

Academic Communities

Interim Report

nus **charity**
national union of **students**

Medr
Y Comisiwn Addysg Drydyddol ac Ymchwil
Commission for Tertiary Education and Research

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Introduction

The Welsh Academic Communities Experiment collates research and works with Welsh HEIs to co-create methods for using academic communities to facilitate meaningful student voice. The Experiment consultants will support students' unions and their institutions to explore models for student representation within academic departments that centre academic societies.

This report explores current and recent research and practice (*from late 2021 to Spring 2025*) within higher education particularly, students' union support and delivery of:

- Academic societies and academic community building
- Academic representation (e.g. course, faculty, or subject reps)

The review aims to inform Phase 1 of the Welsh Academic Communities Experiment by identifying:

1. How students' unions structure and support academic representation and societies, including staffing, funding, organisation, training, and guidance
2. Key challenges and opportunities in higher education around community building and academic representation
3. Emerging trends in student voice and academic community development

The focus is on post-Covid developments in students' unions and higher education across the UK. Whilst the Academic Communities Experiment is a programme for Welsh HEIs, some elements of the research covers all of the UK and not exclusively Wales. We have identified Welsh HEI specific research within the report.

Part 1 offers a review of literature, sector reports and institutional evaluations covering practice within the UK, with comparative insights from European models of student governance.

Part 2 details indicative survey findings from 79 student leaders across Wales, examining role duality, time constraints, motivations, and challenges.

Part 3 maps the landscape of academic/subject societies and representation activity based on a data collection exercise with Welsh SUs in Spring 2025.

Executive Summary - An Opportunity for the Sector

Across a wide range of commentaries, there is growing consensus that traditional academic representation structures, particularly rep systems, are increasingly misaligned with the needs and motivations of today's students. Volunteering in these roles is in decline, driven not only by time pressures and financial challenges, but also by rigid, top-down systems that feel disconnected from students' lived experiences.

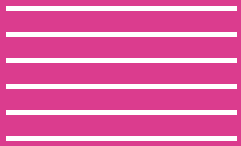
In contrast, academic societies are thriving. Their success lies in their flexibility, autonomy, and student-led ethos, which foster genuine community, personal development and academic engagement. These societies offer a space where students connect socially and academically within their subject area, often bridging the divide between the "academic world" of the university and the "social world" of the students' union.

Emerging practice suggests that academic societies could be central to a new model of student representation and engagement. Rather than relying solely on democratic elections and static roles, universities and students' unions are exploring more adaptive approaches: integrating peer mentoring, social and careers events, and curriculum input, into subject-level communities. These act as "mini-SUs," offering student voice, belonging, and leadership in more accessible and meaningful ways. European models from Vilnius, Helsinki, and Antwerp, highlight the value of decentralised structures where department-level student groups coordinate representation, social activity, and academic support in ways that feel relevant and rewarding.

There is a strong case for greater institutional investment in academic societies, not just as extracurricular activity but as core contributors to student academic success and retention. From peer-led freshman learning communities in the USA to staff-student partnership models, these groups can support transitions, improve attainment and retention, and foster a stronger sense of identity and belonging. Reimagining engagement through academic societies, especially when supported by staff and linked to academic departments, offers a promising route to revitalising student voice and creating inclusive, student-centred communities.

The Welsh Academic Communities Experiment presents a unique opportunity to rethink existing models and pilot new approaches grounded in partnership, flexibility, and belonging. As you work through this report, we invite you to consider how academic societies and reimagined community structures could move beyond the limits of potentially outdated representation models, offering the sector a renewed vision for student engagement that is fit for the future.





Part One

Literature

Review





Part One: Literature Review

This literature review highlights the growing shift in how student voice is understood and supported in higher education. It draws on a structured review of literature, sector reports and institutional evaluations published between late 2021 to Spring 2025.

The review covers practice within the UK, with comparative insights from European models of student governance.

Together, the evidence suggests that it's time to move beyond rigid, formal structures and towards a more inclusive, student-centred model of engagement, where voice, partnership, and community sits at the heart of the academic experience.

Literature Review Findings Summary

- **Outdated and Rigid Structures:** Traditional course rep systems, rooted in 1990s quality assurance frameworks, are now seen as bureaucratic, tokenistic and disconnected from students' lived experiences
- **Low Engagement and Visibility:** Many students are unaware of who their reps are or feel the system fails to deliver real influence or change
- **Exclusion of Diverse Groups:** Existing models often fail to engage postgraduates, commuters, international students, and those from widening participation backgrounds.
- **Misaligned Volunteering Models:** Reliance on unpaid student labour does not reflect current student realities and disproportionately excludes those under financial or time pressure
- **Slow Sector Reform:** Despite isolated examples of innovation, such as paid rep roles or credit-bearing schemes, sector wide change has been slow
- **Underused Potential of Academic Societies:** Academic societies offer flexible, peer-led spaces for leadership, community, and co-curricular learning but remain undervalued in formal governance frameworks.
- **Opportunity to Innovate:** With limited research on academic societies, the sector has a chance to experiment with new models that better align with how students want to engage.



Literature Review Findings

The Representation Rut: Why the Old Model Isn't Working

Academic representation systems based around course and programme-level student representatives have historically played a central role in shaping the student voice within higher education. However, recent research suggests that these structures, first developed in the late 20th century, are increasingly struggling to meet the expectations and realities of today's students. Originally designed to address communication barriers between small student cohorts and academic staff, course rep systems became formalised through quality assurance frameworks in the 1990s. With the expansion of institutions, development of sophisticated data feedback mechanisms and new forms of engagement, the current model of academic representation is now often seen as outdated. Reports such as Rethinking Student Engagement, (AHEP, 2024) and Future-Proofing Student Engagement (evasys, 2023) highlight that students increasingly view traditional rep structures as bureaucratic, tokenistic and disconnected from meaningful change-making opportunities.

