



UUSU

# COURSE REP

## *Handbook*

**LISTEN**

**REPRESENT**

**COMMUNICATE**

Representing the  
educational voice at Ulster

UUSU.ORG

# Welcome to \*TeamUUSU

## Congratulations on being elected as a course rep!

You're now part of a network of hundreds of reps, elected to work in partnership with their academic staff to enhance the learning & teaching experience of students at Ulster.

As a course rep, your role is to represent the Student Voice – this is an opportunity for you to advocate for change within your course, your campus, and the wider University. As a student, no one knows what the learning experience is like better than you. This is the time to use your experience to make change!

This handbook will help you get to grips with your new role and offers practical advice on how to be an effective advocate for your course. The Student Voice team and your Student Officers are always on hand to offer support and to help bring collective issues forward, but this book is your first resource.

As well as shaping the experience of your course, you can set the direction of your

Union by attending your campus Student Voice Forum each semester. Here you can meet other representatives and your Student Officers, find out what's going on in the University and the Union, and raise any unresolved issues. Use this opportunity to get to know your team!

Covid-19 has changed the way we learn. In this time of new teaching approaches, the Student Voice needs to be amplified to ensure your learning experience is the best it can be.

You've already taken a big step by putting yourself forward for elections, and that is no easy task (speaking from experience.) You should be proud of what you have achieved, and take confidence from the people who voted you in. Never doubt your ability, because you are capable of so much. Who knows, you may be writing this message to newly elected course reps someday!

If you have any ideas or issues throughout the year, don't be afraid to get in contact with any of the team. We're always happy to help. Most importantly enjoy your year. We can't wait to see you influence positive change!



**Owen McCloskey**  
President



**Grace Boyle**  
VP Education

# BENEFITS OF BEING A COURSE REP

**Not only will you help ensure the best student experience possible for course colleagues, you will gain valuable knowledge and key skills in the role. All of which will look great on your CV and will enhance future employability.**

Today's employers aren't just looking for someone with a qualification they require a whole range of additional skills and experience before considering someone for a job. Being a Course Rep will ensure that you have an edge above the masses! Research has shown the following skills that are of particular interest to employers, and these skills are definitely required to be an effective Course Rep:

- Leadership Skills
- Team Work
- Communication (both verbal and written)
- Project Management
- Problem Solving
- Lobbying
- Negotiation
- Committee/Meeting Skills
- Report Writing
- Advocacy
- Time Management



## **BENEFITS OF BEING A COURSE REP**

**Consider what previous Course Reps have said about the benefits of the role!**

**"I have learned to listen and talk to different people on many levels, and understand the viewpoints of persons who may be able to see only a small part of a larger issue. I can then combine these many viewpoints in order to see clearly the 'big picture'"**

**"Negotiation, communication and increased confidence"**

**"I have developed the ability to communicate my ideas to all who work at the university on various levels, in formal meetings, short written statements and informal group discussions. Also the ability to listen to my peers and make sure their views are being communicated as clearly as possible"**

**"The ability to seek out solutions and possible solutions for changes and improvements"**

**In addition there a lot of other benefits such as:**

- Making new friends
- Partnership working
- Influencing decisions
- Greater ownership
- Having a voice
- Feeling valued
- Making a positive impact on your course



# ACCREDITATION

## EDGE AWARD

Course Reps will have the opportunity to use their time and experience as one of the required activities (category 4) towards gaining the EDGE Award.

**To qualify you must attend SU Course Rep induction and submit a handover document which will include:**

### **A UUSU COURSE REP SKILLS AUDIT**

Details of committees, meetings and activities you have been involved in during your time in the role.

**Hints and tips aimed at the next person taking on the role (this is a one page reflection on your time as a representative)**

More information on what's involved can be found at [uusu.org/awards/edge/](https://uusu.org/awards/edge/)

\* Please note EDGE accreditation is not automatic in the role.

## COURSE REP CERTIFICATE

Official certificates are awarded by UUSU to course reps that have attended training and completed the EDGE course rep activity. These are signed and validated by a Senior Officer from Ulster University and the Students' Union President.



# WHY IS REPRESENTATION SO IMPORTANT?

**Through academic representation, and valuing the student voice, staff and students can become partners in improving the educational experience for everyone.**

The Student Voice Guidance document sets out a clear framework for capturing the student opinion, and the culture and ethos which must be fostered to ensure staff and students feel able to collaborate to improve the Ulster University experience for everyone. By following this Student Voice Guidance and its values, Faculties, Schools, Departments, Courses and Programmes will ensure that Student Representatives can add to academic enhancement and the student experience with appropriate staff support.

## WORKING TOGETHER

### PARTNERSHIP VALUES

#### **AUTHENTICITY**

Students and staff will work together in a non-tokenistic way to build a culture of trust and respect in which everyone's views are valued.

#### **EXCELLENCE**

There will be willingness to change and an intent to strive for excellence within the learning and teaching environment at Ulster.

#### **SUPPORT**

The University and UUSU will create and nurture opportunities for staff and students to have creative and meaningful discussions about their education experience. Staff will work to ensure students feel able to join in constructive discussion in a safe and non-critical space.

#### **TRUST**

Everyone will work openly, accepting that the outcomes will not be pre-determined but that issues can be explored and alternative ideas put forward and discussed.

#### **TRANSFORMATION**

Working in partnership will be a transformative experience for all.



# WHY IS REPRESENTATION SO IMPORTANT?

**There are four levels of academic representation within Ulster University.**

## 1. Course Reps

Course Reps are elected at course level to represent the views of students who are their course colleagues. They are usually the first point of contact for most students in regard to issues, concerns and questions about the course they are studying. Course Reps are the means through which students can comment on things that work well, provide constructive criticism of things that don't work so well and offer suggestions on areas for consideration for their course.

