

Students, their perception of their roles as Student Ambassadors and Course Representatives, and Covid-19.

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Abstract

Relationships between universities and their students are complex, but opportunities for active involvement of students in a variety of roles are available. Two of these, Course Representatives (CR) and Student Ambassadors (SA), are explored in this study to better understand student perceptions of these roles, and explore whether and how they have changed in response to the pandemic within a large and diverse post-92 HE institution (HEI). Qualitative and quantitative data were gathered using online questionnaires and individual interviews. This data reveals that both groups identified their key responsibility as communications, the main benefit being enhanced social interaction. Both also described the difficulties of juggling multiple commitments and a strong sense of belonging to their institution. The Covid-19 pandemic has adversely affected both roles, resulting in communication difficulties for the CR and reduced working opportunities as well as communication problems for SA. Given the move to blended learning approaches in most institutions and the potential for disengagement of students as a result, especially new students who have not yet formed attachments, the SA and CR roles will become more critical to help retain current students and attract new applicants. Understanding how best these roles may be utilised both at a time of a global pandemic and beyond is an important issue for HEIs.

Keywords

Social; communications; active engagement; relationships

Introduction

The relationship between universities and their students is multi-component and complex. Time spent in higher education is not solely about being awarded a degree but about gaining skills and competencies which can be applied throughout future careers and in a variety of contexts (Universities UK, 2016). Forty-nine such skills have been identified from research of employer and graduate skill surveys (Universities UK, 2016). In addition to technical and subject-specific competencies, employers value a wider range of skills such as communication, team working, leadership, critical thinking and problem solving (Lowden et al, 2011). The embedding of employability skills is a major driver of student success in higher education (Norton, 2016).

The relationships between students, student organisations (such as the Students' Union) and universities have changed, at least in part due to the shift towards a transactional model of higher education (Rochford, 2016). Students themselves may

be portrayed and perceived as customers or consumers within higher education (Little et al, 2009). For example, the National Student Survey reports on student experience and student satisfaction, indicative of the notion of student-as-consumer (Carey, 2013), and Collini (2020) views the Office for Students (OfS) as a consumer watchdog. It has been argued that this growing consumerism associated with the introduction of tuition fees may encourage student passivity (Freeman & Thomas, 2005), and high consumer orientation has been shown to associate with lower academic performance (Bunce et al, 2017). Students' active engagement in their own education is essential (Kahu, 2011), ideally not only within their programmes of study but also within the university itself. Active learning, or 'learning by doing' is an important motivator for students (Bonwell & Eison, 1991), and is one of the seven principles of good teaching practice for undergraduate students outlined by Chickering and Gamson (1987). It is a holistic and collaborative student-centred approach, in which academic staff facilitate learning driven by student curiosity (EUA, 2019). In addition to enhancing student motivation and higher order thinking and skills, active learning is also recognised as transformational for learners, academics and institutions. Long-term benefits include shared ownership of learning, development of human skills and enabling HEIs to contribute to the education of active citizens in line with Sustainable Development Goals on education (EUA, 2019). Existing opportunities to engage students are even more important when considered in this context. Two of these; Course Representatives (CR) and Student Ambassadors (SA) will be explicitly considered in this paper.

The role of CR, where students occupy the middle ground between providing information to the university and allowing students to work in partnership with the university in their own education, offers students the opportunity for active involvement and collegiality (Carey, 2013). CR gather and feed information in both directions; to their cohort on issues raised and the actions which have been taken, and to the university students' perceptions of the quality of teaching and learning and specific programmes (Little et al, 2009). The exact practice in relation to CR may vary by institution and country, but within the British university system of governance, it is common practice to have the CR as an unpaid role (Trowler, 2010). Within our institution, CR are usually elected to the position by their peers (unless only one person stands, in which case no elections are needed). However, both the expectations of this role and the nature and meaning of the student voice in this context have been overlooked (Seale, 2009). A typology of student participation within higher education suggests four possible approaches, students being either passive or active participants. Fielding (2001) suggests that within this typology students may function as data sources (e.g., data about performance, quality of work or evaluation), as active respondents (e.g., consultants in institutional change agenda), as co-researchers (working in partnership with staff) or as researchers (students leading their own research and the institution responding to their needs). The CR role offers students the potential to participate as active respondents in university governance, but this opportunity may be limited if they are used only as a source of information; co-option of CR within quality assessment and monitoring frameworks may discourage universities from working actively with students to effect real change (Seale, 2009). In addition, while students have faith in the CR system at an institutional level, they may lack it at the course level (Little et al, 2009). Reasons for this include pressures on student time, inadequate CR training, fear of punishment for criticism and low levels of student motivation (Little et al, 2009). In addition, the liminal quality of this role