Engagement with representative roles has declined, with many students reporting they feel overburdened and poorly supported when acting as academic reps, How to Survive the Rep Apocalypse (Wonkhe, 2025). Additionally, many students are unaware of who their reps are or what they do, leading to a disconnect between representatives and the wider student body, How to Get Off the Hamster Wheel of University Level Student Representation (Wonkhe, 2024). Furthermore, these traditional representation models often fail to engage postgraduates, international students, commuter students and students from widening participation (WP) backgrounds, Why aren't Students Engaging Any More? (Wonkhe, 2024). Research points to a wider disconnection between formal rep structures and the broader student experience, whereas issues such as wellbeing, community and a sense of belonging are increasingly seen as central to the educational journey, The Principled Class Approach (Wonkhe, 2025).

Breaking Point: The Hidden Cost of Volunteering in Student Representation

Volunteering has historically underpinned academic representation systems in the UK, with course reps and similar roles largely dependent on unpaid student labour. However, recent research points to significant challenges with this model. Reports such as Rethinking Student Engagement (AHEP, 2024) highlight that traditional assumptions about student volunteer capacity, particularly around time, energy and financial security are increasingly misaligned with the lived realities of today's students. Students facing academic pressures, rising living costs and growing mental health challenges are finding it harder to prioritise unpaid voluntary roles. Recent cost of living research by NUS demonstrates the impact on students' mental health and ability to engage with their studies due to cost of living issues (NUS, 2024). As participation drops, particularly in rep elections and ongoing engagement, there are real concerns across the sector about the sustainability of purely volunteer driven academic voice systems.

These challenges become more complex and are exacerbated when viewed through the lens of different student demographics. Research such as Why Aren't Students Engaging Any More (Wonkhe, 2024) and A Review of Literature on Sense of Belonging and Community in Higher Education (Newcastle University, 2023) demonstrate that volunteer representation roles tend to disproportionately exclude students from WP backgrounds, commuter students, mature learners and international students. These groups often face additional intersecting barriers such as part-time work commitments, financial insecurity and feelings of disconnect from campus life, making it harder for them to participate meaningfully in traditional rep structures. Furthermore, when these students are involved, they are often overburdened with expectations to represent all minority voices, resulting in tokenistic engagement rather than genuine empowerment



There have been some efforts to address these challenges, although progress across the sector remains uneven. Some students' unions and institutions have explored offering paid representative roles, academic credit or leadership development frameworks linked to representative activity. Newcastle University Students' Union model of targeted funding and support for academic societies demonstrates a more sustainable peer-led engagement alternative ([Newcastle University Students' Union, 2024](#)).

However, the sector is still heavily reliant on volunteerism and any form of systemic change remains slow.

From Extra to Essential: Reimagining Academic Societies in Student Voice

Academic societies are increasingly being recognised as valuable contributors to student engagement, community-building, and academic belonging. Despite this they still remain underused and undervalued in many institutions' formal engagement and governance frameworks. Research suggests that there's a general reluctance to formally recognise academic societies as legitimate partners in academic representation and curriculum development processes. There's concern over consistency and quality assurance; societies are often student-led, voluntary and vary widely in their activity levels. Additionally, there is some concern that formally integrating academic societies into governance could blur the boundaries between formal education provision and extra-curricular activity, complicating regulatory and risk management expectations.

However, where academic societies are properly supported, the benefits are substantial. Studies point to their capacity to address gaps left by traditional course rep systems, particularly building stronger academic communities and enhancing students' sense of belonging, NUSU Academic Societies Funding Scheme Evaluation Report (2023/24) ([Newcastle University Students' Union, 2024](#)) and Building Student Belonging, ([Advance HE, 2022](#)). Academic societies offer students flexible, peer-driven models of engagement that align with students' motivations to network socially, develop career skills and influence their education in ways that are more responsive than formal committee structures often allow. It is worth noting that research and insights into the impact and development of academic societies is in its infancy and is limited compared to that of academic representation models; whilst this is a challenge, it also creates an opportunity for the sector.

Tokenism to Partnership: Rethinking Student Engagement Through Research

Recent literature highlights the growing importance of academic societies and communities as vital elements in fostering a sense of belonging within higher education. Boulton distinguishes between 'social fit' - the extent to which students feel accepted and connected with their peers and university life - and 'academic/ability fit' - the feeling of being valued and capable within academic spaces, A Review of Literature on Sense of Belonging and Community in Higher Education ([Newcastle University, 2023](#)). Both aspects are essential to creating inclusive academic communities. Engagement in campus activities, particularly during transitional stages, plays a crucial role in supporting belonging, while the notion of "fitting in" becomes a problem when students are expected to adapt to rigid systems rather than the system being flexible and shaped to student needs, The Coffee Club: An Initiative to Support Mature and Non-Traditional Higher Education Students in Wales, ([Mannay & Ward, 2022](#)).

A key theme across the literature is the shift from traditional student engagement models towards broader, more inclusive and democratic forms of participation. The Professional standards framework for student engagement ([Sparqs, 2022](#)) and research such as Understanding and Developing Student Engagement, ([Bryson, 2014](#)) and Future-Proofing Student Engagement ([evasys, 2023](#)) position students as partners in shaping their learning and institutional culture, whether through co-created curricula, involvement in course evaluation, or leadership roles. Rethinking Student Engagement, ([AHEP, 2024](#)) and The Meaningful Student Involvement Handbook - A Review of the 'Student Voice Revolution' ([RAISE, 2023](#)) emphasise

that student engagement extends beyond academic study to all aspects of university life. They advocate for moving 'past tokenism' by fostering meaningful student involvement where students are not just heard but actively empowered. This aligns with "pathways for meaningful student voice" which emphasises acknowledgement, empowerment, and shared responsibility between students and staff, Going beyond student voice through meta-level education transformation, (Fletcher, 2017).

