

Representation Review Findings

OU STUDENTS ASSOCIATION

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Committee Staff – Rep Review 2019

Which committee(s) responded to the survey?

11 responses from Boards of Studies across the faculties

6 responses from Institutional Committees (only those that have student representatives as members)

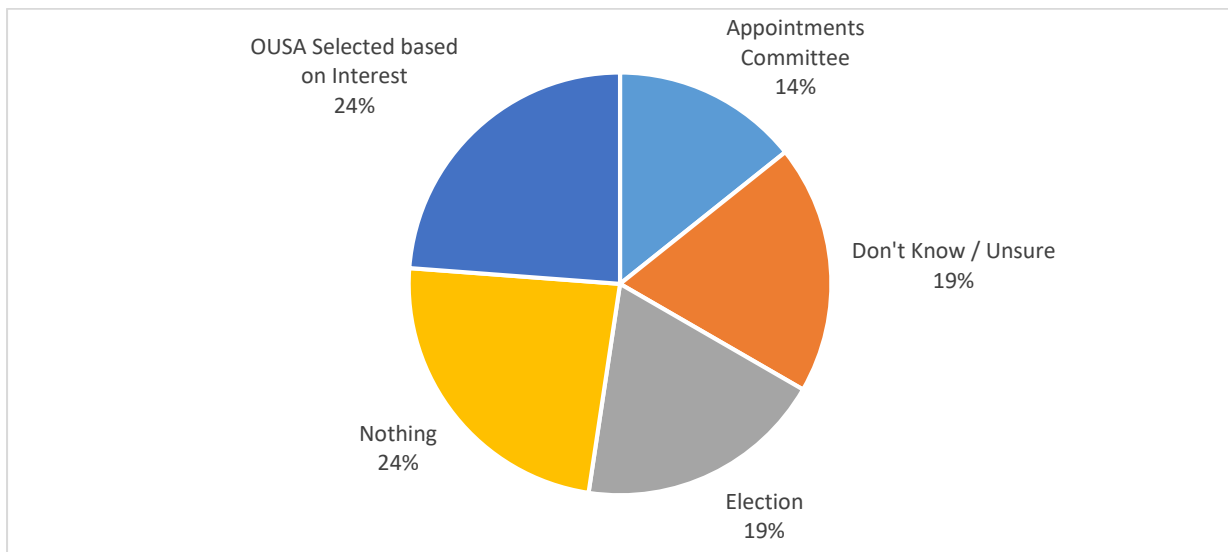
7 responses from all Teaching Committees

Question One: On your committee, you have Central Committee Representatives (CCR) appointed by the Students Association. Their role is to share their individual views and not seek to represent the views of other students. Were you aware that CCRs are only appointed to act as an individual?

Yes – 65% No – 35%

(Staff understanding of the CCR role - whether they represent their individual or collective views - may be influenced by the ‘representative’ at the end of the role title.)

Question Two: What do you know about the recruitment and selection process for Central Committee Representatives?



It was not surprising to see that only 14% of responders knew that the Students Association have an student Appointment Committee, as it has been only recently that efforts have been made to share this information, which includes the processes, principles and the role of that committee on oustudents.com. A large percentage were unsure or did not know anything about our recruitment and selection of CCRs (43% of responses), however they did not indicate that they had a willingness to know more about our current ways of working. Comments included that sometimes the OU works in partnership with the Students Association to promote the role of CCR, however this is more relevant to the Boards of Studies and the Graduate School where the Association actively shares a promotion pack – which for some is utilised and shared on social media and webpages specific to that school / faculty. There was a call in the responses for committees to have a better understanding of

the recruitment and selection process for CCRs, and that it would be useful to know more about the Appointments Committee and the way in which it operates.

Question Three: What do you understand the role of a Central Committee Representative to be?

- **Student Voice / Perspective (individual) – 43%.**
This is where the respondent feels that the representatives are giving their own views only
- **Play a full part in the Committee – 32%.**
Where the respondent feels that representatives are full committee members (specifically states that they engage in discussions)
- **Student Voice / Perspective (collective) - 14%.**
This is where the respondent feels that the representatives are expressing a view held by other students
- **Unclear / unsure – 7%.**
Where the respondent is not aware
- **Feedback to students – 4%.**
Where the respondent feels that representatives keep other students informed

One of the things we could investigate is whether the answers about recruitment in Q2 are indicative of a wider belief that CCRs represent the collective student viewpoint. For example, we could check if those who said 'No' in Q1 (they weren't aware that CCRs are only appointed to act as an individual) were the same respondents who chose the 'Elections' option in Q2 and the 'Student voice/perspective (collective)' option in Q3.

Question Four: How are student views sought on your committees?

