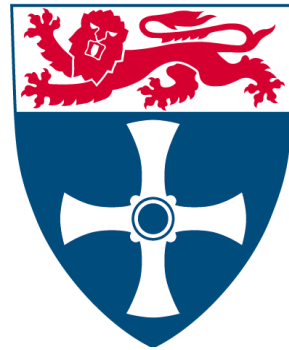




UNIVERSITY OF
NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE



STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE HANDBOOK

**Your guide to representing
students at the University of
Newcastle**

Introduction:

Congratulations! You have decided to become a representative for students at the University of Newcastle. It's a tough job sometimes but it can also be very rewarding; this handbook contains everything you need to know to get started on the road to becoming an advocate for student issues, a representative of student views and a general all-round super student!

Firstly, be prepared, you're about to become extremely popular; anyone with a problem, issue or just the desire to rant will want to know you so be ready to deal with this! By ensuring that these student views are heard and acted upon you are helping to ensure that students in your school have a real say in the running of their course and the development of their degree.

Being a student rep is about more than just sitting in meetings though, it's about acting as a voice for students in the same situation as you. This is a big job and can sometimes seem impossible, the education officer at the Union Society and your school in the University are there to help you and will provide any support you need. Make the most of the union; whether you want advice or just a chat, the education officer will always be happy to help you. Make sure you keep the union up to date with your work as well, if you come across a really big issue it may be something the education officer is already be working on and can help you with or something they need to know about.

Over the year you will develop skills which are invaluable to you as a student rep, remember you can use these skills later in life too and they'll look great on your CV and at job interviews.

Finally: good luck and have fun! It will probably be stressful at times but ultimately it's good to now you're making a difference and helping people.

Your Job:

What does a student representative do?

What does representing an entire school involve?

Be a point of contact:

You act as a point of contact for students in your school, this means you need to make your name, face and contact details known to as many people as possible. If you want to keep some privacy it might be a good idea to get a new e-mail address to use for students.

Solve students' problems:

After you have been contacted, students will expect you to do something! With support from the education officer at the Union Society and other services within the university you can begin to work with academics in your school to solve the problem.

Communicate with different people:

Much of your job is about communication, making yourself available to students is only one part of it. You need to be able to work with lecturers, administrators, union officers, union staff and students. All of these people will work in a different way and respond to different forms of communication best.

Represent students

You will sit on your school's staff-student committee, in this meeting you are representing the students in your school and you should always try to think of what's right for them and what they want not necessarily what you think is best.

Take part in decision making

You will be involved in decision making at your committee, deciding what course of action to take to solve problems and make situations better. Don't be afraid to speak up if you think what is happening is not right!

Gain valuable skills

As a student representative you will experience challenges that many other students will rarely face. You have the opportunity to develop and demonstrate a number of key skills that will help

your academic life at university and increase your employability after you graduate.

Your Role:

What does that all actually mean?

In real terms what will I be expected to do?

Talk to other students

The only way to know what problems students actually have or what they think about something is to talk to them! This doesn't have to be face to face, e-mail is useful for communicating easily with a large number of people as are discussion boards.

Talk to University staff

You are the person nominated to relay problems, issues and comments to staff in your school, this means you have to be confident and prepared enough to face anything. You may need to challenge staff if they refuse to acknowledge a problem but remain mature enough to see their point of view and possibly reach a compromise.

Talk to union officers and staff

Union officers and staff have loads of information and resources that can help you in your role. This guide contains a list of people to talk to and where they work in the union building, they're always happy to help you with any advice or support you need.

Solve the small problems

Help students to solve the immediate problems they are facing and, if the problem is too big for you to handle, try to do as much as you can to make the immediate situation better. Hand on the main problem to someone who can deal with it. There's more on who to pass things to later.

Represent students to committees

Your role involves representing students to your staff/student committee; this means periodically attending meetings with members of staff. There are other committees you can attend to represent students' views, getting a place on union council might be a good idea.

Respect confidentiality

You will hear some very private information, it is vital that you act in a responsible manner and respect students' privacy.

**The best way to represent students fairly and accurately is to keep up with their views – how do you do that effectively?
Keep in contact!**

Contacting Students

1) Make yourself known

You need to be recognisable to the students in your school, if they know your face you won't even need to ask them for feedback. Students are always looking for someone who will take their opinion seriously so if they know who you are and what you do they will find you! A good way to introduce yourself is to ask to speak at the start of lectures, let the students know who you are and your role and let them know how they can contact you. Lecturers should be fairly willing to help you with this although they may ask you to keep it brief! Many schools will have a notice board where you can put up posters advertising your service and any current issues you are working on and maybe even a photo of yourself....

