How representative are elected student representatives? A literature review

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Introduction

Student engagement in student voice activities increasingly receives attention in Scottish Higher Education (HE) as best practice in Quality Enhancement in an ever-evolving field of education (Quality Assurance Agency [QAA], 2012). Student engagement participation and extra-curricular student voice activity is often through democratically elected student representatives, who are trained, elected, and supported by their students' association/union/guild. The relevance, meaningfulness and experience of these student representatives supported by students' associations is discussed frequently in policy spaces and within organisations, yet the literature exploring the experiences of these elected roles across institutions evidences a gap between research and professional practices. This paper examines existing research within student engagement to justify why there is a need to explore this area of student representation in a rigorous manner for the benefit of institutions, students' associations and the betterment of the student experience during a financially challenging period for the sector. Although this paper will focus on the Scottish context, it is hoped that points made within this paper will be applicable for providers across the United Kingdom (UK).

The primary function of a students' association, union or guild (referred throughout the rest of this paper as students' associations) - as set out in legislation within the UK - is to be the representative body for all students at an institution (Education Act 1994, Part 2). A key part of such a representative body are the democratically elected officers who stand to be the lead representatives for students at their institution – either as a sabbatical from their studies (or at the end of their academic journey) for typically one full academic year, or alongside their studies as often 'part-time' officers – in positions that will cover:

> "...all the output students want from their Student Union (SU) as well as having enough diversity within [their] remit that they can attract a wide variety of students leaders." (NUS, 2022)

The officer structure will be set out within articles of association or a constitution, which will serve as governing documentation for a students' association who are often registered charities obliged to follow charity law (see Charities Act, 2011) in line with their national regulators (see Charity Commission, 2023, OSCR, 2025 and Charity Commission of Northern Ireland, 2019). These structures will usually not be routinely reviewed except during an organisation-wide democracy or governance review, usually undertaken by an external consultancy company (see Halpin Partnership, 2023 and Beyond the Blue, 2023). Democracy or governance reviews continue to be well utilised by students' associations to examine representative and organisational structures in students' associations (see Day, 2021)

alongside the need to review governing documentation on a frequent basis (see Education Act 1994, Part 2). Despite this significant usage, scholarly work into such reviews is severely limited, however, due to the frequency of their use and constant development – one only needs to type the term 'democracy review students unions' to see this frequency – their effectiveness seems apparent. Looking at recently undertaken democracy reviews, they have been commissioned to take into consideration the changes in student demographics (UWTSD Students' Union, 2023), students indicating change is needed (Durham SU, 2021) and making sure processes are relevant and accessible to their members' needs (UWSU, 2022). The aims of such reviews relate to the idea of a students' association needing to be reflective of the student body they represent and their needs. This ties into a concept discussed in student engagement research by Alex Bols known as representativeness (Bols, 2017).

Primarily focusing on representatives at a course level, Bols hypothesized that for course representatives to be fully representative they needed to not only reflect the needs and views of the student cohort but also reflect the student cohort demographically (Bols 2017, p.2). Considering elected student officers are the highest form of student representatives that can exist within students' associations, it would make sense to explore how representative these students are.

Despite their prominence within student associations, this is an area of research in which more perspectives on the elected student officer role would be useful to add to literature considering the importance placed on their positions within HE. The nature of student politics (see Brooks, 2016 and Mpanza et al., 2019) and the typology of students participating in such roles (see Brooks et al., 2016a and Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021) does provide insight into those who choose to run for such positions but does not investigate how representative these roles are. Considering the vast research in existence, the importance of representatives within HE (Bols, 2020) and how student voices can be effectively used to evaluate engagement at their institutions and beyond (see Austen 2020 and Bols 2020, 72), how representative these roles are is only just beginning to be considered within research (see McStravock, 2022 and Cuthbert, 2022) in relation to Bols' concept (Bols, 2017). This gap indicates there is still significant scope to contribute to this section of student engagement literature.

Another prominent reason for exploring the representativeness of elected student officers is that within the UK, funding to colleges and universities continues to be strained. The continuous announcement of funding cuts within the Scottish sector alone (see Learmonth, 2023, Scottish Funding Council [SFC], 2021, Scottish Funding Council, 2022a and Scottish Funding Council, 2022b) demonstrates financial resourcing is becoming an increasingly highly sought commodity in education.

