Student Course Reps: Facts and Fiction

Drs Jennie Winter and Rebecca Turner, Teaching and Learning Support

Sarah Davey and Maja Smith, UPSU

Sebastian Stephens

University of Plymouth

Student Voice

what would you change?

Representing you   Make A Change

Introduction

- Historically students have had a voice but the nature and politics around that voice are changing
- Students increasingly conceptulised as consumer and partner in educational processes (Stockerner 2012:1040)
- Student academic representation through student voice is a significant part of this change
- Course Reps (CRs)
  - 20,000 course representatives in the UK (NUS/AMSU 2011)
  - 2/3 universities have programme level representation (Little 2009)

Academic representation at Plymouth
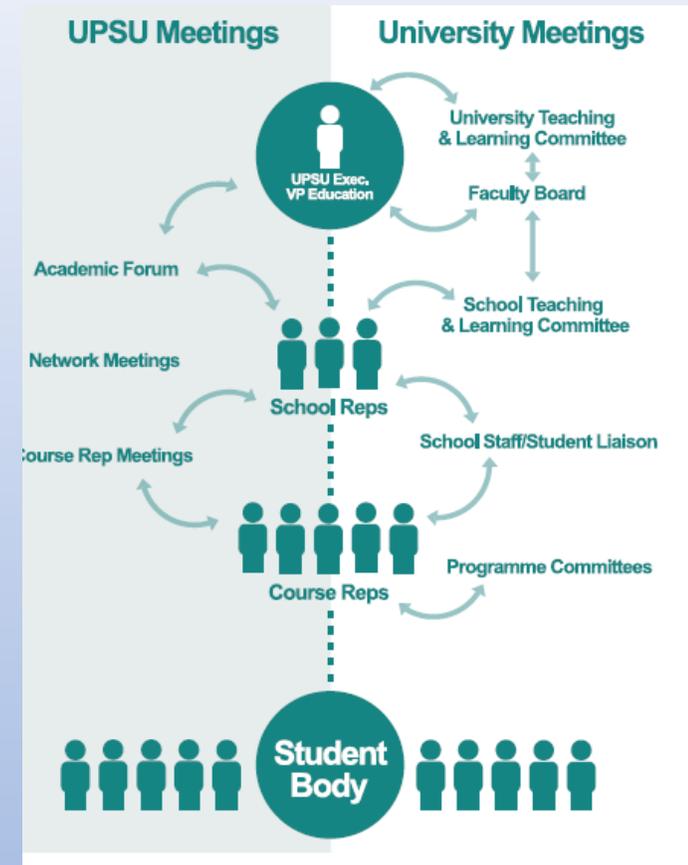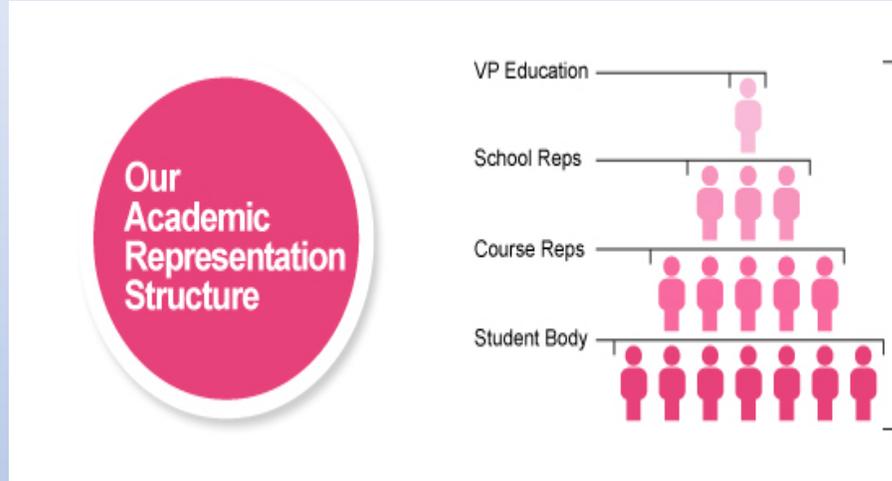
[Student guide to student voice](#)
[Staff guide to student voice](#)

Pros and Cons

- 'Students bring an essential perspective for creating a success-oriented learning environment' Kezar (2005, p.2).

- [Student voice] is important because universities are communities of learning. That community is achieved through a partnership between staff and students and …this opens up possibilities for authentic and constructive dialogue, offering the opportunity for more holistic and reflective feedback and enhancement of learning (Peart 2009).