2) Speak to people

Get around the school and speak to people, nothing beats word of mouth for getting a message across! Make times when you are available and make sure these times are known to students and staff – if staff know that you are taking your role seriously they will refer students' problems to you. Put up posters etc advertising the time and place where students can find you and then make sure you are there. Take the time to listen to everyone that speaks to you and if possible make some notes, they could be invaluable later.

3) Network with other student reps

The chances are that there will be other reps in the same situation as you; the education officer can probably tell you who they are University-wide and your school will have a list of their other student reps. Meet with them and discuss ways that you could work together, if you are in the same school you could organise to split speaking in lectures between you.

4) E-mail!!!

Your school will probably have an e-mail list, newsgroup or mail-base; this is a perfect way to identify yourself to a lot of students. Be careful not to use this method too much as you could be accused of sending 'junk' e-mails. Make sure the students know your e-mail address so they can contact you at any time. It might be a good idea to set up a separate account for your work as a student rep to avoid your personal account being bombarded with mail, just make sure you check it regularly!

5) The union and societies

Many courses have social societies such as geog-soc or the architecture society, these are great places to meet students and ask them about their course and their experiences at University in general. The union is a good place to get in touch with these groups either through society presidents, who have access to society e-mail lists, or through the notice boards on the first floor where societies advertise their activities. Either way you can be sure you'll meet some relevant people who will want to speak to you and you might even make some new friends!

Likely problems:

What are the problems students are most likely to approach you with? These are some examples but this list is by no means exhaustive – students and their problems are unpredictable, as are academics!

Crowding in lecture theatres

Growing student numbers can affect the quality of experience a student gets, as classes get bigger students' learning is affected and their grades can be jeopardized.

This is definitely something to take up with academics at your staff-student committee {SSC}. There may be reasons behind the larger class sizes, such as temporary or unexpected staff absence, or the class could simply be growing year on year with no action. Either way you can raise this issue and request that the school take action such as capping course sizes or providing alternative modules to cope with the demand.

Problems with reading lists

There will always be problems with the availability of key course texts in the library as their resources are not limitless! The first point of call should be the academic in charge of the reading list who may not have passed the information to the library thus not allowing them to prepare for the demand for the book. If the library has the reading list and still does not have enough copies of the text it is best to approach the Library Advisory Group to raise the issue; the education officer sits on this committee as does one student elected at union council so the education officer is probably your best contact.

Problems with teaching methods

Some students may have a problem with a tutor's way of teaching - they could find them too slow, too fast, poorly prepared or even uninspiring and boring. This last complaint sounds silly but it is valid, especially today when we pay for our education, if a tutor is not connecting with the students and engaging them in learning this is a serious problem for students

and will be taken seriously by the school. This is a matter best raised at SSC, though it is worth reminding students that they will have an opportunity at the end of the course to provide feedback on the module and their thoughts on the teaching quality. This may not rectify the situation for them immediately but it will provide a light at the end of the tunnel!

Access to resources

There could be problems with the amount of resources available to students within the school for example lab equipment or computer access. These problems are perennial favourites as there is never enough of everything. Be prepared to use some diplomacy and raise the issue at your SSC but also explain to students that the university buys as much equipment as it can but sometimes there just isn't any way to provide more resources. The staff will probably be aware of the problems anyway and be just as unhappy with the situation as the students. They will be willing to discuss this and take any reasonable suggestions on board to try and find some solutions.

Workload

Students sometimes have problems with the workload their course demands, there could be too much work or, less likely, too little, coursework deadlines in the school could all be at a similar time causing students to face a very heavy workload at some times and no work at others. These are problems for students which can be raised at your SSC where staff can look at their scheduling of work and consider changes. Timetabling assessment is a tricky business and sometimes problems can be caused by simple mistakes which can be quickly rectified if brought to the right person's attention.

And finally

Don't forget that most of the members of staff in your school actually want to help their students to succeed! If there is an issue that is causing problems for students and not allowing them to reach their potential then staff will be happy to help resolve this as long as it is approached in the right way and with a view to finding a situation that is beneficial to everyone.

Issues for referral:

One of the most important skills you will need as a representative is knowing when a problem is outside your remit or too big for you to deal with and passing it on to someone else. There are people whose full time job it is to deal with tricky issues and they are more than happy to help you when dealing with a student.

Academic appeals

All cases of academic appeal should be referred to the education officer and the Student Advice Centre {SAC} in the Union Society. If the outcome of the problem directly affects a student's degree then the SAC and the education officer are your best contacts.

Plagiarism, collusion and cheating

If a student is accused of plagiarism {passing someone else's work as their own without referencing}, collusion {working together with another student on a piece of individual work} or any other form of cheating, the matter should be referred to the Student Advice Centre.

Missed exams, late coursework

If a student has missed an exam or is having trouble with coursework they should be referred to the education officer.

Marking disputes

If a student is in dispute with the school or an individual lecturer over marking the case should be referred to the SAC who have trained advocates to work in this area.

