Monitoring the Diversity of Course Reps

Part 1: The project

Introduction

sparqs is working with four institutions on a pilot project to monitor the diversity of course representatives. The project focuses primarily on protected characteristics, but also explores other relevant aspects of students' lives such as care experience and employment.

Many people working in HE have 'gut feelings' about the make-up of course rep populations. This project challenges the sector's reliance on unreliable, anecdotal evidence by gathering quantitative data so that institutions can understand better their course rep populations and, critically, how representative they really are.

Why monitor the diversity of course reps?

Monitoring the diversity of course reps is valuable in its own right. The project represents a critical step forward in advancing the equality and diversity of student representation and promoting an inclusive approach to student engagement. It also creates an evidence-base for supporting future activities and initiatives to improve diversity, as well as providing a benchmark against which this activity can be monitored and measured.

In addition, monitoring the diversity of course reps can contribute to external drivers and requirements, such as quality assurance processes, outcome agreements and Gender Action Plans.

The pilot – initial steps

sparqs identified four institutions that were interested in taking part in the pilot. These were:

- Fife College
- Scotland's Rural College
- University of Edinburgh
- University of the West of Scotland

These represented a good mix of FE, HE and mixed FE/HE provision, as well as being of differing sizes. The pilot institutions also delivered their course rep training in a variety of ways. This was useful, as course rep training was going to be the primary vehicle for distributing the questionnaire – the varying approaches would therefore allow us to ascertain what worked well in different contexts.

The pilot was overseen by a short-term working group, comprising sparqs' staff and representatives from each of the participating colleges and universities. This ensured the active engagement of the institutions in the development of all aspects of the research design and, ultimately, created a questionnaire and methodology that were flexible and fit for purpose.

<u>The pilot – research logistics and questionnaire content</u>

The working group focused on two key areas: the logistics of administrating and evaluating the questionnaire, and the content of the questionnaire.

In terms of logistics, the working group reflected on the following sorts of questions:

- Who in the institution is best placed to lead?
- What support and information will they need?
- When will the questionnaires be distributed? Would we miss course reps doing it this way? How could we catch them?
- How will they be distributed – paper or electronic? Will that have an impact on completion rates?
- How will institutions analyse and report on the data? What are the resource and other constraints?

In terms of questionnaire content, the working group considered the following sorts of questions:

- Should questions be included about all protected characteristics, or just some?
- What are some of the sensitivities around asking questions about protected characteristics?
- What other issues/topics do we want to ask questions about? Ones that are specific to HE and FE? General questions?
- How can the questionnaire maintain a balance between richness and length?

<u>The pilot – the questionnaire</u>

The working group considered a number of iterations of the questionnaire, with members seeking comment and additional input from institutional colleagues with relevant expertise. In addition, we also sought expert opinion on specific questions, including Stonewall, NUS Scotland and Advance HE (formerly the Equality Challenge Unit).

The final version of the questionnaire used in the pilot included six questions covering protected characteristics, and an additional seven questions that covered issues which were considered to have a possible impact on a student's ability to take up and fully engage with a course rep role e.g. caring responsibilities and working status. In addition, a couple of questions were included that anecdotal evidence indicated might be significant, such as fee status.

The finalised pilot questionnaire asked questions on the following:

- Age group
- Disability
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Religion
- Sexual orientation

- Caring responsibilities
- Care experience
- Level of study
- Full-time/part-time

- Fee status
- Working status
- Course of study

Unexpectedly, issues around the 'course of study' question proved some of the hardest to resolve. Difficulties arose from the significant variations in how institutions – particularly universities - categorised their courses and organised their schools/faculties/departments. Ultimately, the working group decided to create two versions of the questionnaire, identical except for how they framed this question. In the first version, for universities, this question was left open-ended. In the second version, for colleges, respondents were asked to select their course of study from a prescribed list. We will be reviewing whether this approach worked effectively in the college sector or if the college version of the questionnaire should adopt the same approach as the university version for the rollout of the project.

The pilot – data collection, input and analysis

Of the four participating institutions, one (Fife College) distributed paper versions of the questionnaire and two (Edinburgh University and UWS) required respondents to complete it online via SurveyMonkey. The final institution, (SRUC), used a hybrid model, to accommodate the fact that it is a rural, multi-campus institution – course reps who were unable to attend the training and complete a paper questionnaire were e-mailed a link to the SurveyMonkey version.