In some cases, committees have explained how their members of the committee or chairs have explicitly invited student input and commentary during the meeting itself – however some have also commented that invitation to the meeting / committee itself and access to papers is also a way in which students views are sought (without mentioning student contribution to the meetings). Occasionally when business has dictated, CCRs have been asked to comment on matters by correspondence and in ad-hoc email exchange. In a few comments, the person who is requesting feedback is usually the Chair of the meeting / committee. Many explained that the views of CCRs are sought in the same way as any other member (in which all members of a committee should be treated the same with equal responsibilities).

“However, in cases the chair has directly asked the student reps for their view on something. This doesn't happen often though, and may have made at least one of the students uncomfortable.”

“At Teaching Committee, students receive papers and comment during the meeting. This is pretty similar at the Board of Studies although we are more active in asking students what they think on particular topics.”

Some CCRs have the opportunities to be briefed by the Deputy Chair / Chair in advance of each meeting in order to have the opportunity to ask questions in what is described as a “less intimidating” environment. Other support has included students having a session with the Chair held on Adobe Connect where CCRs can meet prior to their committee. This

method also enables the Chair to encourage them to contribute as they wish to the meeting. Another Chair has mentioned how emails are sent to CCRs beforehand, asking if there are any particular issues related to the agenda they would like to raise.

In one instance, it was mentioned that CCRs are invited to nominate items for the agenda, and that the other student representatives who sometimes join as guests at meetings are also invited to contribute (there was no explanation of the role of “student guest”). There was a mention of reliance on gaining student feedback from the Student Consultation forums, Facebook, websites, and student feedback via module forums, subject site forums and Day Schools, however only one gave feedback as to how this supported the CCRs contributions to the meetings. One committee mentioned that Associate Lecturers are also frequently asked to pass on student feedback and their Boards of Studies have developed a collective 'student voice' action plan.

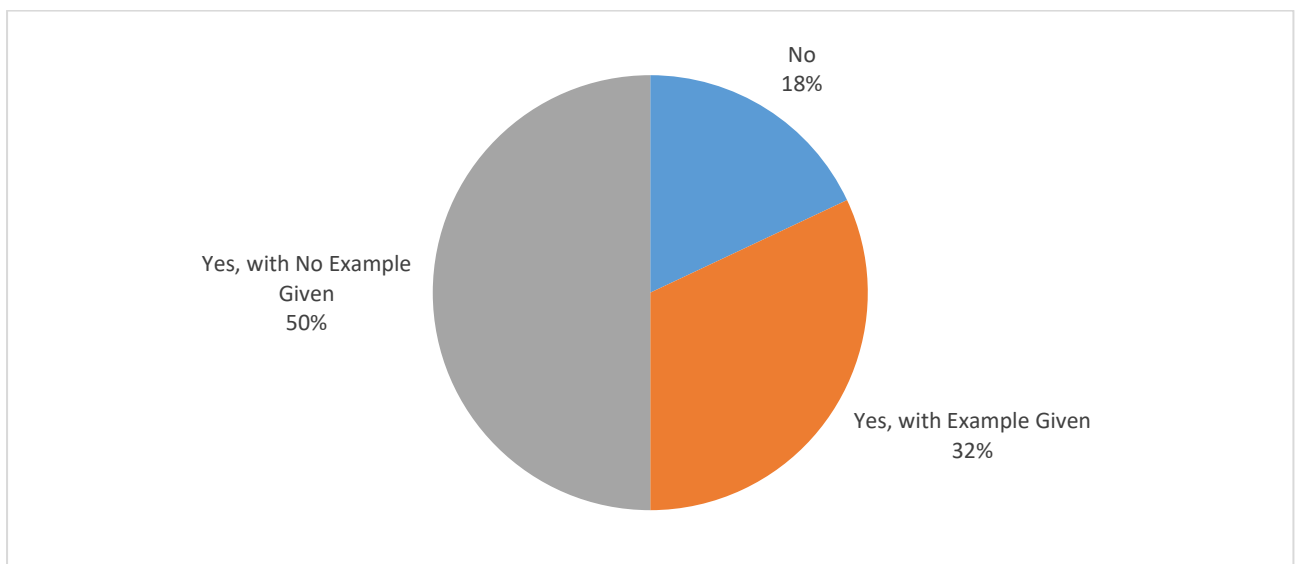
One member of a committee was unsure of how representative the CCR view was:

“Well, I thought they were sought via the student reps, but apparently not. So I guess overall views are not really sought, just the views of 2 specific students.”

It’s worrying that reps’ contributions may be dismissed as unrepresentative of the wider student body or as being ‘anecdotal’. Even while acknowledging that CCRs don’t have a mandate from the student body, it’s still possible for reps to show that they are aware of broad trends within student feedback.