Finally, the literature points to the importance of designing academic communities intentionally. Community-building initiatives, such as the University of Lincoln's pre-arrival online academic spaces or the academic communities pilot at Bath SU, illustrate how early engagement can support a sense of identity and connection from the outset. These findings suggest that academic societies, representation systems, and partnership models are not just mechanisms for engagement but are fundamental to creating inclusive, student-centred environments where belonging and academic success go hand in hand.

Legally Backed, Socially Embedded: Lessons from Europe's Holistic Approach to Student Voice

In many countries across Europe, student representation is deeply embedded within higher education governance and, in many cases, protected by national legislation. In Sweden, for example, students are legally required to be formally represented on key decision-making bodies at departmental, faculty and institutional levels. These roles are reinforced by mandatory training focused on student rights and influence, reflecting a serious commitment to student participation. Student ombudspersons (elected, paid full-time student representatives) at institutions like Studentkåren Malmö also demonstrate how students' concerns are taken seriously.

Critically, these models extend beyond formal governance to influence the broader student experience. In Sweden, for instance, KTH Royal Institute of Technology student 'chapters' are responsible for not only academic input but also coordinating welcome activities, mentoring schemes, and career support. Similarly, Dutch universities like Twente rely on departmental study associations to facilitate academic and social integration through events, peer support and induction programmes. At Riga Technical University in Latvia, faculty-based students' unions develop annual plans that encompass academic life, social activities, and international student inclusion.

Taken together, these examples reveal a consistent trend: a move away from tokenistic consultation towards shared governance, where student voice is both respected and resourced. Crucially student voice is often embedded within student-led communities where student leaders or committees are also responsible for social and co-curricular activities.



Part Two

Student Leader Experience in Wales



Student Leader Experience in Wales

This section explores the experiences of student leaders across Welsh HEIs. A survey was distributed by students' unions focused on what student leaders actually do, how this aligns with their intended roles, what motivates them, and the skills they gain. It also looks at how connected student leaders feel to their academic communities, and how that varies by role and faculty. For the purposes of this survey, 'student leaders' refers to course and faculty representatives, society committee members and elected officers of students' unions.

A total of 79 student leaders responded to the survey. While we don't have a conclusive figure of society leaders and academic representatives in Wales, from estimations we've established that a sample size of around 300 student leaders would be representative. Our sample size, therefore, should be treated as indicative.

Student Leader Experience Findings Summary

Challenges

- **Role Overlap and Complexity:** Many student leaders hold multiple roles (e.g. 80% of society leaders are also reps), yet systems and training often remain siloed, leading to confusion about responsibilities
- **Time and Capacity Strain:** 78% of student leaders cited work-life balance and lack of time as key challenges, reflecting wider sector concerns about financial pressures and student burnout
- **Limited Awareness and Understanding:** Nearly half (49%) said students don't understand their role, and 16% said the system itself is confusing, pointing to the need for clearer communication and training
- **Inconsistent Institutional Support:** While department-level support is generally strong, only 22% felt well supported by their institution overall, suggesting a lack of consistent backing for student leadership
- **Volunteer Model Limitations:** The unpaid nature of student leadership makes it inaccessible for many, especially those with work or caring responsibilities, raising questions about sustainability and equity.

Opportunities

- **Blended Roles Already Emerging:** Students naturally bridge society and representation activities, offering a foundation for new, integrated leadership models
- **Motivated by Impact and Development:** Students are primarily driven by a desire to improve the student experience (73%) and build employability skills, creating space for 'double-benefit' roles.
- **Academic Communities as a Focal Point:** The department or faculty was the top source of support and satisfaction, highlighting their potential as hubs for future academic community development, and the need to strengthen partnership working with departmental colleagues
- **Peer Support Potential:** 70% rely on other student leaders for support, but only 76% are satisfied, suggesting that more structured peer networking could enhance collaboration and wellbeing

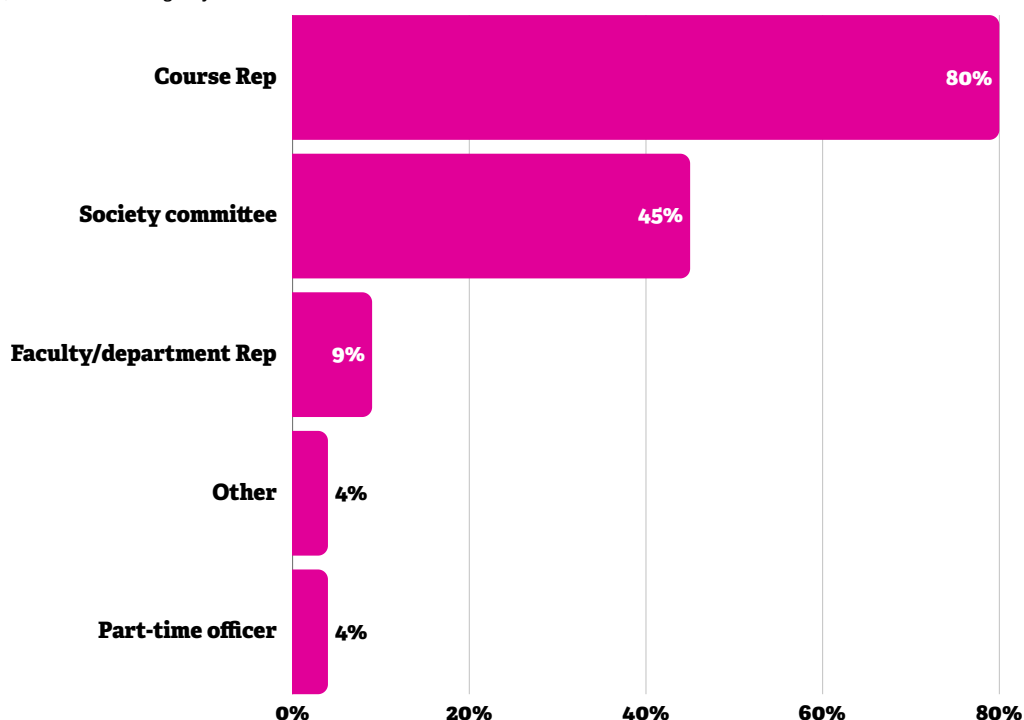
- **Scope for New Role Design:** While paying all reps is unfeasible, SUs could explore hybrid roles or targeted paid positions (e.g. academic community leaders) to enhance accessibility and impact

Student Leader Roles

We asked student survey respondents to select their student leader role. They were able to select multiple roles. The sample includes Course Reps (80% of respondents), Society committees (45%), Faculty or department Reps (9%), Part-time officers (4%) or 'Other' (4%). The majority identify as Course Reps, so these findings primarily reflect the experiences of Course Reps.

