want to propose that the name of 'Departmental Student Coordinator' is changed. Some possible examples are Senior Student representative or Department Representative, as this leaves less ambiguity surrounding the role of the DSC in relation to students.

Student Representatives

We would like to propose that the student representation role is altered, by introducing a more official structure to it. Student reps should attend a meeting with the DSC at the beginning of the academic year, one meeting at the end of each term and a closing meeting at the end of the year. This proposal is based on student reps' feedback, who pointed out in a majority that the lack of commitment came from feeling that the role was unstructured.

Secondly, to counteract the increase of responsibilities for the reps, we want to propose that they receive non-bursary rewards, for example bookshop vouchers, Curzon cinema tickets or discounts at the SU. This proposal is in response to the majority of reps and staff agreeing that a monetary reward is not justifiable, due to the minimal responsibilities reps have.

Feedback

We are suggesting that each department has an anonymous feedback forum on the VLE. Each student will be limited to posting once a day. Their responses will be filtered by the DSC and then, if necessary, passed on to the relevant member of staff. The structure of the anonymous feedback will include the date, subject title, and an area of an issue for efficiency. This suggestion is based on our findings of 67% of students asked in the Annual Survey agreeing that they would benefit from an anonymous feedback platform.

Furthermore, we suggest the DSC produces a departmental newsletter showcasing the progress and actions of the department relating specifically to student issues that have been resolved, this will show that the university and/or department are actively responding to the collective voice of the student body and their concerns.

Finally, we want to suggest that every academic department recruits a current staff member who would be responsible for coordinating the student experience within their department, closely collaborating with the DSC, as well as making sure that student representatives are elected.

SUMMARY

Motivation and Incentive

- DSCs should lead student reps in their role
- Department leaders should attend initial meetings to brief the reps on the department's expectations
- Reps should be offered non-monetary incentives such as Curzon cinema tickets or SU discounts

Structure and Training

- An official structure for the position: meetings at the beginning and end of the year, and meetings at the end of each term
- DSCs should be responsible for the training of reps
- Closing the feedback loop
- Anonymous departmental feedback forum
- Departmental newsletter show casing student issues resolved

Department Resource

- Department should recruit a current staff member that is responsible for collaborating with DSC's and the student rep regarding student experience

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