While the different channels mentioned in response to Q4 were about how the committee seeks student views, these are also channels that our CCRs should be aware of (especially with the BoS consultations).

Question Five: Are Central Committee Representative views influential? Can you provide an examples?



This question was asked as it can be difficult at times for current representatives to recognise the impact of their contribution, and although ‘Student Voice’ might feature within the annual Quality Monitoring Enhancement reports – there is still work to do to understand how CCR views are reported on systematically.

50% of the responses that we received from committees stated “Yes – Views were influential” but there was a struggle for the responders to find an example, or pull one from existing literature/ resources. These results demonstrates that although our students are involved and active committee members – it is difficult to assess and identify where their student voice has made a difference. At present, we are aware that their student voice is absorbed into the facilitation of the meeting, meaning that demonstrating a clear route of their impact can be a challenge. This challenge is consistent across all committees with CCR activity.

Examples from Committee Staff included:

“Yes - we take the views of CCRs very seriously in developing our strategy etc.”

“I recall that for XX the CCR expressed some concerns and sought clarification about the potential for loss of research areas and the effect this might have on existing students and actions to mitigate the risk.”

“Their strong views on print vs digital study materials influenced the choice of materials strategy on new level 1 modules.”

“Their positive feedback on our initiatives such as student buddies and our induction programme have encouraged us to continue with them.”

“Yes they are, particularly where the views are seen as representing a wider-held sentiment among our students rather than arise from perhaps rather specific circumstances of the CCR’s own experience.”

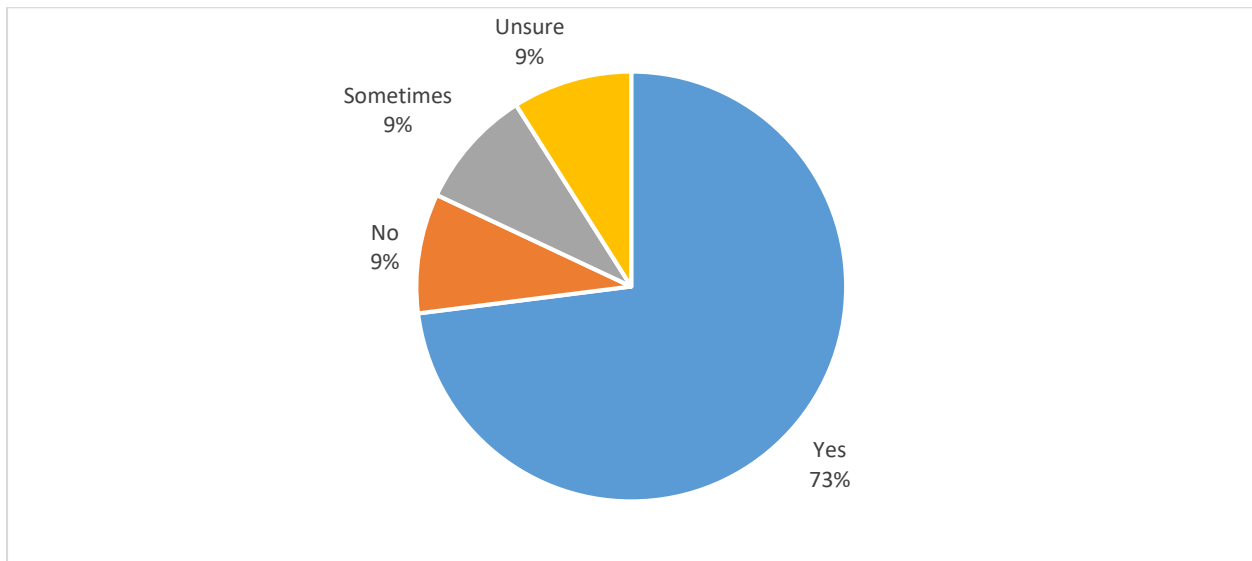
“A good example has been in influencing the Faculty’s approach to the TEF.”

The need to evidence the impact of reps’ contribution are important to both the Association and the Committees, and committee staff could be invited to take a more active role in terms of identifying how the reps’ view are feeding into their decision-making. While it may be difficult to pinpoint activities/policies that have been directly introduced/changed because of reps’ views (50% choosing yes, but with no examples in Q5), such contributions still need to be minuted/logged within the committee. This ‘impact measuring’ is something that can be built into the future Code of Practice. An example found online was from the University of Sheffield’s Code of Practice for Student Academic Representation, which recommends that committees should:

“Present a summation of the student voice for the academic session and highlight key areas that have been raised throughout the academic session” (p.6, point 10.4)

If something similar is put in practice, at the end of each academic year both the OU and the Students Association would be able to pick highlights and identify common themes within reps’ contributions at committee meetings. This would then go towards closing the two feedback loops: between the committees and student reps, and between the student reps as a whole and the wider student community.