It is interesting to consider where students hold multiple roles, particularly across academic societies and representative roles. We know anecdotally that student leaders of academic societies are commonly connected to academic representation in some way. Our survey showed that 85% of society committee leaders are also some form of representative (course reps, faculty reps, part-time officers). Removing part-time officers (as they aren't always academic representative roles) from this shows that across our sample, 80% of society committee leaders are also academic representatives.

B1. As a student leader, which of the following are you involved in?



This demonstrates that students are already fulfilling dual roles, operating in the societies and representation spheres. This duality of roles suggests that even where formal systems are distinct, students themselves recognise and enact the connection between academic community-building and representation activities.

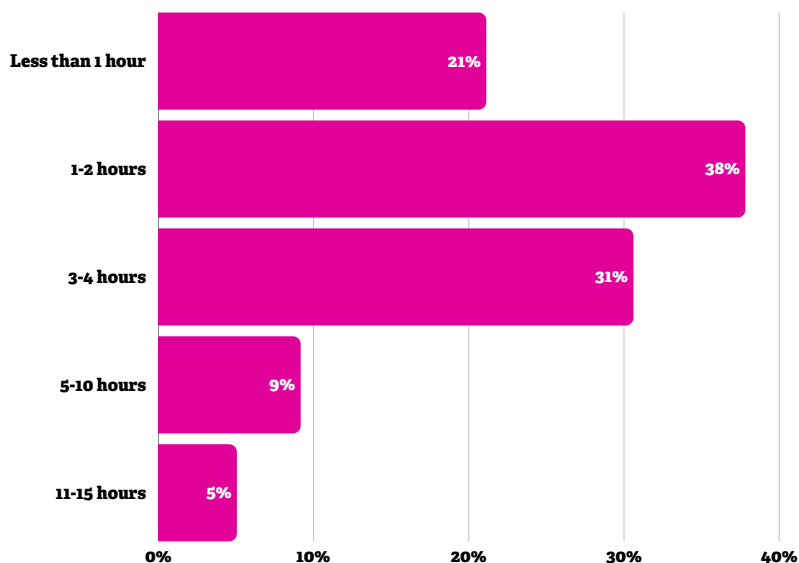
Duality of roles is common across all of the student leaders surveyed:

- Of the 63 Course reps, 23 are also on society committees, 4 are faculty reps and 2 are part-time officers
- Of the 7 faculty reps, 4 are also on society committees, 4 are course reps
- Of the 3 part-time officers, 2 are on society committees and 2 are course reps

Student Leader Activities

The survey examined how much time student leaders dedicated to their roles, with most respondents reporting that they spend a few hours each week on representation and society activities. Most student leaders reported they most commonly spend 1-2 hours per week on activities associated with their role, although in some cases this is as high as 11-15 hours per week. No respondent spent more than 11-15 hours per week on student leader activities.

B3. On average, how many hours per week do you spend doing student leader activities?



It is widely recognised that students often have competing demands on their time; studies, work, caring responsibilities. This restricts their ability to engage with student leader roles. Three in five students and learners have jobs alongside their studies (NUS, 2024) with 11% of students reporting considering leaving their course based on financial difficulties and 6% due to difficulty balancing study and other commitments (HEPI, 2025).

What are Student Leaders spending their time doing?

The majority (80%) of survey respondents were course reps, so it's not surprising that 'academic representation-feedback' is the most common student leader activity reported.

B2. And which of the following areas, if any, are you involved in within your role?



The survey asked student leaders what activity areas they are involved in. Options included activity we expected to see and areas that may be included in future academic community models. Academic representation, supporting students in need of advice, and general social activities appear to be relatively commonplace. Wellbeing activity is higher than anticipated with signposting to university mental health services and sharing wellbeing information being fairly common activities.

Employability, careers focused and co-curricular activities are less common among respondents. These could be opportunity areas for academic community models.

Motivations for becoming a Student Leader

Understanding student leader motivations helps us to design appropriate opportunities that are appealing to students. It should also inform our practice in how we support student leaders to ensure their experiences are meaningful and match their motivations. If students feel their interests and needs are met through their leadership position they're more likely to continue and encourage others to take on similar roles.