requires CR to step from their roles as learners to information giving and management, resulting in role confusion (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). In our institution, like CR, SA are appointed to their positions; but by contrast, they are not elected by their peers and SA are paid. Rather than representing a specific cohort of students, they represent the university itself at a variety of external-facing events such as Open Days and Outreach events. SA need to be flexible, since the activities on offer are fluid and varied. This gives them leeway in terms of the events and hours that they choose to work, but does mean that they are not guaranteed an income. CR receive training from the Students' Union and the organisation of the scheme is not overseen by academic staff, nor are the details of what is covered always clear to them. Similarly, SA receive training as part of an extracurricular scheme which is not organised by academic staff. However, exact practices in relation to how SA schemes operate may vary between institutions and countries.

Taking up these opportunities offers multiple potential benefits to students. These include the development of evidence of employability skills, gaining an understanding of how the university works, making valuable contacts both within and external to the university and in the case of paid opportunities, earning potential (Jackson, 2011; Thompson et al, 2013; Bell et al, 2019). In addition, participation may enhance students' sense of belonging at university. 'Belonging' is described as feeling safe and comfortable, both respected by others and connected to them (Yuval-Davis, 2009). It is a feeling of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others, academics and peers, and feeling oneself to be an important member of the learning community (Goodenow, 1993). Developing a sense of belonging within higher education contributes to student integration, participation, engagement and retention (Thomas, 2012; Hausman et al, 2009; Freeman et al, 2007), and contributes to better outcomes for students (Stuart et al, 2009; Mountford-Zimdars et al, 2015).

Such participation is not without risk. Flint & Goddard (2020) raise salient points about the difficulties students, including CR, engaged in different roles within their institutions could face. In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that different institutions have varied interpretations of the training, job descriptions and expectations of CR, which could result in negative feelings about the value of the role.

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in wholesale changes to higher education provision virtually overnight. By mid-April closure of colleges and universities had affected an estimated 94% of learners in 200 countries (UN, 2020). Campuses closed and teaching, student support and assessment moved online (Crawford et al, 2020). Aside from the personal anxieties many students will have felt about their families, friends and their own risks of illness, this shift to online provision and the loss of the physical campus (replaced by a virtual one) may have added to their anxiety. Research in schools (OECD, 2020) and in tertiary education (e.g., Burns et al, 2020), acknowledged the potential for the closure of educational institutions could result in students' reduced sense of belonging to their institution. In this context, the roles and responsibilities of SA and CR may have changed.

This project sought to gain an understanding of student perceptions of these roles, and explore whether and how they changed in response to the pandemic within a large post-92 HE institution, with a strong widening participation focus. It is already known that students from non-traditional backgrounds such as first generation, mature and commuter students, may find transition to higher education and fitting in more difficult (Reay, 2008; Crossan et al, 2003; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Reay et al, 2010; Waite, Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal

2013; Wainwright & Marandet, 2010; O'Shea, 2015, 2016; Southall et al, 2016). We sought to explore the following questions:

1. How do CR and SA view their roles and responsibilities?;
2. Have their roles changed in responses to the Covid-19 pandemic?;
3. If so, in what ways?

We hypothesised that both roles would change; with the CR being used more as a resource by their peers. We also hypothesised that SA would be negatively impacted by the closure of the campus and university events, due to the nature of the role.

Methodology

Ethics approval for the project was granted by the Faculty Research Ethics committee at the university. Potential ethics issues related to demographics data collected, data safety and ensuring the privacy of student participants, particularly those participating in interviews who left their email addresses in order to organise the interview sessions. For example, the demographics section included the option to respond 'prefer not to answer', and personal information was generally collected using broad ranges (e.g. age ranges, broad ethnicity categories). The email addresses were used only to arrange interviews and then deleted, and all data were stored securely online in the university secure online Box system to which only the project team had access. The project took place in two parts: quantitative data were gathered using questionnaires, while qualitative data were collected using optional online interviews.