Question Six: Do Central Committee Representatives make a good contribution to all of the relevant items on your committees?



This was really positive to see, and also demonstrates the willingness of our CCRs to understand and interpret complex items, and engage on these topics at committees. However there was commentary that this can be mixed, with the same representatives attending the same committees, and also some students perhaps do not contribute due to confidence or due to the vast amount of items on the agenda. There was also an acknowledgement that some volunteers need to be prompted to join the discussion at an appropriate time.

Commentary from Committee Staff included:

“The CCR could potentially comment on more of the items brought to the Committee and bring a student perspective to those. It might be worth asking the CCR (a) if they think that would be useful and (b) how we could help them to do so.”

“Yes, my experience has been that they always read their papers thoroughly and engage with the committee discussion.”

“They make a contribution that is as good and valuable as all other members of the Board.”

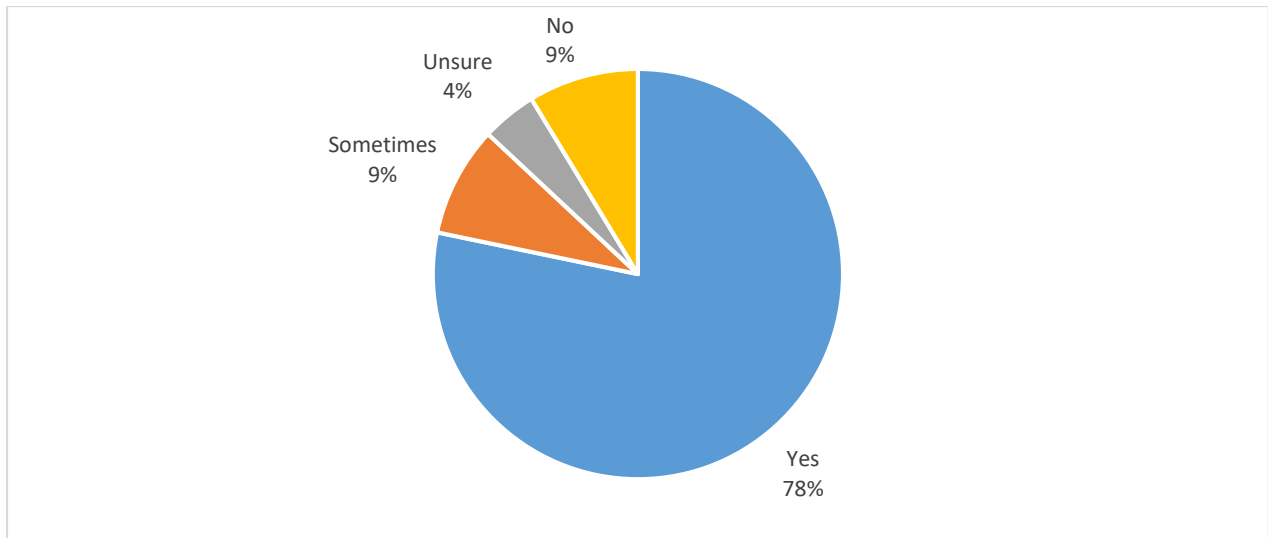
“Mixed. I think it takes time for a new rep to have the confidence to speak, so we possibly should invite them to more often.”

Question Seven: Do Central Committee Representatives drive their own agendas, or are they steered by other members, or do they speak on behalf of the wider student body?

- **Bringing forward a wider viewpoint – 39%.**
As in referring to other students’ views as well as their own
- **Providing an individual viewpoint – 26%.**
As in putting forward their own views in the wider debate
- **Other – 22%.**
Unclear or uncertain

- **Drive their own agenda - 9%.**
As in raising issues without reference to other students / reps
- **Working as committee members – 4%.**
Using their skills, experience and wider student views but taking a holistic view as to what is best for the University

Question eight: Do Central Committee Representatives introduce relevant items for discussion, or produce any reports for your committee? If not - What would be useful for them to bring?



Commentary from Committee Staff included:

“At the moment yes - although in the past we have had some CCRs that haven't contributed to any of the discussions.”

“My experience has been that they always read their papers thoroughly and engage with the committee discussion.”

“I think it takes time for a new rep to have the confidence to speak, so we possibly should invite them more often. We have nearly 40 members so the committee does feel quite formal.”

“It is always a good wake-up call/reminder of a student perspective.”

“They make a contribution that is as good and valuable as all other members of the Board.”

Question Nine: How might the capacity and competence of these representatives be developed to enable meaningful participation?