All the institutions used course rep training as the main vehicle for distributing the questionnaire. Some institutions also distributed questionnaires at initial course rep meetings, in order to catch some of those who had not attended training.

Those institutions who utilised paper versions of the questionnaire had to input the data into SurveyMonkey manually. They used a combination of staff (both institution and Students' Association) and student volunteers. They reported that this was not an onerous process and they were able to input the data swiftly.

Analysis was conducted individually by each institution, so that they could interrogate the data at a meaningful, local level. The participants sought comparable data from their institutions in order to make comparisons between the course rep populations and the college/university population as a whole. In some cases, accessing and/or utilising the institutional data represented a hurdle – either because the institution took a long time to share the data, or because the institution did not collect the necessary data, or because the categories did not match. For instance, one institution collected information about students' gender identity only at the male/female/other level, which is not as detailed as the information collected on gender identity in this research.

The pilot – final stages

In January 2018, when the data collection was well under way, the project ran a half-day workshop for members of the working group which focused on benchmarking, how to use the data and what their next steps might be. The workshop was delivered by a representative of Advance HE with significant expertise in this area.

In April 2018, we held the final meeting of the working group in which we shared our learning from the pilot – in terms of both good practice and lessons for the future – in order to inform the rollout of the project in 2018/19.

sparqs and Advance HE (formerly the Equality Challenge Unit) will be working in partnership to deliver the rollout of the project in the coming academic year. We are hosting an initial meeting in June 2018 to promote the project and get more institutions on board.

Institutions that participate will receive the following materials and support:

- The questionnaire
  - revised based on feedback from the pilot and input from Advance HE
  - college version and/or university version
  - SurveyMonkey and/or document version

- Places at a full-day workshop on benchmarking and using the data
  - delivered by Advance HE

- Written resources
  - Top tips to get the most out of the project - produced by sparqs
  - A guide to benchmarking and using the data - produced by Advance HE

- Informal advice and support as needed from sparqs and Advance HE

Part 2: Case Study from Edinburgh University Students' Association

The context

We were first approached about taking part in the sparqs pilot project monitoring the diversity of course reps in summer 2017, and were keen to be involved in this opportunity. Our initial motivation was a straightforward one – we simply did not know who our reps were and, consequently, whether we had any issues that we needed to work on. We were therefore keen to undertake an information gathering exercise in order to create an evidence base to inform future activities.

The University of Edinburgh is a large and devolved institution – in 2017/18 the institution had 39,700 students allocated to 23 Schools and Deaneries. As a result, the student representation system is similarly large, with 2004 individual students registered as class reps in the same academic year.

The logistics

We operate an online training system for our class reps and so we were able to put a link to the survey on the virtual learning environment where our training is hosted. To make the questionnaire seem as much as possible a compulsory part of the process, we created a simple graphic [Figure 1] which encourages Reps to view the questionnaire as a required stage of the training.
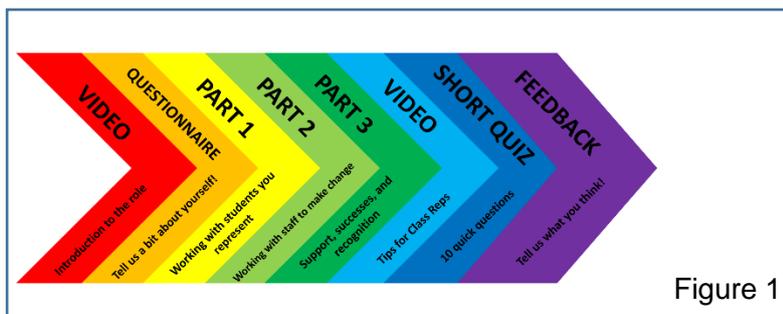
Figure 1

As a result of this, we were thrilled to receive 1,539 responses to the diversity questionnaire. This was 77% of our class rep cohort for the year which gave us a robust data set to work with. We would encourage others with online training to create a similar graphic for students as we believe it to be a key factor in securing the high completion rates which we were aiming for.

The analysis

Our first step upon obtaining the data was to consider our rep cohort in its entirety. We pulled out some 'headline' stats concerning our total cohort and compared this to University level data which was accessible on the publicly available University Factsheet. This allowed us to see whether our overall demographics were broadly in line with the University's population. Not all of the information was available to us via the Factsheet, so we supplemented this information by making ad hoc data requests to the University in order to have comparative data.