As well as the need to justify the expenditure given to them, Scottish Further and HE Institutions are beginning to look to the future of how post-16 education is delivered in Scotland, thanks to the review undertaken by the Scottish Government to move to a more tertiary education model in the country (Scottish Government, 2022) and how this model would be funded (Fraser, 2023). With a significant amount of students' association funding coming from a block grant from their partner institution (see Day, 2021), Scottish students' associations attached to either colleges or universities need to ensure they are demonstrating

the impact their work has on students so that the funding needed to have such impact continues. With representation of students being the primary function of these organisations (Education Act 1994, Part 2), it would be appropriate and timely to examine representativeness within the current climate which could have important implications in ensuring that education institutions best serve their students.

Literature Review

Although representativeness of elected student officers is under-researched, aspects of wider student engagement literature can help develop an understanding of the topic before moving onto exploring student engagement theory into practice.

Student Engagement Theory

Within student engagement research, four key dimensions of student engagement have been identified throughout research – academic engagement with the learning process, social engagement within and outwith the classroom, cognitive engagement to enable enhanced understanding of learning, and affective engagement caused by students' emotional response to what they are engaging with (Finn & Zimmer,2012, pp.102-103). There is no set definition for this area of work (Trowler 2010, p.7-8) with challenges faced being able to articulate:

> "…the focus of engagement...and whether student engagement is seen as a precondition/influence, a process or an outcome" (Bovill 2017, p.1).

This lack of definition can lead to an inability to "improve, increase, support and encourage" (Buckley 2014, p.2) student engagement. It is therefore essential to give clear definitions in research so "all involved are clear which area of student engagement is being explored" (Lowe & El Hakim 2020, p.8) and its prospective impact is clear.

Despite issues with definition, student engagement literature has continued to grow, with researchers looking to better understand the student experience urged to:

> "…continue to pursue a reflective and critical approach to student engagement, together with appropriate research and scholarship" (Lowe 2023, p.11).

To aid understanding, data gathered through surveys can measure student satisfaction alongside comparison with other institutions (Bryson 2014, pp.236-237) and frameworks can be used to evaluate and "account for a multi-faceted concept of effectiveness in student engagement" (Wilson et al., 2022, p.845) activities. Institutions have also been encouraged to use data to understand "the type of students a university has…[which] will help with overcoming some of the potential barriers" (Crabtree 2023, p.15) existing for students to engage with university life. Data has also been used during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdowns' impact on student satisfaction and wellbeing has been heavily examined (Marchlinksa et al., 2023; ONS, 2020) and additionally affected student engagement

as a concept in that these "significant shifts and chaos...[being] the greatest quick-to-emerge catalyst for rethinking and developing" (Lowe 2023, p.11) this area of work. This may mean that student engagement theory requires re-examination, thus research continues to be undertaken in order for HE Institutions to continue to maintain student satisfaction, perform well in cross-institutional surveys such as the National Student Survey, and continue to attract students.

For the purposes of clarity for the remainder of this literature review, student engagement will be defined as activities outwith the classroom. To establish the importance and relevance of exploring Bols' work through elected student officers, the following topics of student engagement in practice will be explored as follows:

- Extracurricular Activities
- Representation and Student Voice
- Representativeness
- Students' Associations and Student Officers
- Representativeness of Elected Student Officers

Extracurricular activities

Extracurricular activities (ECA) can be seen as the "cultural, voluntary and sporting activities organised within the university" (Stevenson and Clegg 2011, p.232) and like student engagement theory, its' definition is "overly broad since it allows virtually anything outside of the regular curriculum to be considered" (Bartkus et al., 2012, p.695) an ECA, meaning that clarity of meaning when discussing ECA's is crucial.

Despite the above challenges, the positive impact of involvement in ECAs is well documented. The link between social interaction and success in education has been attributed to preventing drop out (see Tinto, 1975), improvement in academic performance (O'Dea 1994, pp.26-27), expansion of social circles (Massoni, 2011), perceptions in prospective workplaces (Tchibozo, 2007) and personal development alongside correlation to employability skills (Thompson et al., 2013). ECAs have also been argued to help increase students' sense of belonging and that "ECAs are equally crucial for conventional and non-conventional learners" (Munir and Zaheer, 2021, p.252). Belonging has increasingly been cited as best practice to prevent isolation for online learners (Peacock et al., 2020, p.24) and from alienating those "who already feel isolated in the university context" (Glazzard 2017, p.308); however, challenges have been raised to the assumptions being made that linking a sense of belonging to preventing student drop out promotes "a reductive and exclusive understanding of belonging in the context of a diverse contemporary student body" (Thomas 2018, p.25). Steps should therefore be taken to ensure "accessible and inclusive university-linked extracurricular activity opportunities for all students" (Stuart et al., 2011, p.213). Promoting participation by "student groups who may not normally access them is likely to add value to the overarching student experience" (Kerrigan and Manktelow 2021, p.135).