Questionnaires

Data were gathered using bespoke questionnaires, one each for CR and SA. The questions were largely the same for both, with the wording reflecting whether it was aimed at CR or SA. Questionnaires included two sections, one to gather demographic data to enable characterisation of the students who undertake these roles, and the second part to gather information about the roles including whether and how they changed in response to Covid-19. Demographic data gathered included gender, age, ethnicity, home or EU status, whether first-in-family to university, whether a foundation year was undertaken, mode and year of study, educational background, commuter status and whether students worked while studying. Questions in this section were the same for CR and SA. Questions about the roles included the reasons students had for undertaking them, their advantages and challenges, skills gained, extent of 'belonging' at university, and whether and how Covid-19 impacted upon the role, in line with the research questions for the project. Two minor differences in this section included clarification for CR about whether they were CR or Senior CR (this question was irrelevant for SA). In the question about the student's reasons for undertaking their roles, an additional option about pay was included for SA but not CR, who are not paid in our institution. An example of a questionnaire for SA is shown in Appendix 1. Questionnaires were constructed using Qualtrics survey software. Lists of all current CR and SA were obtained from the scheme organisers (n=358 CR & 164 SA), and individual personalised email invitations were sent to each student, containing a link to the online surveys. Where students were both Course Representatives and Student Ambassadors, they were sent two invitations and links to two

questionnaires, one for each post. Reminders to complete the questionnaire were sent to each student weekly and the survey was open from mid-May to July 1st 2020.

Interviews

Those who indicated that they would like to participate in interviews by responding positively to the invitation in the questionnaire were contacted initially by email to organise them. Interviews were held online using MS Teams and an interview schedule was used to ensure uniformity. Interview questions are shown in Appendix 2. Interviews were recorded using mobile phones, then uploaded to a password protected project folder, to which only the research team had access. All interviews used pseudonyms, and all interviews were carried out by graduate students (PW and HD), to encourage openness and honesty in responses, since the power imbalance between staff and students could negatively affect the interview (Wang & Yan, 2012), and students may feel more able to be open with other students about potentially sensitive workings with staff.

Data collation and analysis

Questionnaire data were downloaded from Qualtrics and demographic data were collated to allow the CR and SA population to be described. Interview data were collated and analysed using basic thematic analysis. Two staff members undertook the interview thematic analysis. Each interview was listened to several times to identify the key themes and subthemes, using an iterative process in which initial themes were added to on each occasion. These were collated and indicative quotes used for illustration.

Findings

Quantitative data

A total of 97 students participated (68 CR and 29 SA), participation rates of 19.0% & 17.7% respectively. Approximately two thirds of the participants were female, although this rose to 75.9% of SA. An equal proportion of participants were aged 18-20 and 21-24 years (42.3% in each age range), although a greater proportion of SA were 18-20 years while a greater proportion of CR were aged 21-24 years (58.6 vs. 35.3%). Approximately one in five participants were white, and the rich ethnic diversity seen in both CR and SA is likely to reflect the widening participation agenda of the institution. Just over four in ten were first-in-family to university, and proportions of those with disability were similar between CR and SA.

Participants were derived from all year groups, with lower representation from Level 3 compared with other year groups for both CR and SA. Just under a third had taken a foundation year (32.0%); a higher proportion of SA than CR (41.4 vs. 27.9% respectively). The majority of participants studied full time, and participants entered higher education with a range of qualifications.

More than half of the participants had part time jobs in addition to their study and university roles, and the most common hours worked per week were 10-20, particularly

for the CR. Over a third of all participants were commuters whose one-way journey to campus always took at least 45 minutes, although this was more common in CR than SA (41.2% vs. 27.6% respectively).

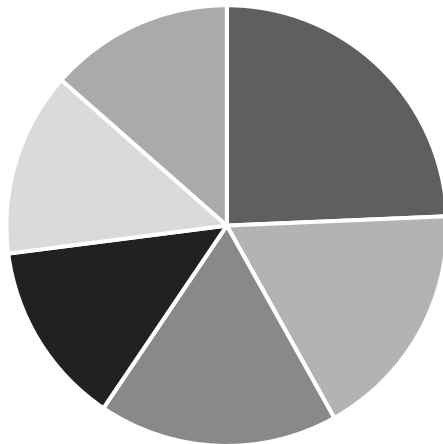
Participants identified several reasons for applying for their positions (they could choose as many as they liked from a list provided). The most important reasons identified by participants were experience, enhanced understanding of how the university works, gaining confidence and evidence for their CVs. Surprisingly, 10.3% of CR identified pay as a reason for applying for the position (which is unpaid). Data are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Main reasons for taking the positions of CR (n=68) or SA (n=29). Data expressed as numbers (%)