This was a useful starting activity but we found that the most valuable and meaningful data was at a School level. We broke down all the questions to a School level and discovered a great deal of variation between different Schools, which had been hidden in the headline figures. For example, 4.8% of total rep respondents reported caring responsibilities. However, when we look at this data by School we see that this raises to 11% in the School of Education and 17% in the School of Health in Social Science (where our nurses study). Knowing this information has meant that we are now able to target relevant communications to these reps, such as emphasising that our Student Council has a bursary for childcare available. The more we know about our rep populations, the more we can create bespoke communication methods which make it easier for our reps to find the information relevant to them.

Alongside the Rep Diversity Questionnaire, we were also keen to find out about the number of our reps who were Widening Participation (WP). We knew this would not be as simple as asking them about this status, as many students do not know that they are from a widening participation background. We therefore asked the University's Governance and Strategic Planning department to run the matriculation numbers of reps for the previous two academic years (2015/16 and 2016/17) through their system to see how many were WP and, if so, how many WP flags they held. This showed that those with WP markers are *more* likely to be class reps, even after accounting for other factors. When looking specifically at SIMD20, this shows a slightly different picture, with those with MD20 very slightly less likely to be a class rep but only by 0.1%. This data has been considered alongside the data from the Rep Diversity Questionnaire to create an even more rounded impression of who our reps are.

<u>Initial impact, next steps and thoughts on the project</u>

The Representation team shared some initial results of the Rep Diversity Questionnaire with colleagues in the Students' Association, which led to interest from other teams in running a similar questionnaire for their volunteers. The Peer Learning and Support Team and the Activities Team are now using the same survey for their student volunteers (Peer Learning and Support Leaders and Society Office Bearers respectively) for the 2018/19 academic year. This pilot project has therefore led to an Association-wide adaptation of the questionnaire, with the aim of measuring the individual student volunteer groups which we support as well as to compare and contrast these groups with one another.

Our next step is to share School-based data from the questionnaire with each of the Schools. We are sending each School an Annual Report from the Students' Association which includes a variety of statistics about their students' engagement with us, including voter turnout, number of reps and percentage trained, and a summary of the findings of the diversity questionnaire. Later in the summer, these reports will provide the basis for in-person discussions with each School. We are keen to work in partnership with Schools to consider their reports and implement actions where appropriate, as it is largely the Schools themselves that manage the recruitment of reps.

It is worth noting at this point, that running the questionnaire is only part of the process around rep diversity. There are a number of questions which need to be considered by institutions undertaking this research, such as whether the demographic makeup of a representative system should map exactly on to your institution's population. Could there potentially be cases, for example, where a group being technically 'over-represented' in purely numerical terms could be a good thing, such as women in STEM subjects? This is a crucial conversation which needs to be had alongside discussions around the logistical elements of the research and may be personal to each institution, or even to Schools and departments within institutions. We plan to have these discussions with each School and recognise that these issues can be complicated and nuanced.

It is also worth noting that, in some cases, the student rep is selected simply by being the only person to put their hand up. Changing the demographic makeup of a group of reps is therefore not a simple process. There are certainly initiatives which can be started which can consider ways to make the process of standing as a rep as accessible as possible, as well as ensuring that both selection and election processes (depending on the system in place) are as free from bias as possible. However, if the results of your questionnaire show large discrepancies between your rep population and your overall student population, it might also be worth considering additional initiatives to harness the student voice. For example, if you discover that you are under-representing part-time students in certain Schools, could you ensure that you are running focus groups specifically for these students where this is an issue?

Going forward, we are keen to run the questionnaire each year and to embed it as a fundamental part of our annual processes. This will enable us to recognise each rep cohort as a set of individuals in its own right, with particular needs which may change year on year. In addition, where initiatives have been introduced to correct differences between rep and School populations, the effect of these changes can be measured each year. We are very much at the start of the journey with monitoring the diversity of our course reps - we have only just finished our data analysis and are about to start the crucial stage of the process during which we discuss the data with Schools and consider steps that both Edinburgh University Student' Association and the University can take to ensure that our student reps are as genuinely representative as possible.

We would absolutely encourage any institution considering undertaking work of this nature to do so. Although we are only at the beginning stages of an ongoing project, we can already see that it is going to be a valuable piece of work which will be of use to the Students' Association, the University and - most importantly - to the reps and student body at large.