Suggestions from Committee Staff included:

1. That the committee provides the opportunity to go through and understand the context of the papers prior to the meeting with the Deputy Chair if useful to the CCR. One committee has online / skype meetings with the Chair and their CCRs which form their perspective, and has an impact on improving the CCRs confidence.
2. That Representatives have an appropriate knowledge of the curriculum and that the relevant school should be involved in 'vetting' the CCR applications.
3. That committees produce more guidance on what the papers / reports actually mean and identify the important parts of use to the CCRs. This would also be alongside committees providing more direction on the type of constructive input that the committee would be seeking from the student. (This would help the Students Association identify relevant sources of information for reps and build general awareness of student feedback channels into reps' training.)
4. That the OU staff are more involved in training and induction activities, and that Committee secretaries should be providing CCRs with an induction to their committee and the people on it.
5. That chairs of committee take an interest in actively seeking the view of students via the CCRs, and proactively invite commentary during the meetings.
6. That due to the length of some papers, the representatives could split the business between themselves, so focus on a few items each. This would allow each CCR at the meeting to speak on an item, and allow for 'unheard' representatives to have a space to be listened to over more vocal CCRs.
7. That representatives could be provided with examples of the work/contributions of past Central Committee Representatives.
8. That there is more stability in the team of representatives in terms of those who are attending meetings, which will allow greater team work and partnership between the representatives. (This is possibly due to the 3 appointed and 2 attend rule.)

OU Staff – Rep Review 2019

What groups of staff responded to this survey?

- 44% STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths)
- 32% Administrative and Other Units
- 12% FASS (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences)
- 8% FBL (Business and Law)
- 4% WELS (Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies)

Question One: What do you believe the university is doing to promote and heed the OU Student Voice?

Staff responses to this question mostly listed the different channels for inviting student feedback. A few responses also offered specific examples of student engagement, mentioned the importance of sharing student feedback internally within the OU, and highlighted areas of concern such as gaps in student support or the perception that the elected student leadership team are ‘too cosy’ with the VCE.

Routes of promoting Student Voice

Respondents listed a number of channels used within the OU for Student Voice activities, as shown in the word cloud below. The open-ended answers have been standardised to gauge the popularity of these channels; for example, phrases like ‘reps on committees’, ‘students on committees’ and ‘committee meetings’ are all standardised as *Student reps on committees*. This has helped in getting an idea of the frequency with which these channels were mentioned.



The most common routes of promoting and heeding OU Student Voice were student reps on committees surveys , OUSA (or engaging with the Students Association) and consultations (face-to-face and online consultations).

This is heartening as it indicates good awareness of the work being done by student representatives, as well as routes of inviting feedback from the wider student community through consultations.

However, there were some surprises in the feedback; the OU's Student Voice website and Module forums received 3 mentions each, while the National Student Survey (NSS) received only 1 mention. The Student Voice Website is a platform that brings together various surveys and 'you said we did' responses, the module forums are open to all students to give informal feedback, and the NSS questions relate to some of the key metrics of undergraduate student satisfaction. The very few mentions of these channels are worrying, as they might be indicative of poor communications with staff.

Examples of Student Engagement

A few respondents offered specific examples of student engagement, which point to good practice in terms of going through both formal channels offered by the Association (such as the Disabled Students' Group) and designing student panels to invite feedback from the wider student body. Respondents also highlighted how student feedback was being used for enhancement activities such as improving the support offered by frontline staff.

"There are many initiatives and a strong team who are leading and promoting student voice activities. The Learning Design team runs a Curriculum Design Student Panel of around 1900 students, who provide input to module design."

"In SeGA we work hard to make sure disabled students are involved in our activity. We attend the OUSA Inclusion Group and we have student representation on many of our groups, with plans for more. We work closely with the Disabled Students Group and OUSA student reps, often asking them ad-hoc questions and to contribute to key issues as they arise."

"The University is looking at student surveys and data from courses, changing the way that courses are delivered, the course assignments are being overhauled, more support emotionally and academically is being given with the help of front line staff."

Sharing student feedback and related communications

Respondents mentioned the need for better sharing of information within the university, both in terms of signposting staff to student feedback and also facilitating conversations around how student feedback can inform ongoing work at the OU (so that staff can engage meaningfully with student feedback). Respondents were also aware of the need to close the feedback loop with the wider student body.

"Great pockets of good practice across the OU but this needs to be more prominent to those working in developing and delivering elements that contribute to the student experience."

"Offering several formal and informal feedback mechanisms and consultative forums. Not clear if any actions are taken and how these actions are communicated to students."

"There are ad hoc consolations around new curriculum but these are more hit and miss, or ad hoc events such as Psychology's OUSA-OUPS campus event 6 October 2018. Real-time feedback is promising but is arguably too heavily policed by SRPP rather than allowing module teams to talk more freely to students and get instant feedback."

This feedback around revisiting the processes through which student feedback is taken forward within the university has a strong overlap with the responses categorised as **(Systems and Processes) “Yes, but...”** under Q4.