Harassment/discrimination

Students facing harassment or discrimination should be referred to the education officer or the welfare officer at the Union Society. Both the University and the Union have policies regarding harassment and discrimination and official action may need to be taken.

Student's personal problems

As a student representative you are *never* expected to take on students' personal problems or act as a counsellor. This is a huge responsibility and can be incredibly stressful so is best left to people trained to deal with it. If a student approaches you with a personal problem you can refer them to the University counselling service, the Student Advice Centre or the welfare officer in the Union Society.

Contacts

Union Society

Web: www.unionsociety.co.uk

Phone: 0191 239 3900

Democracy and Training Officer

Office: 1st floor Union Society

E-mail: educ.union@ncl.ac.uk

Phone: 0191 239 3963

Mobile: 07803024153

Student Support Officer

Office: 1st floor Union Society

E-mail: welfare.union@ncl.ac.uk

Phone: 0191 239 3917

Mobile: 07803024152

Student Advice Centre

Offices: 1st floor Union Society

E-mail: sac.reception@ncl.ac.uk

Phone: 0191 239 3979

Student Counselling

Phone: 0191 222 7699

Student Progress Office

Phone: 0191 222 6587

The Committee:

Much of your representative work will be done through staff-student committee {SSC}; you have a forum here for feedback to academics and a chance for direct input into the workings of your school.

What's so important about SSCs?

Staff-student committees have a vital role in ensuring that students receive the highest quality course that the University can deliver. For students it is a good way to have input into their course, but SSCs are also important to academics who want to know what their students are thinking about the education they are offering.

What is my role?

Your role is to represent the views of the students in your school. You form a crucial part of a feedback loop that should allow students to have input into their course and understand the impact that this input has made.

This process has four stages:

In stage one a student has a problem and brings this to a representative,

Next the representative takes the issue to the relevant committee, in this case the staff-student committee for their school

Stage three sees the committee discuss the issue and come to a decision about what should be done.

In the final stage the student representative feeds back to the students about what has been done. This fourth stage closes the feedback loop and is the most important part of being a representative; it's no use working if the people you're working for don't find out the results!

What if I don't understand?

The easiest way to find out about something during a meeting is to ask, it may seem obvious but some people won't ask when they don't understand! The other members will not expect you to know everything and will be happy to explain issues to you. Before a meeting check out your issues and research things you don't understand. There are many people who will be willing to go over things with you such as staff in your school, the education officer or the Student Advice Centre, just ask!

Will I be listened to?

Yes! The other members of the committee may not agree with your opinion, indeed on some issues it's likely that they won't, but they will respect your right to speak and your point of view. You are there because the University values student input and need to hear your voice.

Remember: staff-student committees were set up because the staff in your school want to know what the students think about their course – don't be afraid to speak up and express your views or challenge a member of staff, that's your job! If you behave appropriately and make your case in a rational way you will be listened to and respected.

Faculty forums

What is a faculty forum?

A faculty forum is an opportunity for students to meet the representatives from their faculty and keep them informed about the issues concerning them. Faculty forums are also a good way for representatives to keep students in their faculty informed about the work they are doing and any successes they have had in dealing with issues.

Who attends?

All student reps should attend, so student members of staff-student committees and boards of study and school representatives on union council will be there. Anyone else who wants to attend is welcome to so they can speak to their representatives and find out what's going on.

When are they?

Faculty forums are usually held once a term although if the students or the reps feel that there is a need to have a meeting at a particular point an extra forum can be arranged.

Who organises faculty forums?

The Education Officer in the Union Society organises them so if you want to get involved they are a good person to contact, the e-mail address is democracy.union@ncl.ac.uk

How to do committees:

What are the things you need to know if you're going to succeed as a representative?

Always read the papers that you have been sent before a meeting – you may miss something important if you try to skim them in the meeting.

If you have a problem with something in the papers bring it to the education officer and they will try to help you.

Meet with other reps before the meeting to find out what they think about an issue, a united front is stronger!

Gather opinions and quotes from students in your school, this will add weight to your argument.

Make sure you are on time for the meeting; making a good impression will help you when you are pushing a point.

Raise your hand if you want to speak; don't interrupt others and definitely don't let them interrupt you!

Be polite but firm and don't become pushy or aggressive.

People will try to undermine you if they don't agree with your opinion but if you remain reasonable the chair will respect you and help you get yourself heard.

Don't be afraid to speak up early; don't wait until the end of a debate to voice a radical opinion.

Make notes during the meeting and ask for clarification if you do not understand something, be certain you understand before moving on.

Remember you will be asked for a 'student opinion' at some point so don't drift off, even if the topic is really boring!

After the meeting let students know what happened, whether you were successful or not, and what decisions were made.

Invite feedback from students on the decisions made by the committee and start to plan your next steps if necessary.

Keep the education officer informed of any major developments, they may want to get involved too!

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