Reason	CR	SA
Great experience	58 (85.3)	26 (89.7)
Understanding how the university works	55 (80.9)	21 (72.4)
Gain confidence	51 (75.0)	21 (72.4)
Good for my CV	48 (70.6)	26 (89.7)
Making useful contacts	41 (60.3)	17 (58.6)
Fun	38 (55.9)	16 (55.2)
Points for a HE award	37 (54.4)	11 (37.9)
Make friends	31 (45.6)	15 (51.7)
Paid position	7 (10.3)	20 (69.0)

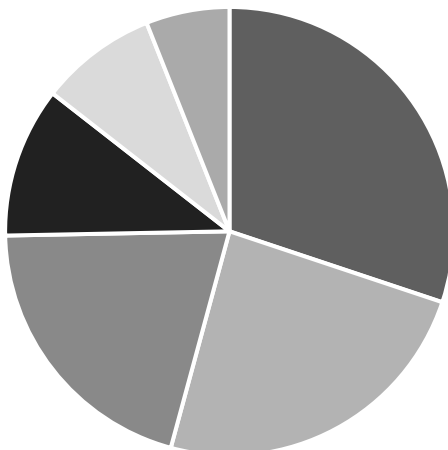
The main responsibilities of the CR and SA roles are shown in Figure 1. In all, 56 CR (82.4%) identified the main responsibilities of the role. A total of 126 responsibilities were identified, the most common 3 of which related to aspects of communication. A total of 65 SA identified the main responsibilities of their role, a response rate of 95.6%. In all, 94 responsibilities were outlined, the most common of which were representing the university (19.1%), sharing experience with others and giving a positive impression of the university (13.8% each).

A



- Representing the University
- Share my experience with others
- Give a positive impression of the University
- Encourage future students
- Answer queries
- Be useful

B



- Collating information from students
- Being voice for students
- Giving into to students
- Improving the course
- Liaising with lecturers
- Attending meetings

Figure 1. Responsibilities of role identified by a) Course Representatives and b) Student Ambassadors (expressed as numbers of respondents)

Advantages & challenges of the CR role are shown in Table 2. Advantages of the CR role were identified by 55 CR (a response rate of 80.9%). A total of 124 advantages were identified. The most common were social, both in terms of peers (13.5%) and academic staff (17.1%). A total of 50 CR (73.5%) identified challenges of the role. In all, 65 challenges were identified, the most common of which was peers being unwilling to participate or contribute (26.2%).

Table 2: Main advantages and challenges of the CR role. Data are expressed as numbers (%) of respondents

Advantages	
Getting to know lecturers	19 (17.1)
Getting to know peers	15 (13.5)

Improving things	11 (9.9)
Communication skills	10 (9.0)
Challenges	
Students unwilling to participate or contribute	17 (26.2)
Balancing academic work & other commitments	5 (7.7)
Unrealistic expectations of students	5 (7.7)
Time	4 (6.2)

Main advantages and challenges of the SA role are shown in Table 3. Advantages and challenges were outlined by 66 respondents, a response rate of 97.1%; 100 advantages and 41 challenges were identified. Meeting people was the most common advantage (19.0%), followed by the range of opportunities available (8.0%). The most common challenges were being out of comfort zone (14.6%), not getting jobs applied for and fitting in the work alongside other commitments (both 9.8%). SA jobs are advertised on a first-come, first-served basis, which resulted in frustration when applications were unsuccessful, even before Covid-19.

Table 3: Main advantages and challenges of the SA role. Data are expressed as numbers (%) of respondents

Advantages	
Meeting people/ making friends/ networking	19 (19.0)
Lots of opportunities	8 (8.0)
Gaining confidence	8 (8.0)
Communication skills	5 (5.0)
Challenges	
Lack of confidence/ out of comfort zone	6 (14.6)
Not getting jobs applied for	4 (9.8)
Balancing academic work & other commitments	4 (9.8)
Public speaking	3 (7.3)

With regard to belonging, slightly more SA than CR agreed that the university treats students as individuals, that involvement in activities was easy and that their roles as SA or CR helped them to belong, although levels of agreement in both groups were high. There were lower levels of agreement that participants were known to academic staff because of their roles.

Table 4: Responses to statements related to belonging. Data expressed as numbers (%).