Areas of concern: Gap in student support

One respondent mentioned difficulties in receiving and responding to student feedback on areas such as support for disabled students. The comment highlights two concerns about the systems in place:

- the need for student feedback to be collected in a way that trends can be identified and addressed, rather than left for individual staff members to deal with.
- Enhancement activities in response to student feedback to include improved staff training, who are then able to better advise students.

“I don't think the voice of students with disabilities is heard loud enough. We are often left to try to find a way forward for these students on an individual basis, often when it is too late to succeed or the student is too disheartened by their experience. We also have consistently not resourced disability support adequately or trained frontline staff adequately to understand issues, question/explore and refer appropriately.”

Areas of concern: Representativeness of Association Student Voice

Respondents raised concerns about the representativeness of the Student Voice within the Students Association:

“I think it listens to a small group of students who are not representative of the wider body. OUSA doesn't challenge. People often talk about the OUSA reps 'cosying up' to VCE. I fear they are too easily influenced by senior members of staff.”

“Very little beyond the very small number of students in OUSA, the vast majority of students have no say in anything.”

The representativeness of student feedback is also highlighted in the feedback to Q2 and Q5. The perception of ‘OUSA representatives’ as somehow being separate to the ‘wider student body’ (Q2) is worrying, as is the feeling amongst OU staff members that a minority of students take up most of the volunteering roles (Q5). The latter issue was also highlighted in the Volunteering Research Project conducted by the Association; an individual student representative undertaking several roles at once is problematic not only due to the demands placed on the student, but also because it gives the impression that the full range of student opinion is being lost. In the context of how the Open University is heeding student feedback, more needs to be done to ensure that the ‘informal channels’ mentioned by staff respondents are made more visible, and well as the feedback channels other than student representatives on committees.

Areas of concern: Staff Awareness

Staff awareness of Student Voice activity also emerged as a potential area of concern; this was especially worrying when the respondents identified themselves as Associate Lecturers, as they are often the main point of contact for students. The responses to Q3 touch on staff awareness, too, and taken together the answers to Q1 and Q3 suggest a need to help staff identify different ways through which they can access student feedback (such as consultation summaries or by visiting the Student Voice website).

“As an AL I'm unsure”

"I know there are student representatives on various bodies - such as Senate. As a central academic, my (only) day to day contact with undergraduate students is on the module forums."

Question Two: What Student Voice is being heard? Are the current methods only accessible to particular student groups?

- Around 40% of the responses suggest that the Student Voice is selective as it is mainly already engaged students commenting, completing surveys and providing their feedback.
- 1 response stated that "No students are being listened to"
- 16% of responses "Did not know"

It could be suggested that whilst the survey responses show that some students are involved in university decision making, it is a very small number in comparison to the wider student population, with regularly engaged students being active in giving their Student Voice. 16% of the responses stated that they didn't know if current methods for collecting student opinion were only accessible to particular student groups, whilst a majority raised that all students can be heard via their elected representatives and the Students Association (but the Student Voice this provides can be relatively small.)

Whilst there are opportunities for students to relay their Student Voice back to the university on differing matters via the Student Consultative forums and speaking to Association elected representatives (Central Executive Committee), there is a need for these activities to be more visual as the wider student population may not know where to look for opportunities to be heard, or have their feedback acted on.

"I think the students who are willing/able to spend the time making significant contributions are a self-selecting group that may not be representative of the wider student population."

"There seem to be a few students who have the time in the day and short travel distances to come to meetings. Remote participation is always possible but I am not aware of students using that so much."

"There is a wide variety of opportunities for engagement including formal and informal ways that should help in enabling students from different backgrounds to get involved."

"OUSA is represented but it is a challenge to reach the wider student body."

"Some channels (e.g. student reps on BoS) are limited; others are potentially open (Student Consultative Forums)."

Question Three: If no Student Voice activity appears apparent, why might this be?

The responses from this question can be split into three areas. 1.) There is activity, 2.) Why there isn't activity and 3.) Those that are unaware or require further information to answer.

Responders said that if the Student Voice does not appear apparent, that this could be down to a lack of knowledge about how students can be involved in structured opportunities, or that the student body is unaware of the mechanisms that are in place that facilitate the Student Voice (e.g SEAM). Another opinion is that student feedback is not communicated about enough with the wider staff teams, and that as the OU is such a large organisation and

can be difficult to get the message across to multiple stakeholders. It was also stated that students might have a limited time to engage with surveys, and that current surveys have very low response and engagement rates.

“End of module surveys (SEaM) usually have very low return rates - often only 1 or 2 students out of groups of 20 - why is this??”

“Too many students are busy they may not have time to 'speak' or vent about the university; fear of reprisals?”