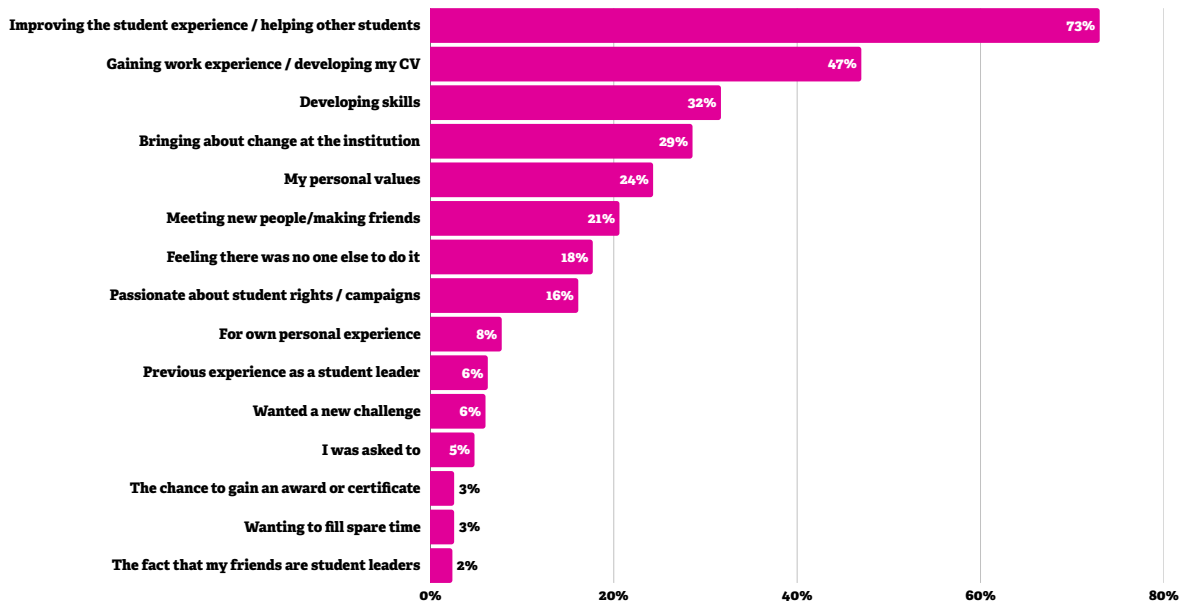
Improving the student experience or helping other students is the primary motivator for becoming a student leader, with the majority of respondents (73%) choosing this reason. Student leaders also want to gain work experience or develop their CV (47%) and skills (32%) through their role.

This shows us how important it is to design meaningful leadership opportunities where students have the ability to make things better for themselves and their peers, whilst also equipping them with skills. Promotional communications to recruit or elect new student leaders should consider the combination of skills and CV development with examples of how they could shape the student experience.

This focus on 'double benefit' (to yourself and to the cause) is a powerful message.

Benefits of the role

C1. Which of the following best describe your motivations for becoming a student leader?



We asked student leaders to tell us what they believe are the top 5 benefits they have gained/will gain from their role(s).

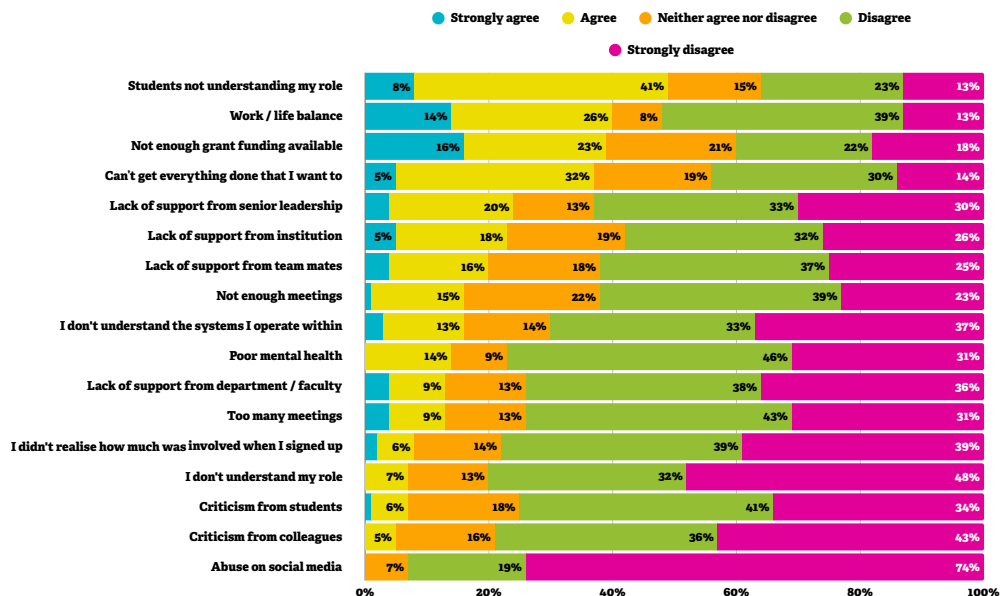
Student leaders reported:

- Increased confidence & public speaking skills
- Leadership experience & skills (e.g. managing teams and organising events)
- Enhanced communication skills (both professional and peer-based)
- Networking & building relationships (with students, staff and faculty, community building)
- Making a positive impact & helping others

Challenges facing Student Leaders

We asked student leaders to identify the challenges they face in their roles, providing a list of options from which they could select multiple responses.

C2. To what extent do you agree that the following are challenges you face within your role.



Communication

There are clearly communication challenges facing students' unions and institutions, with 'students not understanding my role' cited as the biggest single challenge for student leaders; 49% of respondents reported that they strongly agree or agree with the statement. Student leaders also reported that 'I didn't realise how much was involved when I signed up' and 'I don't understand my role' but these aren't highlighted as key challenges.

New academic community leaders would straddle the activities within traditional academic societies and representation duties, and could therefore create an opportunity for a new training offer, re-defined role profiling and allocation of SU support. When considering this, SUs should be mindful of flexibility and access to training to ensure it isn't accidentally exclusionary through being a substantial time commitment or badly designed and therefore off-putting.

Student leader work/life balance

We know from the research cited earlier in this report that students are time poor and are studying within a financial crisis. Volunteering within academic representation and societies is challenging for students who are committed to their volunteering roles. Our survey showed that 78% of student leaders faced challenges with 'work / life balance' (40% strongly agree or agree) and 'getting everything done that I wanted to' (38% strongly agree or agree).

Clearly we can move to different student leadership models, moving away from volunteering and offering part-time work or paid internships for key student leaders. However, this isn't financially sustainable or even possible for some institutions and many SUs with less capacity, particularly if we're committed to existing models. Paying hundreds of society leaders and course representatives isn't feasible.

Perhaps though, with new blended models we would design new student leadership positions that could be paid. Some SUs are trialling paid community leaders responsible for co-curricular activities, leading on representation and developing employability based events connected to their school or course. Even without an entirely new blended model there's potential for streamlining student volunteers and hopefully supporting students to feel more balanced with their responsibilities.