	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	PNS
The university treats all students as individuals	SA: 24 (82.8)	SA: 4 (13.8)	SA: 0 (0.0)	SA: 1 (3.4)

	CR: 54 (79.4)	CR: 10 (14.7)	CR: 3 (4.4)	CR: 1 (1.5)
It is easy to get involved in activities	SA: 24 (82.8)	SA: 2 (6.9)	SA: 2 (6.9)	SA: 1 (3.4)
	CR: 50 (73.5)	CR: 12 (17.6)	CR: 4 (5.9)	CR: 2 (2.9)
Being CR/SA helped me feel I belong	SA: 25 (86.2)	SA: 2 (6.9)	SA: 1 (3.4)	SA: 1 (3.4)
	CR: 50 (73.5)	CR: 14 (20.6)	CR: 1 (1.5)	CR: 3 (4.4)
Academic staff have got to know me well, because of my role	SA: 16 (55.2)	SA: 9 (31.0)	SA: 3 (10.3)	SA: 1 (3.4)
	CR: 36 (52.9)	CR: 26 (36.8)	CR: 5 (7.4)	CR: 2 (2.9)

With regard to Covid-19, differing impacts were found (Figure 2). Both CR and SA agreed that their roles had changed as a result of the pandemic, primarily that time spent in the role had decreased. This was most marked for the SA, unsurprising as many of the public facing events were cancelled. The most common changes outlined by SA were 'events cancelled' (n=18, 43.9%), and 'limited opportunities' (n=10, 24.4%; data not shown). For CR, the most common changes related to communications; 'no one responding' (n=8, 23.5%) and 'communications much more difficult' (n=6, 17.6%). 'No one responding' related to their peers, some of whom CR reported as not reading their university emails and not responding to communications, while 'communications much more difficult' related to both staff and students. Since face-to-face meetings were no longer possible, a reliance on emails resulted in delays in getting information and passing it on, which was frustrating for the CR caught in the middle, impacting on their ability to perform their roles effectively.

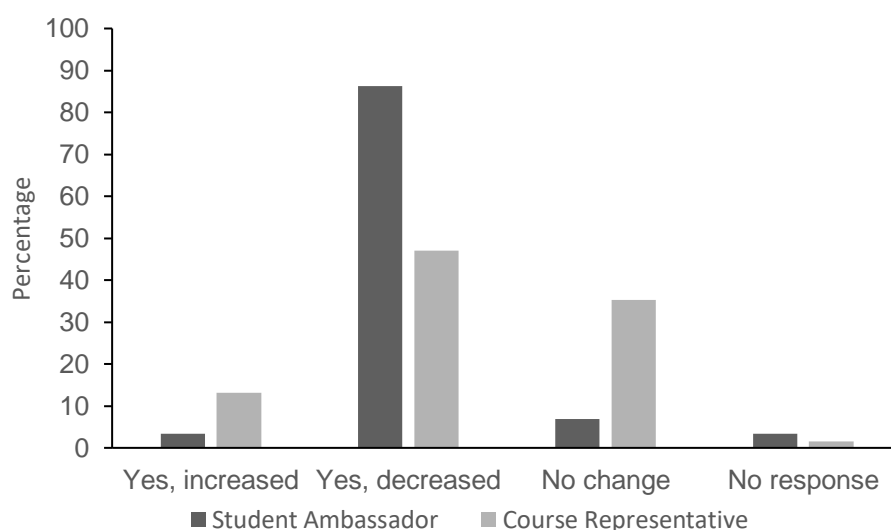


Figure 2. The impact of COVID-19 on Course Representative and Student Ambassador roles, identified by students, expressed as percentages of respondents.

Asked what three words they would choose to describe their roles, 48 CR and 27 CR responded, response rates of 70.6% and 93% respectively. The most common words chosen are shown in the wordclouds in Figure 3 (in which the more frequently a word is mentioned, the larger the word size).

A)



B)



Figure 3. The main words identified by both a) CR and b) SA to represent their role. The frequency of the word dictates the size of text.

Qualitative data

A total of 19 interviews were carried out; 11 with CR, 5 with SA and 3 with students who were both SA & CR. Average duration was 13.4 mins (range 8.4 - 26.2). Most interviewees were females (n=12; 63.2%).

Tensions of the role

The majority (15; 83.3%) described no tension in their roles; only 3 (16.7%), all of whom were CR, described tensions. All 3 described the difficulty of giving negative feedback to academic staff:

'...I had to find a polite way of saying it' [Ciara, CR].

The difficulty of balancing this while still communicating student dissatisfaction was expressed:

'Find balance between ensuring that what I give back is constructive but also portraying course mates displeasure accurately' [Chandler, CR].