The ultimate aim is to ensure the continual improvement of the student learning experience which is achieved through effective communication between Students, the University and the Students' Union. The Staff-Student Consultative Committee is usually the best place for a Course Rep to provide student opinion. As a Course Rep you play an essential role in the student feedback process by ensuring that the University listens to the voice of its students and acts upon the information that it is given.

During your time as a Course Rep, you will relay the comments, questions and concerns of your fellow students to the Academic Staff who can make changes happen. In addition, the Course Rep will feedback information to the Students' Union and relay information from the Students' Union back to students on their course. This is achieved via campus forum meetings each semester.

## 2. School/Dept Reps

School/Department Reps are appointed from our network of experienced Course Reps within each School/Department and are there to support our expanding Rep system at Ulster. They provide a central line of communication from Course Reps to the Students' Union and Senior Academic Staff within their Faculty. This group of student Reps will be an extra source of guidance and support. Make time to get to know who your School/Department Rep(s) is this year. Their details can be found on the Students' Union Website **UUSU.ORG**.

# WHY IS REPRESENTATION SO IMPORTANT?

## 3. Faculty Reps

One experienced student is elected to convene representation across the Faculty, supporting School/Department Representatives and Course Representatives, and to represent the student voice at Faculty-level committees with their full time UUSU Officer. This group of engaged students will also be involved in quality assurance mechanisms such as revalidation to ensure student opinion is relevant and accurate in this process.

## 4. Student Union Officers

Every student at Ulster is automatically a member of the Students' Union. Your full time Student Officers are also elected each year and make up the Student Executive Committee. Together, they represent the collective voice of Ulster University students at the highest level of on University committees.

As a student led organisation your Students' Union also provides opportunities to become involved in our own decision making processes. Get involved and influence real change through our Student Council. For more information contact your Campus VP.



# YOUR ROLE AS A COURSE REP

**As a Course Rep you will have to carry out certain tasks in order to be effective and successful in your role.**

**Your induction will be provided by the Students' Union.**

## 1. COMPLETE INDUCTION AND PREPARED FOR THE ROLE

**WHY?** Firstly familiarise yourself with your course rep handbook and Student Voice guidelines. Then come along to your Students' Union induction and get involved with our meetings! This will help you find out about what you are meant to be doing and how to go about it.

Induction will provide more information about the student learning experience and your role in ensuring it comes up to the expectations of your class. Check the UUSU website for more details on dates and times and how to access our online training if you miss out on your campus sessions. Look in your inbox for our emails with updates and information on supplementary skill-based training sessions we offer during the year.

## 2. IDENTIFY YOURSELF TO THE STUDENTS YOU REPRESENT

**WHY?** So that students are aware that there is a Course Representative system, that you are their representative and if they have issues (positive and negative) they should give their feedback to you.

**HOW?** As Course Reps are elected by their course colleagues, most people will know who you are. In any event it does no harm to introduce yourself in lectures as the Course Rep just in case someone was absent. Make use of posters, notice boards, emails, and chatting at coffee breaks to get the word out!

### 3. TO KEEP AN EYE ON THE STATED AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF YOUR COURSE

**WHY?** To ensure that you and your course colleagues receive quality teaching and that the stated aims and objectives of your course are being addressed.

**HOW?** Ask your course colleagues to provide you with feedback which you should then communicate to your Course Director. This can be done either informally or through your Staff Student Consultative Committee (SSCC). They will be grateful to learn if teaching and the course is meeting expectations, and if not - how this can be addressed.

### 4. IDENTIFY STUDENT ISSUES AND NEEDS

**WHY?** Provide your Course Team and Faculty with information that is representative of the entire student body on your course, not merely individual opinions. As a Course Rep you must identify the issues and needs of your course colleagues.

**HOW?** A series of suggestions entitled "Effective Communication with your course colleagues" can be found in your course rep handbook. It gives helpful tips as to how you might identify the issues and needs of students on your course. It's all about communication! Remember the sooner you start communicating with class colleagues the more information you will gather.

### 5. REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF CLASS COLLEAGUES EVEN WHEN YOU DON'T PERSONALLY AGREE WITH THEM

**WHY?** Remember as a student you are the expert on the student experience on your course or in your Faculty, so consult with your course colleagues and give feedback to the academic staff. In life we may find ourselves in minorities - some of us more than others. When representing the views of the entire course cohort it is likely that on some issues you will be in a minority. It's your job to represent your course colleagues views even if you don't necessarily agree with them.

**HOW?** If a major decision is being taken in which you feel that there should be greater student involvement in, don't be afraid to say so and ask the Faculty what it can do to ensure consultation with more students. Equally, if you feel you should be involved in decisions, which you are currently not, then don't be afraid to suggest this.

### 6: ATTEND AND ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE IN YOUR COURSE/PROGRAMME STAFF-STUDENT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE MEETINGS

**WHY?** Without Course Reps attending and participating in Staff-Student Consultative Committee meetings there is no point in having them. The harsh reality is that academic staff have many other demands on their time - so making the meeting worth their while will be appreciated! Plus why waste your time - students have time constraints too.

**HOW?** Try and find out as soon as possible when the meetings are scheduled (Your Course Director or School Office will have details) and keep that time free. It's important any issues or concerns are officially noted during the meeting. SSCC minutes are advanced to other higher level School/Department Committees and quality assurance processes such as course revalidation. If it really is impossible for you to attend then speak to the chair beforehand about getting the agenda and papers early so you can provide written comment on them.

### 7. LIAISE WITH YOUR STUDENTS' UNION AND ATTEND YOUR CAMPUS STUDENT VOICE FORUM EACH SEMESTER

**WHY?** Your Students' Union can only identify challenges or suggest enhancements around the student learning experience through your feedback. Tell us about what is working well and what needs to be improved.

**HOW?** Your Student Voice Forum takes place each semester. This meeting brings together all academic reps to network and discuss current developments around learning and teaching. The Student Voice forum is led by the campus VP and School/Department Reps. Issues raised will then be actioned by the relevant representative with University staff. Outside of this keep in contact with your School/Department as much as possible online or through meet-ups. Your full time officers and Academic Representation Coordinator are also there to support you during the year.