“There is Student Voice activity. One issue is how connected and committed senior management is in hearing it. Voice matters most to people when they have unmet concerns. Understandably we see most activity from students seeking to have their voices heard when they have deep concerns.”

“N/A: our students generally engage when feedback is requested (or the opportunity is presented to them).”

A large number of responses stated that they did not understand the question or did not know. This again, could be due to a lack of knowledge or that staff members have when not directly engaged with students due to the nature of their work.

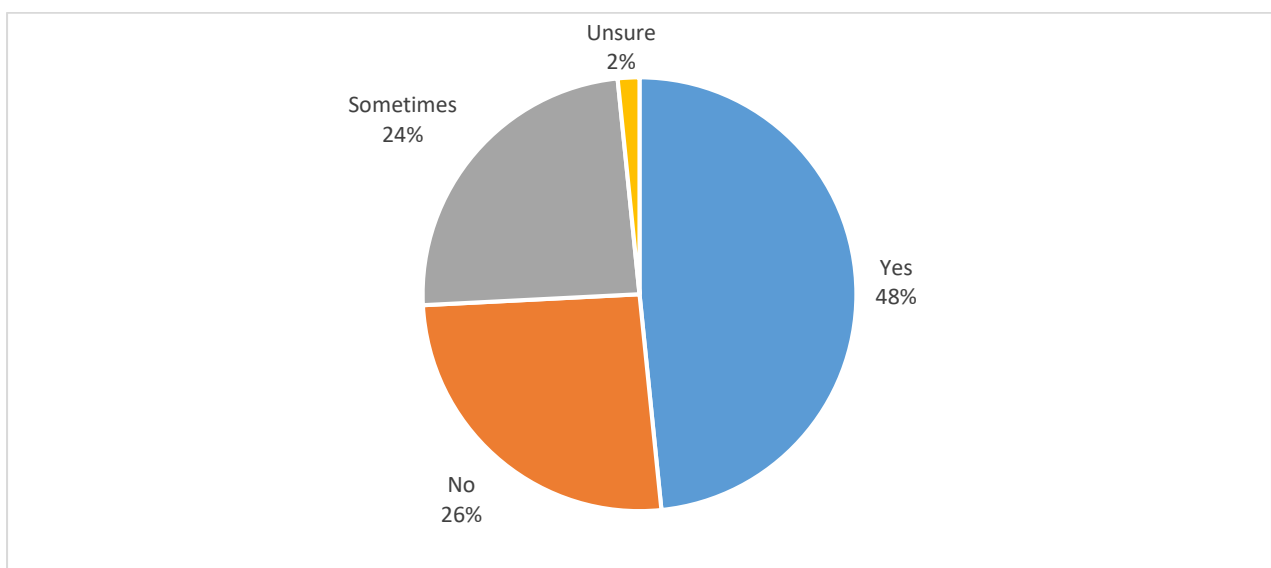
“Maybe because staff in my department are not really involved in it. Which is odd, as I work with students all day every day.”

“Perhaps feedback from students is not shared widely enough with staff? I definitely think communication could be better around this. Perhaps it is only academic staff that are directly involved in teaching that receive this information?”

The Association was mentioned in that it was stated the web links to the organisation / opportunities for students to be involved in student voice activities were not prominent enough, and it could be difficult for students to engage due to feeling disenfranchised.

“The OUSA exec are too close to VCE and too willing to agree to any proposals that VCE tell them are a good idea.”

Question Four: Does the culture of the Open University foster the development of Student Voice?



Whilst it was encouraging to see that nearly half of responders stated “Yes” to the question, a lot of the responses had a second part to it explaining their response with a follow up:

(Listening to Students / Culture) “Yes, but... “

- Senior management are separated from frontline student activity, and as a result only “listens” to students when it is in their interest
- The culture of the OU makes it difficult for students to find a named person to talk to when a particular issue needs to be raised
- There is a “fear” of working directly with students
- Efforts made to listen to student views are not inclusive enough, and only a few individuals are consulted

“Senior managers are struggling to do what they 'need to do' and student (and staff) voices, even if important, are secondary.”

(Systems and Processes) “Yes, but... “

- There are issues getting students to engage online in OU systems
- Student Voice is over-managerial and process-driven, rather than genuine partnership
- The OU lacks practical tools for managing feedback from very large student communities and cohort sizes
- Masses of data and results from surveys are difficult to contextualise without a joined up approach or direction

“It is difficult because OU students are generally time poor. We need to make it easier to get their voice to feed through. The use of Moodle forums which are clunky and time-consuming to use in all applications puts people off getting more involved in discussions.”