At times, this balance was not achieved and students, seeing the minutes of meetings, challenged CR:

'You've kind of lost the urgency of our complaint'. The difficulty of managing this for the CR was evident:

'Want to act professionally' [Chandler, CR].

Perceived reasons for lack of volunteers for these roles

The major reasons suggested for a lack of volunteers for roles such as CR and SA were varied but included a lack of willingness to take responsibility (36.8%), lack of clarity about what the role entails or the application process (26.3%) or lack of confidence (26.3%). In addition, a lack of incentives (especially for the unpaid CR role) and an unwillingness to become involved in voluntary activities were highlighted (15.8% each).

How CR and SA would encourage other students to take on these roles

The major advantages for being involved were social – building relationships with both staff and students (68%). This was followed by gaining skills, primarily communication skills (47.4%), helping others (31.6%), gaining insight into how the university operates and gaining confidence (21.1% each). The development of a network of contacts through roles such as SA and CR was seen as highly beneficial:

'You build good relationships with lecturers and that in turn helps you out....benefits your studies too' [Ciara, CR].

Impact of Covid-19 on the role

Covid-19 had a differential impact on the two groups. For CR, communication difficulties were frequently described (71.4%):

'They don't always feel comfortable to text me but they would come up to me in class' [Ciara, CR]

'They ask me a question, I email faculty, they email me back....adding to time lag' [Penny, CR & SA].

A lack of student engagement when teaching moved online was also described, compounding communication difficulties (42.9%):

'No one checks their uni emails' [Bernadette, CR], resulting in a lack of clarity about the CR role:

'Made it a bit hazy what my role is' [Ciara, CR].

For SA, the cancellation of face-to-face events was very disruptive both in the short and longer term; plans to work over the summer were destroyed and income fell. Three quarters of SA reported that the number of jobs available fell, although others were made available online. Twenty five percent of SA said their income had fallen and 12.5% said that even where events moved online, their duration was shorter. Like CR, SA said it was harder to communicate online compared with face-to-face (25%):

'Can't feel the same relationship as seeing them face-to-face. There's less connection...they're not willing to talk online' [Rachel, SA]

Opinions of CR and SA on their training

Opinions of the training received were mixed. Overall, 57.9% were satisfied with their training, but 21.1% could not attend their training and 21.1% did not remember it. Improvements suggested to the training included making it more active and authentic, related to the tasks required (26.3%):

'I think maybe a demo of the board meetings' [Monica, CR].

'Early module feedback...nothing much about that' [Phoebe, CR]

Asked whether joint training with staff would be beneficial, the majority (73.7%) thought it would be, and the main reason for this was the possibility of establishing relationships with staff and reaching a common understanding of role expectations and responsibilities:

'In terms of building relationships and knowing where you stand....bridging the gap' [Rachel, SA]

'Would help with communications and building relationships' [Penny, CR & SA].

Discussion

Two very different but equally important active student roles were explored in this study. Viewed from the student perspective however, the similarities were striking. Both CR and SA identified the main responsibilities of their roles as aspects of communication while their main advantages were social. Both described a key challenge to fulfilling their role effectively was balancing of multiple commitments. However, differences between the roles were also apparent. For CR, the communications described were two-way between students and the university, reflecting their position as middlemen between their peers and university management. By contrast, communications for SA referred to sharing of experiences, giving encouragement and presenting a friendly and approachable institutional face to the external world. Advantages of both roles were described either directly or indirectly as social, as a form of networking, although this was explicit only for the SA. CR identified the contribution of their role in getting to know (and be known by) academic staff and their peers, whereas for SA friendship and networking were highlighted. Since developing social relationships enhances belonging (Katanis, 2000; Johnson, 2012; Read et al, 2018; Meehan & Howells, 2019), it is likely that this aspect of both roles contributed to the strong sense of belonging expressed by these participants. The words they chose to describe their roles also related to social and communication aspects either directly ('communication', 'engaging/ friendly', 'leadership') or indirectly ('encourage', 'help', 'motivation'). CR explicitly acknowledged that an advantage of the role was developing relationships with lecturers as well as students and social aspects of belonging have been shown to include relationships with staff as well as peers (Oldfield et al, 2017; Rivera Munoz et al, 2019). However, a potential negative impact of the pandemic on relationships has been highlighted (Longhurst et al, 2020). Developing relationships is easier on campus where informal and spontaneous face-to-face contacts with others are possible (Tinto, 1993; Simpson, 2003; Strayhorn, 2012), and how best to facilitate a sense of connection in an online environment is less clear (Fowler-Watt et al, 2020).