### 8. WORK IN PARTNERSHIP WITH OTHER REPRESENTATIVES ON ISSUES OF JOINT CONCERN

**WHY?** There are potentially 900+ Course Reps and 30 School/Department Reps based across all the campuses at the Ulster University. Working with the other reps will allow you to make your case more effectively - remember if there is an issue you have in common the more individuals pressing for change means it is more likely to happen.

**HOW?** Arrange to meet other Course Reps on a regular basis, if this is not possible then perhaps meet in the hour before the Staff-Student Consultative Committee to discuss the major issues you wish to raise. Keep in touch with the School/Department Reps responsible for your School/Department and use our feedback form to keep them updated after SSCC's on the issues being raised or to share what has been working well. You can use the online discussion forum within the representation area of Blackboard Learn which all reps will have access to, or use the find your rep tool on our website, [uusuu.org](http://uusuu.org) to network with other reps.

### 9. REFER MAJOR ISSUES AND INDIVIDUAL CASES TO YOUR STUDENTS' UNION OFFICERS

**WHY?** As a Course Rep there are some issues (namely, personal , disciplinary, disputes & appeal matters) that you should not become involved with, because you have a limited amount of time and there are other services available that have a core duty to provide guidance, support and advice.

**HOW?** If you are approached with such an issue please refer the person to the appropriate service. If you are in doubt about making a referral please contact your Campus VP who will do so on your behalf.

### 10. PROVIDE FEEDBACK TO YOUR COURSE/SUBJECT COLLEAGUES ON THE OUTCOMES OF MEETINGS YOU ATTEND

**WHY?** So that you can check that class colleagues are happy with the outcomes of the meeting. If they are not then you can go back to the Faculty, or members of the academic staff, and sort out the confusion. Reporting back also means that your colleagues will see the value of the Course Representative system and see that it really can improve the student learning experience.

**HOW?** A number of suggested methods of communicating with course colleagues are detailed in the Course Rep Handbook.

# ISSUES YOU MAY ENCOUNTER AS A COURSE REP

**Students from your course may approach you with a wide range of questions, some of which may be addressed at the StaffStudent Consultative Committee (SSCC). Other issues can be dealt with outside this committee more informally.**

**Remember if the question is not within your remit you should refer your course colleague to an appropriate person within the Students' Union or University.**

**Your job as a rep is to ensure that any problems your course colleagues encounter during their studies can be raised and resolved.**

Students have a right to expect quality teaching, resources and facilities that enhance their learning. The main concern for a Course Rep is to ensure that issues raised are directly related to the academic nature of your course. Some Course Reps make great use of their position to discuss matters such as the catering or the car parking at the University. While these might be very important issues on which the students you represent have very strong opinions, they are not necessarily issues which staff teaching your course will have any ability to act upon, and they should be passed on to the Students' Union. For this reason the most useful comments that you can make as a Course Rep are about the issues on your course which the staff teaching will have the power and ability to make changes to.

## ISSUES YOU MAY ENCOUNTER AS A COURSE REP

### TYPES OF ISSUES THAT YOU CAN RAISE

**Here is a list of issues and questions that you may wish to think about when consulting with your course colleagues. There are three different areas:**

- Commenting on things that work well on the course
- Constructive criticism on things that didn't or, don't work so well on your course
- Suggestions on new areas to consider on the course

### QUESTIONS TO ASK COLLEAGUES

**Questions you may wish to think about when consulting with your course colleagues:**

#### Curriculum Issues

- Are the learning outcomes being met?
- What is the match between expectations of students, the learning outcomes and curriculum content?
- Does the curriculum content encourage the development of knowledge and skills?
- How relevant is the course to future study and employment?
- Are your timetables and workload appropriate?
- What opportunities are available for practical and vocational experience?
- Have employers/regulatory bodies been consulted about course content?

#### Teaching and Learning Issues

- Is the range of teaching and learning methods appropriate for delivering your curriculum?
- Should there be more lectures, labs or tutorials?
- What teaching methods would students find more appropriate for your course?



# ISSUES YOU MAY ENCOUNTER AS A COURSE REP

## Issues relating to Learning Resources

- How good was your induction process?
- How do you rate the on-course support provided to you, for example through your Studies Advisor?
- Are appropriate library services available?
- Are the texts on the reading list readily available?
- Which texts on the reading list were really useful?
- Is there ready access to computer facilities?
- Is the software you are expected to use matched to your course needs and are you trained how to use it, if necessary?
- What are the most helpful learning resources provided for your course?
- Is the accommodation and equipment that is used for your course adequate?

## Issues relating Assessment

- Do you understand the criteria for assessment and the methods used?
- What feedback do you receive?
- Is it prompt and effective?
- Is the assessment policy and practice clearly described?
- Could the timing for submission of coursework be reviewed?
- Is it too close to exams?
- Is there an unreasonable delay in the return of marked assignments?
- Are the comments made on marked assignments helpful?
- Is information given on plagiarism and how useful is it?

## Issues relating to Student Progression (from one year to the next)

- How many students drop out of the course?
- How many of each degree classification are awarded each year?
- How many students go into relevant graduate employment?
- How many students fail?

## ISSUES YOU MAY ENCOUNTER AS A COURSE REP

### Issues about Quality and Standards

- Are course evaluation forms used and collected?
- Is such evaluation acted upon?
- Do you consider that student views are influential?
- Can you provide any examples?
- Do you receive any information about what the department or course have done in light of student feedback?

### Issues related to Student Representation

- Are students aware of the role of the Course Rep?
- Do they understand the mechanism of representation throughout the Students' Union and university?
- Do students explicitly understand and know about the transferable skills they can acquire as a Course Representative?
- Do the students receive sufficient feedback about what the Faculty has done in light of student feedback?