Other considerations such as a student's location, identification with their education environment and time put into ECAs can have a significant impact on student integration to university (Astin, 1984), with social class and cultural background also playing a role in how

involved a student is or can be involved in ECA's (Suber, 2009). As examples of ECA's can be vast, occurring within and out with the curriculum, for the purposes of this research it is important to consider such an activity that overlaps both arenas ECA's can occur in – through representation and student voice.

Representation and Student Voice

The learner voice has always been highlighted as central to the development of education as a discipline (Dewey, 1916), moving forward with the formalisation of student voice in various policy frameworks within HE in the UK (see QAA, 2012, 2018 and OfS, 2022). Due to this increasing importance of student representation and student voice, there are ongoing conversations around strengthening this mechanism through paying representatives for this role (see Natzler, 2019) and other forms of extra-curricular involvement around learning and teaching to "ensure they are not excluding students who need to work" (Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill 2020, p.2555) who would otherwise be unable to participate. Considering more students:

> "…are expected to become strategic, instrumental citizens of their university…[with] growing emphasis on the importance of student voice in quality assurance activities" (Mendes and Hammett 2023, p.165),

more pressure is being put on the representative role so attention must be paid to ensuring:

> "…we… stop assuming that they can contribute their time and emotional labour for free, when everyone else around the table is paid" (Dickinson, 2021).

This idea must be carefully considered, however, as paying or not paying students and their "perception of the value of their role" (LeBihan, Lowe and Marie, 2018, p.117) can influence participation.

With this growing significance, Fletcher (2014) hypothesised the need for 'Meaningful Student Involvement', which has six defining characteristics - students being meaningfully involved in all aspects of their education; their views sought out and corroborated by those in the education system; students fully involved in strategies for educational reform; structures of support in place for all involved; all involved being equally invested in the process; and where learning exists in these opportunities being clear. Although these characteristics can lead to the enhancement of the student voice, students involved in these processes, staff tasked with listening and implementation and the systems in place to capture the student voice must be considered alongside Fletcher's characteristics in order to successfully facilitate student involvement in feedback mechanisms.

Student voice in HE can be captured in several ways such as the role of student representatives. Despite its wide usage, concerns have been raised at how this voice is being captured, allowing the student voice to potentially be "passive in the process of change" (Carey 2013, p.73). Also worth noting is students' ideas around their representative role can

be influenced by how academic staff perceive the role and their expectations on said students (Lizzio and Wilson 2009, p.69). Power imbalances between students and staff have also been discussed within research. Stemming from the view of tutors being in more powerful positions and resulting in "the discourse which inhabits [this] relationship serv[ing] to 'normalise' the power imbalance within this relationship" (Robinson 2012, p.103), it has been noted these imbalances are important to consider "if student representation is to be seen as more than tokenistic" (Bols 2020, p.35) – a point made clearly within course representatives in research but could easily be applied to elected student officers.

To mitigate such influences, role ambiguity must be tackled by setting clear expectations and clarifying "the type and extent of the authority they [experience] in the role" (Lizzio and Wilson 2009, p.78) to help students understand their roles more clearly. Another mitigation is electing student representatives to their positions, and it has been argued that formal elections give representatives "...more of a mandate … [and] a perception that being elected [gives] the representatives more legitimacy..." (Bols, 2020, p.75) compared to students being recruited into the role.

Students who undertake these representative roles have motivations linking to personal development, helping fellow students, wanting to understand how things work in their institution and persuasion into the role (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009, pp.73-74). These motivations can influence the types of students that will willingly volunteer for a representative role, with only certain demographics of students commonly undertaking these roles (see Bols, 2017 and Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021), meaning that only "the usual suspects and 'super-engaged' students are being heard" (Lowe 2023, p.8).

Having only certain students becoming representatives poses a challenge with an ever-diversifying student body, considering that many students "may be prevented from fully participating in, integrating with or feeling as if they belong" (Humphrey and Lowe 2017, pp.173-174) dependent on their mode of study or even proximity to campus. Although this can be tackled through training given to student representatives (Bols 2020, p.75), concerns have also been raised about whether representatives are able to speak for the wider cohort rather than just articulating their own viewpoints (Fielding 2004, p.299). The question of "whether the full range of student views is being adequately reflected and reported through the student representation system" (Little et al., 2009, p.25) comes up frequently in research and has been examined further in recent years through the concept of representativeness.