The original idea for this study derived from a consideration of the liminality of roles such as CR (Flint & Goddard, 2020), and our interest in exploring the perspectives of

students involved in active, extracurricular student roles. We hypothesised that Covid-19 would impact upon both SA and CR, but in different ways: CR would be utilised more as a resource by their peers, while SA would be impacted negatively due to the cancellation of face-to-face events. While our initial assumption about SA proved largely correct, that related to CR was not. In fact, the majority of both SA and CRs reported that the amount of time they spent in their roles decreased in response to Covid-19, although this reduction was greater in SA. Qualitative data also highlighted how the move online negatively affected communications for both groups. In part this was thought to be due to lower engagement by students, who did not contact CR to ask for help, or check their university emails. A reliance on email to communicate resulted in time lags between questions being asked and answered, compounding difficulties. For SA, the move of events online resulted in shorter and fewer events, reducing their earnings. Developing relationships with event participants virtually also proved more difficult; like university students, external participants appeared to be less willing to engage and ask questions online. With regards to online teaching, students may be reluctant to use microphones and actively engage (Kedra & Kaltsidis, 2020), and different personality types may find the switch to online learning more difficult (McNulty et al, 2006). This is an important issue, given that much HEI teaching and activities remain online for at least the first semester, and online belonging and connectedness as well as learning may be affected.

The liminality of the CR role in particular was evident in the qualitative feedback; the difficulty of accurately reporting cohort feedback professionally without giving offence to staff or disappointing peers was vividly described. Both SA and CR highlighted 'communication skills' as one of the advantages gained from these roles; and it is clear from the qualitative feedback that such skills are very much needed. In terms of employability, soft skills such as communication and leadership are recognised and valued (Lowden et al, 2011; Universities UK, 2016). These roles therefore offer a meaningful way of embedding employability skills. Nonetheless, it can be difficult to recruit students particularly to unpaid roles such as CR. Suggested reasons for this included a lack of willingness to take on additional responsibility, lack of clarity about either the process or the role, lack of confidence or incentives and unwillingness to undertake voluntary activities. This may be a consequence of the additional responsibilities which many students have to contend with, such as caring responsibilities, working alongside their studies and long commutes. In this study, 54.6% had a job in addition to studying, 37.1% always had a commute >45 mins to university and 10.3% had additional unpaid responsibilities (Table 3). With regards to confidence, 40.2% of participants were first-in-family to university, and 52.6% had entered university with qualifications other than A-levels (Tables 1 & 2). Despite this, they had chosen to take on additional roles as CR or SA, so the advantages of such roles for them outweighed the challenges of juggling multiple responsibilities, although they acknowledged this as a key challenge in undertaking their roles.

From this study it seems that communication and the social dimension of both roles are crucial, yet both aspects are likely to be impacted by the move to blended learning which has taken place in most 'new' HEIs in response to the pandemic (Crawford et al, 2020). While the online world potentially reduces belonging by making informal day-to-day interactions more difficult, paradoxically it is likely that both SA and CR will be needed more than ever. Universities need to attract more students, while simultaneously ensuring that those they already have are retained. Personalising interactions and encouraging social interactions online especially for new students will

contribute towards their settling in and feeling at home. Both CR and SA have essential roles to play within and outside of the university, but ensuring they play an active part in constructing their roles so that they are as effective as possible will be key. Now, more than ever, we need to hear from students what matters to them, what they consider to be useful and not in engaging them. This is not without institutional risk; student organisations have an unpredictable and potentially uncontrollable aspect, while remaining an important part of providing the much-marketed 'student experience' (Rochford, 2014). While the student voice can help us to construct our blended learning offer to best meet their learning and social needs, we also have to accept that we cannot control or predict their views. At the same time, students need to understand their responsibilities and that we need to work together to ensure that HEI recognise and respond to students' needs (Harris, 2011).

Conclusion

The roles of CR and SA are likely to be more important than ever in helping us to understand the student perspective, in the current largely online world. This study has clarified some of the key advantages, responsibilities and challenges of the CR and SA roles, and the impact of the pandemic upon them. We recommend that HEIs work with their CR and SA to better understand how best these important functions may be carried out in the new world in which we find ourselves; we have much to learn but also much to be gained by doing so.