Structural issues

The literature review highlighted how overly complex representation systems can hinder engagement, an issue which is echoed in the survey results. Student leaders reported a lack of institutional backing (22% agreed or strongly agreed), and misunderstanding about how the system works (16% agreed or strongly agreed).

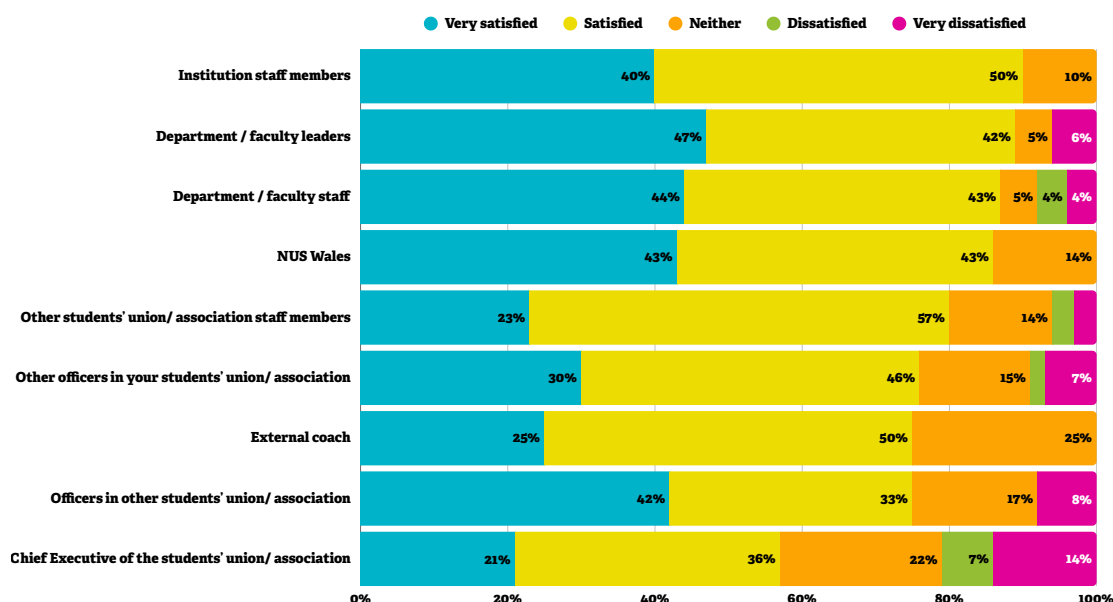
Through development of academic communities or new blended initiatives it's possible to redefine roles and to make systems clearer and easier to understand. It's an opportunity to establish buy-in from your institution and make feedback and communication channels easier to navigate.

Sources of support

We asked student leaders to consider their support networks. Unsurprisingly given the number of representatives in our student leader survey pool there was a strong connection with the academic department or faculty, who emerged as a key source of support. Most student leaders reported they seek support from their department / faculty staff (68%) and academic leaders (47%). Student leaders reported high satisfaction with their support from the department / faculty with satisfaction rates consistently higher than 87% whether their support came from department or faculty leaders or general faculty staff.

Where student leaders have engaged the Chief Executive of the students' union/association for support (18%), satisfaction is still positive (57% positive satisfaction) but generally lower than other SU team staff who 37% of students go to for additional support (80% positive satisfaction) and officers who 15% students go to for additional support (76% positive satisfaction).

Finally, peer support is also crucial for student leaders, with over 70% reporting that they would go to other student leaders within the SU / association. Encouraging peer networking (typically through training and regular socials) will foster connection across student leaders. This should be built into any blended activity. It's interesting that whilst this is a commonly accessed support network, there's room for improving the quality of support, with 76% of student leaders reporting positive satisfaction with this support. Whilst this isn't a bad rating, there's certainly room for improvement.



A range of good quality support should be accessible by student leaders. Blending academic society and student voice activity is an opportunity to enhance this. Ensuring our student leaders know who their key contacts are within the academic department or faculty whilst maintaining a positive relationship between the student leaders, the department and the SU will make this support network effective.



Part Three

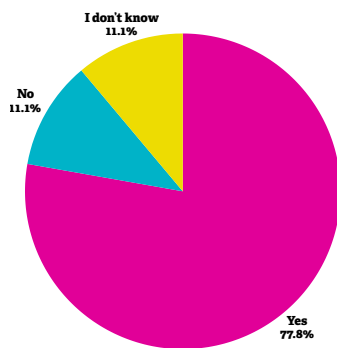
Academic Representation and Societies in Wales

In March 2025, we invited all Welsh HE students' unions to take part in a data capture survey as part of the Academic Communities Experiment. The purpose was to better understand how students' unions currently organise academic societies and academic representation, and whether these structures are working effectively. The survey also aimed to gather insights into SU size and activity levels, highlight existing challenges within current models, and identify potential opportunities for developing a more integrated or "blended" approach to student engagement. We received responses from 8 out of the 10 HE students' unions.

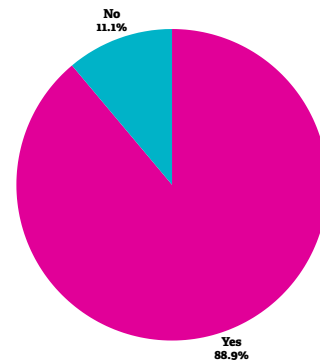
Staffing

The majority of students' unions have staff supporting and working with academic societies and academic representatives. Around half of SUs have these staff working within the same department, suggesting a fairly close working relationship or possible blended working.

A7. Do you have staff supporting and working with academic societies?



A9. Do you have staff supporting and working with academic representatives?



Within the institutions, 2 SUs reported that the faculty/school have dedicated student experience staff who work with academic societies.