NSS Student Voice (2017)	Sector	UoP
23. I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course.	83.5	84.4
24. Staff value students' views and opinions about the course.	78.1	75.6
25. It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on.	63.0	59.5
26. The students' union (association or guild) effectively represents students' academic interests.	56.9	61.3

Pros and <u>Cons</u>

- Potential mismatch between what student unions and universities believe the purpose of a student representation system is; driving education change versus quality assurance (Bols 2015).
- The extent to which universities are responsive to CRs (Seale 2010: 999; York Consulting 2006)
- The power imbalance within student-tutor relationships has implications for how CRs capture and present the student perspective (Robinson 2012).
- **Questions about the extent to which course reps and systems are democratic and representative of the student body** (Brooks et al. 2015b; ECU 2007)

Methodology

Aim: ***Exploratory study to capture the experiences of course reps working across the University community***

- Course reps recruited through UPSU (November 2017)

- 15 chosen to participate in online platform (December 2017-April 2018) responding to questions exploring
  - Recruitment
  - Representing peers
  - Using evidence to support representation
  - Challenges of CR role
  - Lessons learnt

- Summary interview exploring themes emerging from data (May 2018)

Preliminary findings: Motivation

- **2 main motivations**: personal academic/professional development and to represent the student voice
- **10/15 CR** had previous relevant experience of representation

'I had been on the student council from around the age of 8 at school and always enjoyed voicing others opinions'.

'I was a prefect and deputy head girl at secondary so have always enjoyed getting involved in positions that allow me to change/help the institution'.
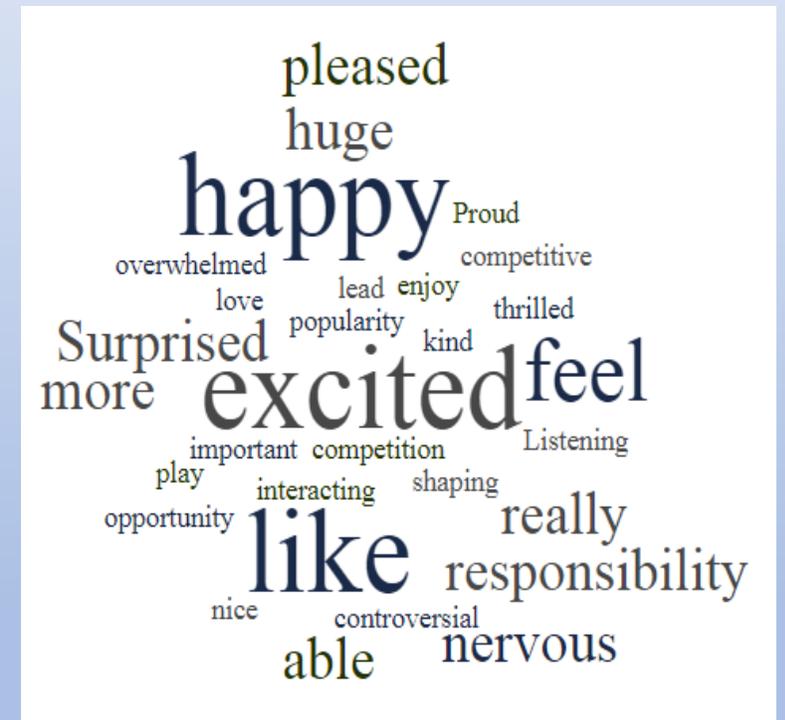
- ECU (2007) identified a perception among union staff and students that the people who stand are a '**certain type of person**'.

Preliminary findings: Recruitment

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- **2/15 CR** described 'democratic' election process
- **13/15 CR** volunteered and were accepted or approached by lecturer
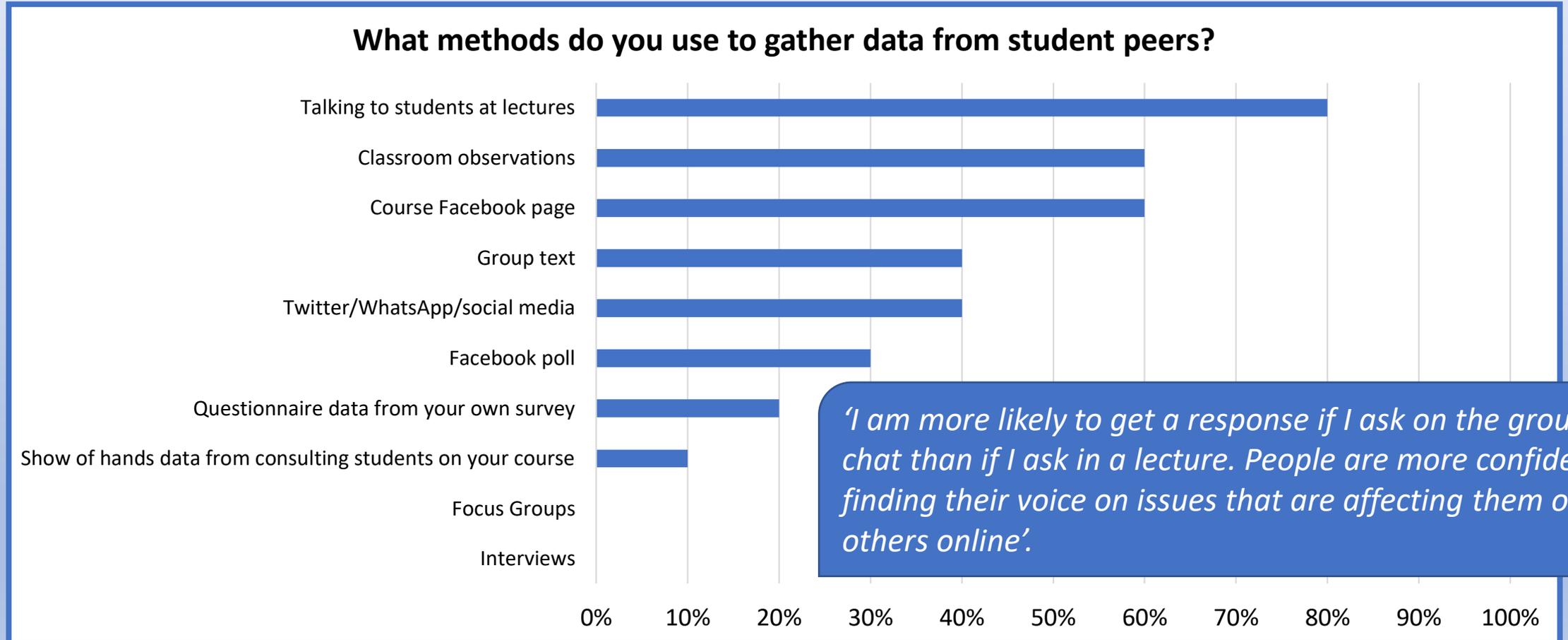- Described as 'controversial'