# ISSUES YOU SHOULD NOT DEAL WITH

**With course work, extracurricular activities and employment, students have a lot to fit into the average week during term-time. For this reason it is very important that Course Reps do not undertake more tasks than they need to. There are some issues that a Course Rep should not deal with.**

## **Do not be tempted to get involved in:**

- Disputes between students and academic staff, and between individual students (for example; harassment, discrimination and victimisation)
- Formal procedures (for example; exam failures, academic appeals, individual complaints, disciplinary hearings etc)
- Financial and funding queries including debt
- Welfare problems, health and personal issues (for example, housing employment and immigration)
- Exam and results appeals

Your initial reaction may be to help the individual, however, it should be recognised that all these issues require some expertise and in depth training to ensure that the best advice and assistance is provided. It is suggested that you do not attempt to help individuals approaching you on these matters.

These sorts of issues can be really time consuming and complex so don't feel bad about referring someone onto a source of information who has agreed to provide such support, such as the Students' Union and Student Support Services. Always get the student's consent if you need to discuss a case with someone else, or refer it. If you do decide to refer a student elsewhere explain to them why you are doing so and give them the opportunity to ask any questions and / or voice any concerns.

You should offer to help arrange an appointment while reassuring them that support and help are available. Be sure not to ask leading questions or investigate.

**If in doubt about an issue you should pass the student onto a Students' Union Officer, Student Wellbeing or academic staff within your Faculty. See useful contacts.**

# HANDLING COMPLAINTS

**An important part of being a Course Rep is receiving feedback from students. Inevitably, some of the feedback you receive will be complaints and it is important that you listen and respond to them.**

If student feedback highlights a problem it should be reported to the Course Director by a Course Rep, without identifying the individual source of the comments. The Course Director may be in a position to resolve the matter or may need to refer it to the Head of School or Manager of the relevant service, for resolution.

Not all complaints are satisfactorily resolved. If a student approaches you with an unresolved complaint, you should refer them to the Ulster University Student Complaints Procedure. Information on the Student Complaints Procedure can be found at **[UUSU.ORG](http://www.uusu.org)**.

The University libraries, Registry, Student Support and Faculty offices should all hold stocks of the Student Complaints leaflet and associated forms. The process is also outlined on the University website:

**<http://www.ulster.ac.uk/quality/qmau/complaints.html>**

The Campus VP, who can be found on our website, will also be able to provide advice and assistance.

**<https://www.uusu.org/student-voice/your-reps/>**

# WHO'S WHO AND WHAT'S WHAT?

**As a Course Rep you will come into contact with many academics and non-academic staff members and attend various committee meetings. This section highlights some of the staff and committees you may come into contact at the Ulster University.**

## **Staff-Student Consultative Committees (SSCC)**

This course level meeting will be based around all areas of the student learning experience. Here you can feedback on good practice as well as discuss the challenges that students have experienced. You should also be briefed on learning and teaching developments and proposed changes including the implementation of the new degree algorithm.

Each course has its own SSCC, which meets at least once a semester. How these are run can vary slightly but will involve Course Reps, sometimes across year groups and your Course/Subject Director with other relevant staff responsible for your learning experience.

Remember to research the opinion of those you are representing before meetings and feedback on what was discussed and follow up on any actions. You can then add items to the agenda in advance of meetings. Course Reps are also required to communicate ongoing developments and to consult with course colleagues on proposed changes to a course or its modules.

**Please get involved with your SSCC! This is your formal opportunity to represent the collective views of your course colleagues and really impact on their Uni experience.**

# WHO'S WHO AND WHAT'S WHAT?

## Aspects not covered by the SSCCs

Although SSCCs cover a wide range of issues, they do not allow for individual student's complaints or problems to be addressed. These complaints or problems may include:

- Personal problems of individual students
- Academic difficulties of individual students
- Allegations of unfair or inappropriate treatment by staff or other students.

If a student approaches you with a concern regarding one of these problems you should NOT seek to raise the issues during the SSCC meetings. Try to address the problem at a more appropriate time with your Advisor of Studies or Course Director, or the Students' Union. They will be able to refer you to the appropriate person within the University who will help to resolve the situation.

## Course/Subject Director

Each course has a Course Director who is responsible for the day-to-day running of the course and is the person you should contact initially with any problems or queries about the course.

## Module Co-ordinator

Each module has a Module Coordinator who has overall responsibility for the module. The main responsibilities of the Module Co-ordinator are:

- Planning the module and changes to the module
- Co-ordinating and managing teaching on the module
- Co-ordinating the assessment of students on the module

## Adviser of Studies

All registered student on a taught course will be assigned an Adviser of Studies who provides guidance in matters relating to choice of modules, assessment and progress. Students are encouraged to talk to their advisers about their work and progress and to seek assistance, if required, with study or examination skills.

## WHO'S WHO AND WHAT'S WHAT?

Studies Advisers will be pleased to provide students with information about the range of support available e.g. from Student Wellbeing, Chaplaincy, Careers Service and, if requested, will make arrangements for students to seek specialist advice or help. You will be given the name of your Studies Adviser during the first week of the semester. You should meet with your Adviser at least once each semester. Your Adviser will agree with you the frequency and format of these meetings. Should a student approach you as a Course Rep, with any personal or individual academic issues, you should refer them to their Adviser of Studies or the Students' Union's Education and Welfare Officer.

### Course Committee

Course Committees are responsible for the management, review and continuous reappraisal of courses and generally consist of all teaching staff. They meet regularly and submit annual reports to the Faculty Board to recommend any amendments necessary in the light of Student Feedback and other developments. The Course Director chairs the Course Committee and is responsible for the day-to-day administration of the course. Student representatives from the SSCC may be invited to attend Course Committee meetings for the unreserved business.

### Student Voice Forum

This forum will be held once a semester and provides for discussion between Course Reps, the Students' Union President, the Campus VP and the Academic Rep Co-ordinator (Student Union staff role). The purpose of the meetings are to ensure that the Students' Union is aware of the issues students are facing both academic and non-academic which need to be highlighted further through the university Committee structure to be address and resolved.