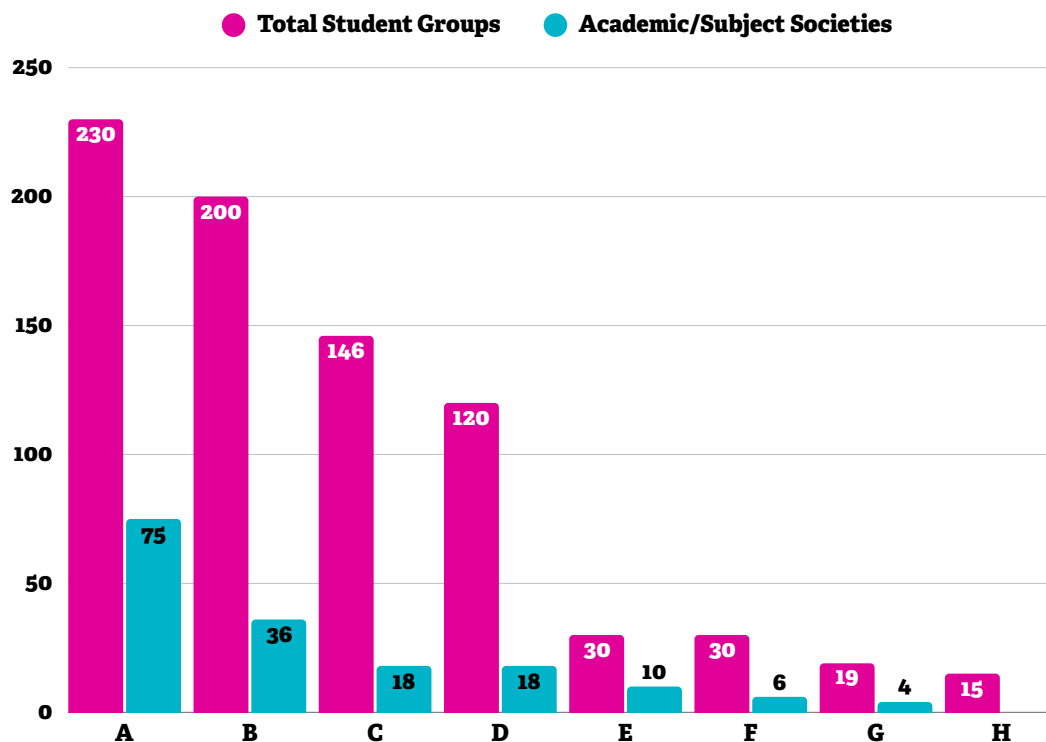
Academic societies

The number of student groups affiliated with SUs ranges from 15 to 230 and the academic/subject societies affiliated ranges from 0 to 75. This variance is usually down to the size of the student cohort and the capacity of the SU to facilitate and provide opportunities for students. On average academic/subject societies make up 19% of all student groups across all SUs surveyed. We haven't compared this against other types of student groups (e.g. hobbies or cultural societies) but we know from other research that besides sports clubs, academic/subject societies typically make up the largest proportion of student groups in an HEI SU.

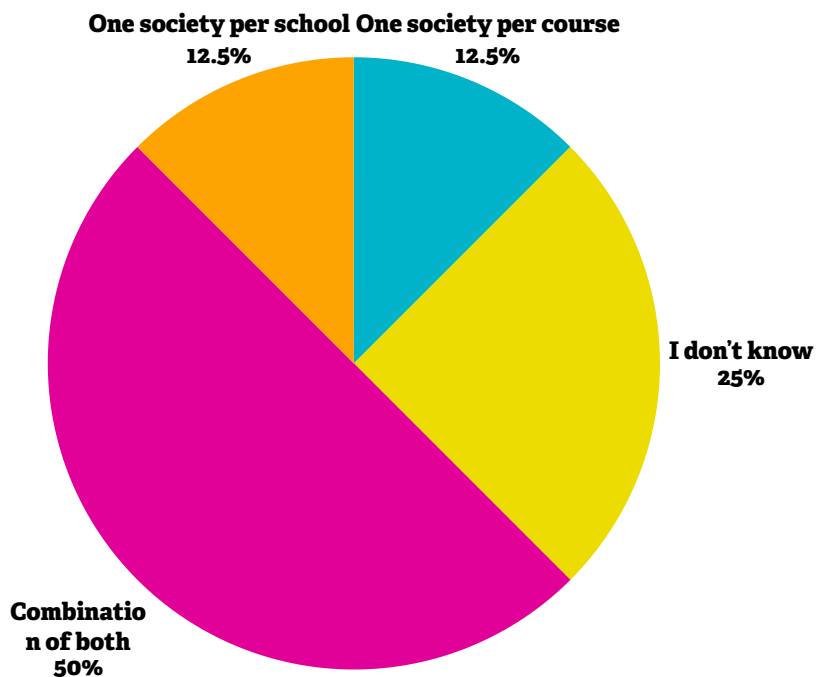
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A5. How many student groups do you have in total?

B1. How many academic societies/subject societies do you have in total?



B3. Please describe how your academic societies/subject societies are organised.



Academic/subject societies are not organised consistently across different HEIs. Societies can be representing a course or a school. In 3 SUs, academic/subject society memberships are free; the others encourage these societies to charge a membership fee and some set a lower limit for membership fees.

Challenges with academic societies

We asked 'What sort of challenges, if any, do you currently face with your academic societies work?' and have grouped the responses under three key themes.