Appendix 1: SA Questionnaire

Exploring the students' perception of their roles as Student Ambassadors and/or Course Representatives, in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Part 1: About you. Please tick **one option** for each of the following questions.

1. How would you describe your gender?

Male	Female	Other	Prefer not to say
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2. When you started your course, in what age bracket were you? (years)

18-20	20-24	≥24	Prefer not to say
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3. To which of these broad ethnic groups would you say you belong?

White (e.g. British, Irish, any other white background)
Black/Black British (e.g. Caribbean, African, any other Black background)
Asian/Asian British (e.g. Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, any other Asian background)
Mixed (e.g. White & Black Caribbean/African, White & Asian, any other)
Other ethnic groups (e.g. Chinese, any other ethnic groups)
Prefer not to say

4. Are you classed as:

Home/EU	International	Prefer not to say
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5. Are you the first member of your immediate family (grandparents, parents, siblings) to go to university?

Yes	No	Prefer not to say
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6. Are you currently in:

Level 3 (foundation)	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7 (postgraduate)
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7. If you are currently in Level 4 or above, did you take a foundation year before starting your degree?

Yes	No	Prefer not to say
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8. Do you study:

Full time	Part time
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9. When you came to university had you done:

A levels	BTEC	Apprenticeship	Access course	Other, please state:
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10. Do you have a part-time paid job while you are studying (in addition to any paid role at the university e.g. Student Ambassador)?

Yes	No	Prefer not to say
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11. If yes, approximately how many hours per week do you work in your paid job?

Up to 10 hours per week	10-20 hours per week	>20 hours per week
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12. On average, how often does your journey to university take you longer than 45 minutes (one way)?

Always	Usually (3-4 times a week)	Sometimes (1-2 times per week)	Rarely (<1 per week)	Never
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13. Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

Yes	No	Prefer not to say
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14. Do you have additional unpaid responsibilities outside the university (e.g. childcare, caring responsibilities)

Yes	No	Prefer not to say
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Part 2: Being a Student Ambassador: your perspective

15. How long have you been a Student Ambassador?

This is my first year	This is my second year	This is my third year
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16. What were your **MAIN** reasons for becoming a Student Ambassador? Please tick **ALL** that apply.

Paid position
Great experience
Gain understanding of how the university works
Make useful contacts
Put on my CV
Make friends
Thought it would be fun
Gain confidence
Evidence for the University Award
Other, please state:

17. What do you see as your main responsibilities as a Student Ambassador?

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18. In your experience, what are the main **ADVANTAGES** of being a Student Ambassador?

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19. In your experience what are the main **CHALLENGES** of being a Student Ambassador?

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20. If an employer asked you what skills you gained as a Student Ambassador, what would you say?

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21. How much do you feel that you personally belong at this university?

0 (not at all)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 (totally at home)
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22. Please indicate your level of agreement with EACH of the following statements.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The university treats all students as individuals					
It is easy to get involved in activities at this university					
Being a Student Ambassador has helped me to feel like I belong					
Academic staff have got to know me well because I am a Student Ambassador					

23. Has the Covid-19 pandemic affected your role? Please tick ONE option.

1. Yes, I have had to increase the time I spend as a Student Ambassador
2. Yes, I have had to reduce the time I spend as a Student Ambassador
3. There has been no change for me

24. If applicable, can you tell us more about how your role has changed as a result of Covid-19?

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25. What THREE words would you choose to describe your experience as a Student Ambassador?

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26. Do you have any other paid/voluntary roles within the university? (tick all that apply)

Class rep	Student Union rep	Senior course rep	Other, please state:
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Thank you for your time.

Appendix 2: Individual interview questions

1. Any aspects of the questionnaire which need clarification will be checked first.
2. In your questionnaire you gave X reasons for putting yourself forward for this role. Would you like to add anything to that?
3. In your role, you are the link between the university and the student/applicant (depending on whether the respondent is a Course Rep or a Student Ambassador). Does that ever cause tensions for you? If so, can you explain that?
4. Sometimes it is hard to get students to step forward as Course Reps/Student Ambassadors. Can you think of possible reasons for this?
5. What would you say to encourage another student, who was considering becoming a Course Rep/Student Ambassador?
6. In what way/s has the Covid-19 pandemic affected your experience as a Course Rep/Student Ambassador?
7. What was your experience of your training as a Course Rep/Student Ambassador?
8. Is there anything you would change about the training (for example would joint training with staff be beneficial)? If so, what changes would you suggest?

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