The meetings also provide an opportunity for the Students' Union to brief Course Reps on issues which are of concern both locally and nationally, provide support, guidance and advice, and filter through information about the activities of the Students' Union, which in turn should be fed back to your course colleagues.



# BE AN EFFECTIVE COURSE REP

**This section of the handbook aims at providing Course Reps with tips on how to be effective and successful in their role, and deals with the following topics:**

- **Communication** with course colleagues
- **Thinking through** issues
- **Communication/negotiation** with academic staff
- **Committee/meeting** skills

## COMMUNICATION

### Communicating with Course Colleagues

One of the things that many Course Reps experience as the most difficult aspect of their job is finding an effective way of communicating with their course colleagues. Whatever method you use to communicate it is useful to bear in mind these three issues.

#### 1. Why should students communicate with their Course Rep?

Many students will not communicate with their Course Reps because they don't properly understand what a course representative does. You will need to explain what it is you do, namely that students can approach you with positive and negative points about the course they are taking and that you will pass the information onto the course leaders so that they can address the issues raised.

#### 2. What difference does speaking to a Course Rep make?

This is a question that other students implicitly answer in the negative if they have issues with their course but don't come to speak to you about it. If students don't believe that the course representative system works, or that it makes a difference to their learning experience, then a vicious circle starts with more and more students feeling that the system doesn't address their concerns.

This has an effect on how representatives of your class colleagues you can be at meetings. It is important therefore that you – and if you can persuade them, academic staff – encourage student comments by providing means to help them communicate with you. It is also important that you provide information for students about what has happened at meetings and issues that you have raised on their behalf. This means that you can demonstrate to others that speaking to a course rep can make a difference.

### 3. How should I communicate with course colleagues?

This too is a question that most Course Representatives ask at some point when they are struggling with how to find out what the courses issues are. Here are some suggestions which are aimed at helping you find out information as quickly and easily as possible. Remember the sooner you start communicating with class colleagues the more information you will gather.

- Ask your lecturer or tutor to give you a few minutes at the start or the end of a class so you can explain what it is a course representative does and how students can contact you;
- Put up posters around your department or publicise your email address;
- At the beginning of a class give everyone a small sheet of paper and ask them to write one thing they think is going well about the course and one thing they think could be going better about the course. At the end of the class collect all the sheets of paper and feedback to academic staff
- Ask the Faculty whether it would be possible to have a notice board somewhere prominent in the department so students can leave anonymous comments about the course. Remember to check this regularly. It will help others to make comments if you acknowledge on the notice board that you have read the comments and taken them on board. It might be a good idea to place two or three comments on the board to get people started.
- Have a facebook page for your class and welcome any comments. Make sure it is a closed group to ensure confidentiality.
- Some Faculties can provide a pigeon hole for the Course Reps so that students can leave messages or comments there for their representative;

## BE AN EFFECTIVE COURSE REP

- Some Course Representatives hold 'surgeries' where students can drop by somewhere conveniently to speak about issues they have faced. Usually such surgeries are successful if well-publicised, and if held after a lecture. Get in touch with us and we will arrange tea and coffee for your group. You could hold an 'open discussion' after a lecture, somewhere like the refectory, the week before a SSCC or course meeting. This will work better if you have managed to get the agenda from the Faculty beforehand and will enable you to discuss with your course colleagues the issues that the Faculty want to raise as well as the issues you have been asked to raise.
- Don't underestimate the potential of coffee-breaks and chats before and after lectures or class nights out as opportunities to discuss issues that students may have. It is only natural that issues about your course will crop up as it is one of the things all have in common. Remember the best way to discover the views of your course colleagues is to be accessible and encourage them to approach you.
- Listening skills are very important, try not to interrupt people when they are talking to you. Make notes and then ask for clarification of anything you don't understand



## **THINKING IT THROUGH**

**It is important when passing on information to academic staff and the Students' Union that you are able to give them information that will assist them in using the feedback you have provided. This often means giving more than a simple list of strengths and weaknesses about a course. The following questions will assist you in collecting more information and hopefully get a better grasp of the issues you may be asked to communicate.**

### **What is the issue?**

Try and spell out as simply as possible what is wrong or right about the course.

### **Why is this an issue**

It affects teaching quality through or impacts on the ability to learn because...

### **How do you know it's an issue?**

Complaints/comments have been made, students have spoken to you (here you are attempting to provide evidence for what you are saying).

### **Where is this an issue?**

In one module/ programme/ year/ the whole faculty/ university/regional or national.

### **Who does the issue affect?**

Different year groups, undergraduates, taught and/or research postgraduates, males, females, home or international students, mature students, campus-based students.

### **When is it an issue?**

Should the course or faculty be aware of deadlines or time scales around the issue which may impact upon it?

## AFTER YOU HAVE THE FACTS FOLLOW THESE STEPS

### 1. Assess the situation

Most people don't remember information in a logical or chronological order, so it will be up to you to determine the key issues and order events. Once you have ordered this information confirm with class colleagues what you understand to be the crux of the matter and the key issues around it. Ask if they are in agreement, if not; get them to re clarify the issues until you understand clearly.

### 2. Identify Objectives

Ask your colleagues what they hope to achieve by raising an issue and what their preferred outcome would be. This will assist you in determining the most appropriate course of action.

### 3. Develop a strategy

Agree objectives with your course colleagues, deciding what action is to be taken and by whom. Always set time scales. In terms of developing a strategy you should consider;

- Should the person/issue be referred elsewhere?
- Is it something you can take up informally with academic staff or should the issue be progressed at a Committee?
- If you need to raise it at a committee do you need to submit a paper?
- Is it something that needs to be raised by the Students' Union Officers?
- Do you need support, advice and/or representation from the Students' Union?
- Is it urgent or can it wait until the next SSCC?

### 4. Provide Feedback

Remember it is important to keep your course colleagues and the Students' Union informed of progress. It can be frustrating if the feedback and communication cycle is broken, as people will become disheartened and alienated from the Course Rep system, making your job more difficult.