Representativeness

When first exploring representativeness, Bols examined concerns that have been identified in previous research such as "the double fact that students see different issues and see issues differently" (Fielding 2001, p.130) and how a small group of students end up overtaking what is deemed to be the student view (Menon, 2003), highlighting concerns of those who participate in these initiatives being able to articulate the broad views of all students.

This concern has also been examined within staff-student partnerships, where it has been identified that:

"…those from privileged social locations and identities who have the prior confidences or networks for self-select or be selected for involvement" (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021, p.229).

When students reflected on their involvement in such activities, schemes being open to any student to participate helped with "understanding their schemes to be inclusive" (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021, p.237) with students' perceptions of the accessibility of a programme playing a role in whether they participated in such projects (see Marquis et al., 2018). This would suggest that to tackle the perception that only certain types of students participate in student representation, it needs to be clear that the opportunity is open to all students so that it can be seen as an inclusive and accessible activity.

Bols identified that beyond ensuring this opportunity is made available to all students, that:

"…it is probable that students will be more likely to be prepared to speak to representatives who look and sound like themselves and seem better able to empathise with their experiences" (Bols 2017, p.5).

To ensure that institutions are hearing the views from as many students as possible, gathering demographics of those involved in student representation can help identify 'hard to reach' groups within an institution (Bols 2017, p.5). Such work commenced in Scotland (see Steven and Thomas, 2019) then across England and Wales where institutions were asked to identify underrepresented cohorts then design interventions for these groups, resulting in benefitting diversity within the institution and reflection on "what substantive changes could be made to the institution itself" (Moody and Thomas 2020, p.14). Although this project focussed on areas within institutions, the benefits outlined above would indicate such an exercise would be beneficial to improve diversity within student representatives.

How representativeness is viewed within institutions has been seen to possibly "have a significant impact on the extent to which they are perceived as being effective" (Bols 2022, p.33) and with representativeness appearing in wider research (Lowe 2023, p.8) within the forum of course representatives, other levels of representation such as student officers and their students' associations should be considered.

Students' Associations and Student Officers

Throughout the history of HE (see Day and Dickinson, 2018), students' input on their education has been identified as a need, with Scotland first recommending students sit on University Court (see Universities (Scotland) Act, 1858) and the establishment of Student Representative Councils (SRCs) (see Universities (Scotland) Act, 1889). The developments in England and Wales of student representation "was significantly slower" (Day and Dickinson 2018, p.16) but by the turn of the 20th century each institution in the UK had "some form of student representative council" (Day and Dickinson 2018, p.17). Despite its original political intent to restrict students' unions (see Day, 2021), they now see protection through legislation

(see Education Act 1994, Part 2) and a legislative mandate their national regulators (see Charity Commission 2023, OSCR 2025 and Charity Commission of Northern Ireland 2019).

Elected by the student body "to act on their behalf and in their interest" (Klemenčič 2014, p.400), student officers will either take a sabbatical year to undertake their role or do so alongside their studies, depending on if the role is full-time or part-time. The importance of student officers is gaining more prominence with university management seeing them as:

> "…key actors in articulating students' views and concerns in a market within which 'the student voice' has assumed considerable power" (Brooks et al., 2016b, p.472).

However, this importance can change as the interests of officers' "passions could be completely different from those of their predecessor" (Shaw and Atvars 2018, p.4), adding a sense of volatility to this relationship which is key to articulating and amplifying the student voice. Considering the complexity of the elected officer role, supporting officers through inductions, training and ongoing development with association staff alongside setting out responsibilities, boundaries and enabling understanding of their roles has been cited as important to officer success and improvement of wellbeing (NUS, 2023) when representing students.

Representativeness of Elected Student Officers

Although a key role, challenges have been presented around how much student officers reflect the viewpoint of students, with this argument "gain[ing] prominence when justifying the nature and extent of student representation" (Luescher-Mamashela 2013, p.1443) within institutions alongside how aware the student body is of what their elected officers do (Kasper-Hope, 2023). To ensure this power remains, it becomes significantly important that:

> "…such positions of relative power are opened up to all students, and that the wider student body views their union leaders as broadly representative" (Brooks et al 2015, p.1205).