'I offered my name forward and the class were happy with it. Didn't take much; my class are very quiet and don't like to talk for others'.

'The programme leader asked who wanted to be a course rep. I put my hand up and so did another student. He put his up first so he was made Rep and I was made deputy. I have not seen the other student since though. We were not elected, there was no 'campaign''.

pleased
huge
happy Proud
overwhelmed competitive
love lead enjoy thrilled
popularity kind
Surprised excited feel
more
important competition Listening
play shaping
opportunity interacting really
like responsibility
nice controversial
able nervous

'I was excited at the prospect of taking on the role'

Preliminary findings:
Working with students

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What methods do you use to gather data from student peers?

Talking to students at lectures — 80%
Classroom observations — 60%
Course Facebook page — 60%
Group text — 40%
Twitter/WhatsApp/social media — 40%
Facebook poll — 30%
Questionnaire data from your own survey — 20%
Show of hands data from consulting students on your course — 10%
Focus Groups — 0%
Interviews — 0%

'I am more likely to get a response if I ask on the group chat than if I ask in a lecture. People are more confident in finding their voice on issues that are affecting them or others online'.

N=10, missing 5

Preliminary findings: Taking forward agendas

- Students presented a range of issues to course reps who performed 'triage'
    - In cases where low levels of student dissatisfaction all issues are taken forward
    - In cases where there are multiple issues these are ordered according to merit
    - Merit can be based on the number of students presenting the issue, the course reps previous experience, their own agenda and the suitability of the issue to be presented in a short amount of time.
    - Course reps seeking solutions to issues was common

'If I feel it is a main topic I will bring action but there have not been many'.

'If there is an issue I will try and understand the why of it rather than accepting it; a general statement of discontent. I will also ask if they have a solution in mind.'

'Usually it is the most popular questions that will be asked on the day but it is also the ones we think will be able to be answered quickly as we don't have much more that 5/10 minutes at the meeting'.

Recommendations

Support and guidance to enable

- More egalitarian course rep elections
- Shared expectations across the university
- Inclusive representation of different student groups
- Pros and cons of online voice engagement
- Accountability and legacy of identified programme issues

Next Steps

- Interviews
- Generalisability
  - Proposed survey to identify extent of trends across course rep population

About the authors

- **Dr Jennie Winter** is an Associate Professor in Higher Education with the Teaching and Learning Support team at the University of Plymouth. You can find out more about Jennie here.

- **Dr Becky Turner** is an Educational Developer with the Teaching and Learning Support team at the University of Plymouth. You can find out more about Becky [here.](here)

- **Sarah Davey** is Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Membership Services at the University of Plymouth Students' Union

- **Maja Smith** is the VP Education at UPSU and is responsible for representing Plymouth students and improving their experience in all areas related to education You can find out more about Maja here.

- **Sebastian Stephens** is a PhD student and research assistant within the Plymouth University Peninsula Schools of Medicine and Dentistry. You can find out more about Sebastian here.

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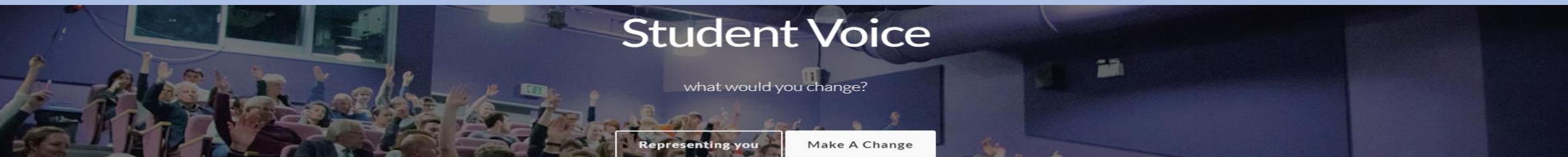
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Image acknowledgements

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