## **NEGOTIATING WITH ACADEMIC STAFF**

### **Communication and Negotiation with Academic Staff**

Course Reps will be involved in a variety of communication and negotiation activities by liaising with individual students and academic staff, and representing student views at the SSCC and Student Union Course Rep Meetings.

To represent students effectively it is important to develop good communication and negotiation skills. Remember informal routes of negotiation can sometimes be the most successful. Try to solve problems at the lowest level possible, i.e. in the first instance speak informally to lecturers on the module/ course.

It is important to remember that on many occasions the Staff-Student Consultative Committee will meet only once a semester and usually towards the end of it. If there are problems with the course it will be only natural that students will want a resolution to these issues earlier than the staff-student consultative committee will allow.

In such circumstances it is probably best to approach the course leader/ programme director to discuss the problem and attempt to negotiate a solution to it. Course Reps sometimes think or feel that it's a them and us situation, the students vs staff. Usually this doesn't have to be the case, and the best results are achieved by students and staff working together in partnership.

### REMEMBER

The main reason the Ulster University have Course representatives is so that student's can contribute to the improvement of courses and degrees. Academic teaching and support staff are committed to their jobs and equally want to see an improvement to the courses they work on.

You will not be expected to have the skills of a diplomat when negotiating at meetings, however, if you know that a major issue is coming up which is important to students you should set aside some preparation time. In negotiations confidence is important; you must appear sure of your argument and not be caught off guard by those who disagree with you.

It is important that before negotiations start that you examine your case for flaws by thinking about how and why someone may disagree with you and prepare responses to their counter points.

Access the strengths and weaknesses of your case and that of your opposition; decide what issues you want to concentrate on in your argument and on which points you are willing to concede. Negotiation is all about compromise by both parties; if no one compromises an agreement will not be reached. Part of the art of negotiation is for you to appear to make more concessions than the other side.

Tactically if you make the first concession it may well be beneficial for you later on in the course of negotiation, because you will be in a position to remind the opposition that you made the first move to compromise and now it is their turn. Always have a bottom line, below which you are not prepared to go; otherwise you may end up conceding too much.

Try to manipulate your arguments to appeal to others in attendance, use other Course reps as allies to back up the point you are making. If an issue is raised, which you have not anticipated, and has a detrimental impact upon your argument DON'T PANIC! Ask for an adjournment as this will allow you to digest the new information and come up with a counter argument. Do not try to tackle an issue on which you do not have an agreed view, as your opposition may use this against you that's Politics!



## BE AN EFFECTIVE COURSE REP

Tactics are important BUT there is no substitute for a well researched, prepared and presented case.

Always make notes and have a list of your major points in front of you before you engage in negotiations. It is important to avoid being in a position where you have to argue an ill prepared case.

### After the meeting:

Always try to conduct a post-mortem once the negotiations are over as it will give you a chance to evaluate and hopefully learn from your successes and mistakes.

### Consider the following points:

- What did I learn (positive and negative) that may help me in future negotiations?
- What situations should be avoided?
- Who conceded and why?
- Did I anticipate the final outcome?
- Could I have changed the outcome in any way through more preparation?
- What were my opponent's tactics?



## MANAGING CONFLICT

During your time as a Course Rep you may find yourself facing angry, upset or frustrated students who are unhappy with a University decision that affects them. It is important to remember that in these situations the negative emotion is neither personal nor, in reality, directed against you. Do not lose your temper or antagonise the situation in any way, and follow the five step conflict management framework.

### Step 1

Conflict needs to be confronted assertively not aggressively. “Look before you leap” and think about what you are trying to achieve before confronting the other person.

### Step 2

Step into the other person’s shoes as this will help you make sense of the problem and ascertain whether this is a conflict situation or a series of misunderstandings. It will enable you to start identifying the real issues whilst showing respect for the other person.

### Step 3

Try to arrive at a mutually acceptable definition of the problem. The course of conflict can be destructive if both parties persist in a combative approach to the definition of problems.

### Step 4

Undertake a collaborative search for mutually acceptable solutions.

### Step 5

Make sure that each of you has ownership of the agreement, as this way it is less likely to be broken. Make agreements which involve clear and unambiguous communication.



## **COMMITTEE AND MEETING SKILLS**

Committee and Meeting Skills Committee meetings usually follow rules and procedures. These may vary from committee to committee but generally speaking they follow the format detailed below. Here is an example of a typical Agenda from a Staff Student Consultative Committee:

### **1. Agenda**

A list of topics to be discussed. An agenda is circulated 5 to 7 days before the meeting. Contact the committee secretary if you have queries about the agenda.

### **2. Welcome and Apologies**

Welcome all attendees and record in the minutes the people who have said they cannot make the meeting..

### **3. Minutes of the last meeting**

This is an important check to make sure decisions that were taken at the previous meeting have been recorded accurately. This part of the meeting can be used to correct any errors or omissions, but not to discuss items again.

### **4. Matters Arising from the minutes of the last meeting**

This is where updates and progress chasing, of issues raised at the last meeting, takes place

### **5. Teaching and Learning Issues**

These issues can be quite wide ranging. They may include issues concerning the delivery of the course and its materials, e.g. whether the Module Outline, the Module Handbook or anything to do with the organisation of the modules are an accurate reflection of what is taught and carried out.

### **6. Assessment Issues**

Relates to things concerning assessments, whether assessments from different modules occur at the same time, if insufficient feedback was given for course work or if there were problems during the exams.

### 7. Studies Advice

Relates to matters which are going to happen in the future . Remember that matters which comprise purely of giving information and no decision making can be written down and circulated.