In order that election to such positions is inclusive, encouraging diverse groups of students to stand (ECU, 2007). Students' associations are seeing challenges in "a lack of motivation within the general student body to participate" (Little et al 2009, p.55), with the pandemic exacerbating this causing "'fatigue' amongst students to proactively engage with enrichment activities" (QAA 2023, p.20) linked to students' associations, causing reconsideration on how such opportunities are promoted to encourage student participation. Challenges have also been cited in how visible students' association activities are, with students wishing to see multiple forms of online and on-campus communication used to raise awareness of such activities (Moore and Lowe 2019, p.11) and with:

"…considered, strategic, and/or targeting communication…the most common [activity] to inviting a diversity of partners to engage" (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021, p.234).

Although a beneficial area for research, minimal examples exist examining this area of work. It has been hypothesised that representativeness can be applied to individuals who stand in students' association elections and that attracting diverse candidates to stand is a key step in addressing this issue (Cuthbert, 2022) to understand "how and why such disproportionate barriers to engagement arise and potential ways to overcome them" (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021, p.229).

Issues in representativeness have also been seen internationally. Australia and New Zealand's voluntary student unionism legislation and its effect on how student associations are funded have impacted how independent the association's viewpoint is from that of institutions (see Rochford, 2014 and Nissen and Hayward, 2017). With the process of student elections being discouraged in India, the impact of the Lyngdoh Committee Report's recommendations on age limit of candidates has had significant impact on how representative student officers can be (Dechamma, 2014). There have even been calls from the United States of America (USA) for student government leaders to be more representative and:

"…student government should be accessible to all and include a diverse range of identities, philosophies, backgrounds, and experiences" (Goodman 2021, p.704).

McStravock argued that lack of diversity could also be seen in student leadership roles in the UK but that students:

"…are not putting themselves forward...due to a combination of the practical barriers...and...a feeling that the SU is inaccessible to students like them" (McStravock 2022, p.4).

For officers to be fully representative of its student body, students' associations must ensure "mechanisms are in place to capture the experiences of all members of the student community" (McStravock 2022, p.9), allowing underrepresented cohorts of students to be able to engage with their representative body.

Despite the emergence of this topic, it has yet to be explored within a students' association if elected officers are able to be fully representative of the wider student body, so research would benefit from such exploration. It is hoped that this research will be able to conclude if Bols' (2017) concept is applicable to elected student officers, if the same challenges with course representatives present themselves within student officers, and recommendations can be made to benefit the wider student movement.

Conclusion

The above literature review can be seen to demonstrate why further research exploring the extent the concept of representativeness applies to elected student officers could be worthwhile.

As a form of extracurricular activity gaining more prominence in HE (QAA 2012, 2018, OfS 2022), there is a need to explore how representative current systems are to ensure such opportunities are accessible and open to all, enabling wider participation within an increasingly diverse student body (Stuart et al., 2011, p.213).

With COVID-19 having a significant effect on HE and students' perception of value in activities outwith the classroom (QAA, 2023), both institutions and representative bodies needs to continue to use data to understand its student body (Crabtree 2023, p.15). The use of quantitative data will help explore representativeness in regard to reflecting the study body these individuals represent as well as identifying under-represented groups, but examining representativeness of viewpoint (Bols 2017, p.2) will have more challenges.

With the increasing diversity of the student body (Stuart et al., 2011, p.213) and pressure on students undertaking these roles (Mendes and Hammett 2023, p.165), alongside concerns of fostering meaningful student engagement (Fletcher, 2014) with the current passivity of student voice (see Carey, 2013 and QAA, 2023) and power imbalances existing in such roles (Robinson 2012, p.103), work needs to be done to ensure such opportunities are accessible and open to all. Understanding underrepresented groups in institutions and designing interventions to encourage wider student involvement (Moody and Thomas 2020, p.14) can help ensure roles are perceived to be inclusive, with perception having a significant impact on how effective representatives can be.

Alongside working in partnership with their institution, students' associations need to consider ways to ensure relevance and value to their students. With elected officers having significant responsibility, recent research has highlighted that improved understanding of their role, support and training can help ensure the ability to undertake such roles effectively (NUS, 2023), however, how representative these roles are has not been examined thoroughly in research. The research that does exist has highlighted that accessibility of the elections process and attracting diverse candidates to stand (Cuthbert, 2022) alongside student voice mechanisms being able to capture the full student experience (McStravock, 2022) should be considered to address representativeness concerns but with these views not being tested, the need for this research is made more apparent. Such results (see Cuthbert 2024) should be shared with the sector where sector bodies, students' associations and their institutions need to come together to ensure these roles of authority and power are able to be obtained by any student who wishes to stand for them.

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