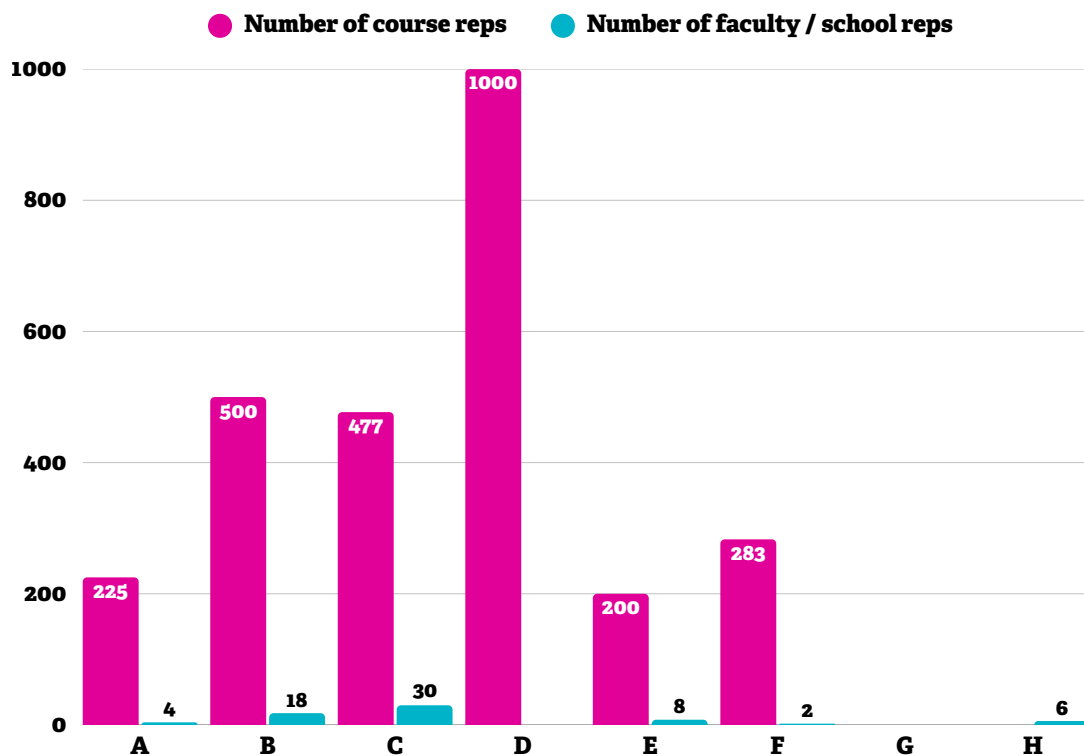
Theme	Example Challenges Identified
Student Engagement & Participation	• Low engagement / membership • Some subjects have no societies • Niche societies struggling to stay afloat • Lack of relationship with Voice team • Disconnect from Academic Rep system • Difficulty encouraging students to start societies • Student availability impacted by placements • University places low priority on academic societies
Resources & Infrastructure	• Limited budgets / funding • Lack of access to equipment and facilities • Lack of bookable rooms and space on campus • Staffing capacity • Balancing responsibilities (staff and students) • Cost of living pressures impacting participation • General resource constraints
Clarity & Consistency of Purpose and Support	• Unclear whether societies are academic, social or employability focused • Inconsistency in support across faculties • Ownership of student-on-student complaints related to academic matters • Inconsistent activity levels across societies • Unclear expectations for collaboration between university and societies • Event planning challenges

Academic Representation

The number of course reps ranges from 225 to 1,000 with most HEIs having multiple reps per course/ programme. In 50% of HEIs course representatives are elected (with the other 50% being selected).

The number of faculty/school reps ranges from 30 to 0 and it's worth noting that the SU supporting 1,000 course reps doesn't have any faculty/school reps.

C1. How many course reps do you have?
C6. How many faculty/school reps do you have?



We asked survey respondents to tell us the main 5 typical activities of course reps and faculty/school reps. We've summarised these below thematically.

Activity Area	Course Reps	Faculty/School Reps
Gathering Student Feedback	- Talk to students - Use surveys, social media, WhatsApp groups to gather feedback - Organise feedback events - Collate and analyse feedback - Promote feedback methods and rep system	- Gather feedback from Course Reps - Organise focus groups/surveys - Collect/report student feedback to higher levels - Promote NSS and other surveys - Run school-wide feedback events
Representing Students in Meetings	- Attend Student-Staff meetings - Attend course boards - Attend SU Council/Senedd	- Sit on higher-level committees - Chair/co-chair committees - Attend SU Academic Rep events/conferences - Attend SU Council/Senedd
Working in Partnership with Staff/SU	- Discuss feedback and solutions with staff - Act as link between staff and students - Support Speak Week - Feed into campaigns and elected officers' work	- Advocate for faculty/departmental issues - Campaign on faculty-relevant issues - Work with Course Reps to escalate issues - Work with SU on projects - Promote the SU
Promoting Rep System & SU	- Promote rep system and feedback tools - Support SU campaigns and events - Run events to promote the rep system - Create social media content - Attend SU training/events	- Promote course rep system and NSS/surveys - Attend SU academic rep events - Represent faculty in SU spaces - Chair or lead events - Mentor/support course reps
Leadership & Development	- Attend training - Participate in SU events - Feed into wider SU work	- Attend training/workshops - Chair meetings - Lead events - Model leadership for Course Reps - Develop partnerships with staff & SU

We asked students' unions,
'What challenges do you currently face with your academic representation work?'

These can broadly be summarised under three themes:

1. Student Leader Engagement & Participation

- Patchy provision - some reps engage, others don't
- Balancing multiple responsibilities
- Lack of community for reps
- Low motivation
- Difficulty gathering constructive feedback
- Reps have limited capacity for bigger campaigns/events

2. Systems & Support

- Limited influence or support in university spaces
- Confidence/courage to speak in higher-level meetings
- Staff willingness to listen and change based on feedback
- Hard to judge impact of reps
- Duplication of feedback channels
- Institution staff misunderstanding SU role / academic representation
- Lack of communication between reps and staff leading to unclear expectations

3. Inconsistent support from elected sabbatical officers

- Quantity of reps vs staff ratio
- Wider student engagement
- Inconsistency across programmes/schools
- Relevance of feedback gathered
- Integration and use of feedback platforms
- Lack of engagement from wider student body
- Feedback loop not closed properly

Welsh Student Voice Project
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nus *charity*
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