### 8. Any Other Business (AOB)

Often a dumping ground for people who have not got their act together to put an item on the agenda! So any item or issue not covered in the meeting can be raised here. It can be:

- A general query
- An emergency that has arisen since the agenda has been published
- A point of information about a forthcoming event

**\*Important\* Do not raise important or controversial issues at AOB.  
Put these on the agenda as a separate item or under Matters Arising.  
Participation in Committee Meetings**

It has taken many years to promote, establish and defend Academic Representation on University committees, so your participation and contribution as a Course Rep in meetings is crucial. So bear in mind these helpful hints:

- Try and meet other reps beforehand to gauge their reaction to issues on the agenda, or if there is a contentious issue plan a response.
- Remember that you are not on the committee as an individual but are representing students from your course.
- Check with other Course Reps about any ambiguous / controversial / confusing items.
- If you have any doubts, do not be afraid to ask for clarification from the Chair.
- Sit where the Chair can see you.
- If you agree with something say so.
- Be positive.
- Be ready to listen to others.

# SOURCES OF HELP

**These people are useful points of contact for issues, which your course colleagues approach you with, that are outside of your remit as a Course Rep.**

**Or if at any time you feel like your role as a Course Rep is becoming a bit pressurised and you require some help, guidance and support - don't worry these people will be happy to help you achieve the goals you have set yourself, or just take some of the pressure off you!**

## **School/Department Reps**

School/Department Reps are elected to help provide leadership and support for our 900 course reps across the 4 campuses. Having plenty of experience under their belt, they are there as your first point of contact should you need any help. Find out who your School/ Department Rep is for your at <https://www.uusu.org/student-voice/your-reps/department-reps/>

## **Academic Representation Coordinator (ARC)**

Having responsibility for the management and development of the Course Representation System, the ARC will obviously be well aware of the issues (positive and negative) which Course Reps face, and offer practical advice and help to assist you in your role. The ARC organises training for Course Reps and facilitates Student Union Representation Forums on each campus.

## **Full Time Students' Union Officers**

The Officer Team, as the ultimate elected representatives of students at the Ulster University, will be more than willingly to have a chat with you and share the benefit of their wisdom and experiences. Many of the Student Officers have been Course Reps in their time and understand the nature of the role. In particular your Campus VP is available for support and advice and generally provide a "listening ear"

## SOURCES OF HELP

They can help with all academic and non academic issues, and therefore are an invaluable resource and good contact for any referrals you may have to make as a Course Rep which may include students with issues relating to:

- Housing
- Finance
- Health
- Accommodation
- Student Disciplinary hearings
- Exam and results appeals
- Stress & anxiety due to work/exam pressure

### Advice Bureau

Your UUSU Advice Bureau exists to represent, support and advocate on your behalf. As UUSU is independent of Ulster University, what better platform is there to ensure you have the proper and professional advice to help you with all of your academic related issues and complaints. So drop in, make an appointment or contact the team at **[advice@uusuu.org](mailto:advice@uusuu.org)** for the guidance!

### Other Course Reps

It is useful to get to know other Course Reps within your year or even your School. Fellow Course Reps can offer support and act as sounding boards as they encounter the same issues. It is also good to have allies who can make a huge difference when you need to raise issues at meetings.

Course Rep training is a fantastic way to meet other reps and the Students Voice Forum which is held on each campus once a semester, offers another chance for you to get to know your fellow reps and impart experience and knowledge. Don't forget that the On-line Discussion forum is a great vehicle for asking questions and sharing good practice with people in the same role as you.

# STAFF STUDENT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEES

**When Course Reps meet with staff from their course or faculty it is known as the staff student consultative committee.**

**This section informs you how best to prepare and participate in these formal meeting that course reps have with academic staff from their course. The meeting gives an opportunity for representatives to give detailed feedback on everything relating to your course in a structured manner.**

One of the most frequently mentioned issues that staff have with these meetings is that they tend to consist solely of a series of problems and complaints being identified. It is natural where students have had difficulties with a course that they wish to see these addressed and dealt with. Nevertheless remember if you only identify the problems and the negative aspects of a course then this may have the effect of demoralising staff, and they may not be quite as willing to work with you on other issues to enhance your learning experience.



## PREPARING FOR SSCC

The exact composition and remit of staff-student consultative committees varies from faculty to faculty, and even department to department, with some meetings being more formal than others. It is therefore important to do some Research before your first meeting, This may involve talking to other Course Representatives or academic staff or the Students' Union.

### **Find out from the Students' Union or your Faculty/department what the practice is regarding some of these issues:**

- Who attends the meeting?
- Who chairs the meeting?
- Who takes the minutes of the meeting?
- How many meetings are there each year?
- How will you find out about the date, time and place of the meeting?
- Is there a set agenda for the meeting or will you be invited to add agenda items?
- Will a senior member of academic staff in the Faculty/department speak to students before the meeting informally?
- Is it appropriate that relevant staff and students may be invited to give information about a particular issue?

### **It will also be necessary to do some preparation for the meeting, as a Course Representative you should:**

- Ask students what their issues and comments are. Get as much feedback as possible and attempt, where possible, to get a balance of positive and negative comments;
- Prepare for meetings by reading and understanding the minutes of previous meetings;
- Read the agenda – are there any items you need more information on either from the Students' Union or your fellow class colleagues?
- Meet with other representatives on the committee and let them know in advance what issues you wish to discuss. If necessary, have items placed on the agenda as this tactic is better than simply raising issues under any other business;
- When reading the papers write down any initial questions you may have; always highlight important sections; and identify what you want to do or say on each item.



## PARTICIPATING IN THE SSCC

**Find out from the Students' Union or your Faculty/department what the practice is regarding some of these issues:**

It is important not merely to attend a staff student consultative committee meeting, but rather to play an active part and engage in the meeting itself. A couple of things that you may wish to bear in mind are:

Remember the committee is a forum to talk about common concerns – it is not the appropriate forum for raising issues concerning individual grievances or to talk about individual students or academic staff;

Sit where the chair can see you – it might also help to sit next to the other Course representatives, so together you can be allies;

- State problems in a constructive manner – concentrate on the issue rather than the personalities. With larger issues it may be an idea to break them into their smaller constituent pieces and deal with them separately;
- Take notes of what is being said so you are clear about what has been agreed and who will carry out the necessary action (so you can report this to your course colleagues).
- If you have any doubts, ask for clarification from the chair (the chances are you will not be the only person with doubts or confusion);
- Don't remain silent – if you agree with something say so; if you don't agree with something then say so too;
- Try to be assertive rather than coming across as an aggressive Course representative

## STAFF STUDENT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEES

### Actions after the Staff-Student Consultative Committee

Earlier we discussed the importance of demonstrating the effectiveness of the course representative system to other students. This is so that they feel that taking up issues with their course representative does make a difference to their learning experience and that of future students. A few points to consider after the meeting are listed beneath:

- Report back to students on the main outcomes of meetings. You should also report the outcomes to the Students' Union so that they can detect major issues across the University and raise them at the appropriate committee;
- If the Faculty or the course committee agree that changes should be made to the course because of student feedback then don't be shy about pointing this out to other students showing that either they or future students will benefit as a result;
- Identify if there are issues which you have agreed to get more information on or issues which you want to discuss further with students and then discuss these issues with groups of students;
- Check through minutes to make sure that discussions have been accurately recorded and that nothing has been left out – this will ensure that the course representative in the year after you will be able to check up on the action points that were agreed by the committee meeting.



# THINGS TO REMEMBER

## PROMOTING GOOD RELATIONS & DIVERSITY ON OUR CAMPUSES

Here at the Ulster University Students' Union, we believe that everyone has the right to have his or her culture, politics and identity respected. Although at times we may not fully understand other perspectives and opinions, we believe that no person should be made to feel excluded from the University's Community.

As a Course Rep, you have a responsibility to reflect and articulate the interests of all members of your course. This includes those whose needs, background, cultural tradition or beliefs are different from your own. By committing to playing a role in creating a campus environment that respects and supports cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity it is important that you foster, communicate, and promote mutual respect and peaceful coexistence among all members of this Institution. As Course Reps, you will have many opportunities to make a positive contribution on campus, by creating a better environment for everyone who studies and work here.

## LEGITIMACY OF THE COURSE REP ROLE

Course Reps have an authority and legitimacy that is given to them by their student colleagues when they elect them. The authority given is that you shall act as their official spokesperson and representative on issues affecting their course. It is reasonable therefore for your course colleagues to have a means through which they can make you aware of their views and of monitoring the representation you make on their behalf. Remember to feedback to your course colleagues and keep the Students' Union informed of the issues you are raising on behalf of your course colleagues.

In addition the role of Course rep is recognised by the Ulster University, your Students' Union and the National Unions namely NUS and USI. Representation is acknowledged by all these bodies as being crucial to the continual improvement of the student learning experience.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

It is vital that ALL Course Reps respect fellow students by treating the information they receive as confidential. If a student's issue requires you, as a Course Rep, to talk to a third party, you should always gain the student's consent first. You may find yourself in a position where you are very concerned for a student to the point where you feel it necessary to break their trust [i.e. you are concerned for their safety]. Here, you should seek help from the Campus VP within the Students' Union or approach Student Wellbeing.

If you wish to communicate any personal details about any individual you must seek their informed and written permission beforehand. You must never give out other people's contact details without their express permission. Remember there are many reasons why students may not wish even members of their families to have these details.



# YOUR STUDENTS' UNION

## ULSTER UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' UNION

**The Students' Union will be at the centre of student life by representing, supporting and involving all students in getting the best from their time at Ulster University.**

All Ulster University Students are entitled to free and automatic membership of the Students' Union. UUSU is made up of 7 elected full time officers across the four campuses. There are three Overall officers: President, VP Education and VP Sport and Wellbeing. There are also Site Vice-Presidents responsible for each campus.

### **Responsibilities include**

- Representation of students on various University committees advising students on issues such as finance, housing, academic appeals etc
- Co-coordinating relevant campaigns
- Insuring students rights are met on a local and national level
- Day to day running of the Students' Union

Remember the officers have been students too and have experienced the highs and lows of University life – they can identify with the issues students may face individually or collectively. Drop in and have a chat with them at your

### **How can you get involved in the Students' Union?**

- Societies
- Sports
- Volunteering
- Student Council
- Elections

**Find out more visit [UUSU.ORG](http://UUSU.ORG)**

# RESOURCES

## YOUR STUDENTS' UNION OFFICERS

**Owen McCloskey**

president@uusu.org

**Robert Millar**

**VP Belfast**

vp.belfast@uusu.org

**Grace Boyle**

**VP Education**

vp.education@uusu.org

**Curtis Donnan**

**VP Coleraine**

vp.coleraine@uusu.org

**Fintan Darragh**

**VP Sport & Wellbeing**

vp.sport@uusu.org

**Rebecca Allen**

**VP Jordanstown**

vp.jordanstown@uusu.org

**Ryan Harling**

**VP Magee**

vp.magee@uusu.org

## YOUR STUDENTS' UNION OFFICERS

**Mandy Mulholland**

**Student Voice Manager**

m.mulholland@ulster.ac.uk

**Naomi Browne**

**Academic Rep Coordinator**

n.browne@ulster.ac.uk

**Emmet Doyle**

**Democracy & Policy Coordinator**

e.doyle@ulster.ac.uk

For a full list of Students' Union contacts please visit

**[www.uusu.org/people/staff](http://www.uusu.org/people/staff)**

## USEFUL WEBSITES

**Students' Union**

[www.uusu.org](http://www.uusu.org)

**Student Complaints Procedure**

[www.ulster.ac.uk/quality/qmau/complaints.html](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/quality/qmau/complaints.html)

**Exam and Results Appeals**

[www.uusu.org/advice](http://www.uusu.org/advice)

**Student Support website**

[www.ulster.ac.uk/wellbeing](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/wellbeing)

**Ulster Student Guide**

[www.ulster.ac.uk/guide](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/guide)