(Enabling Voice) “Yes, but... “

- There are a lack of face to face opportunities to speak to students
- Student views in module forums or on Facebook accounts are not valued.
- The Student Voice may be heard but acting on it is not so clear
- No budget to talk to students is an issue

“The culture does, though distance education necessarily involves some degree of separation between educators and students, which may be a barrier to effective feedback.”

Whilst the OU is a distance learning organisation, (and that in itself poses some barriers in terms of developing a proactive culture of listening and responding to Student Voice) there need to be efforts made to join up the formal and informal means of communication, and the reams of student feedback that currently exist. In some of the comments, there was also a common theme that Student Voice needed to be coming at ‘Grassroots’ level from students themselves, rather than taking part in opportunities to give feedback on topics set by Senior Management.

Further Commentary from Staff:

“Absolutely - much more than other universities that I have worked for.”

“No, I think students who are already good communicators or get very upset are heard, but I haven’t seen anything about helping students develop their voice to make changes.”

“I believe it does at the module level. I think students are less engaged at qualification level or above.”

“Yes I believe it does, as it is the students that we are working for, so that the education is accessible to all, no matter what previous educational background, disability, ethnicity, age, gender etc.”

“Difficult to tell how much a representative OU student voice went into OU redesign work, for example.”

“The OU’s ethos should allow the Student Voice to flourish, but we may still need a cultural shift to enable a bottom-up approach within the governance structure.”

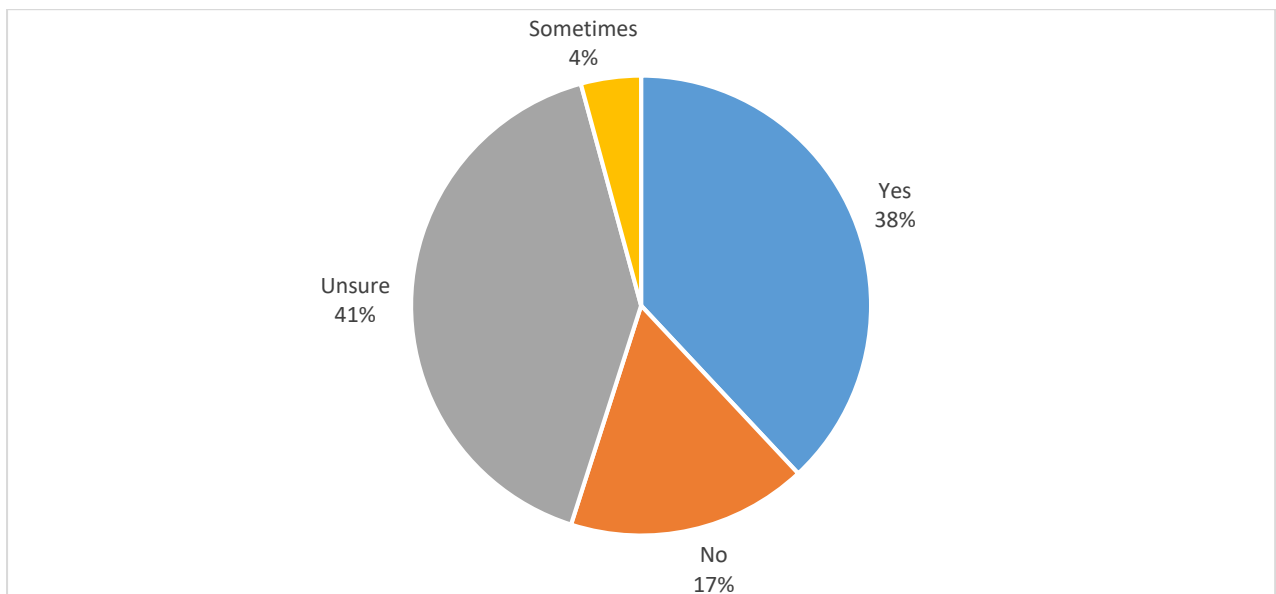
“The culture of the OU is moving towards listening to the Student Voice, but there is still a strong current of “we’re the experts and we know best.”

“It tries, but could do more to embed it - student reps as part of module development, for example.”

“Apart from small pockets where budget holders avoid student voice just in case it leads to a requirement for extra spending (yes I know of a specific example where a project manager specifically said not to use developmental testing or student panel consultation just in case it leads to extra development to meet students’ needs).”

“Not really no. Just take PGR students as an example- practically nothing is said about them or acknowledges their existence except what is pushed out of the graduate school - and these students are on campus and deeply embedded in faculties. The University seems to have a blind spot there, and that’s probably not dissimilar for all students - we do a lot of naval gazing here and I sometimes wonder if we all remember that we are a university.”

Question Five: Does the culture of the Students Association foster the development of Student Voice?



There was positive feedback indicating that at present the Students Association feels positive and collaborative, and staff have awareness that the Association has played a key role in the recent Student Voice initiatives at the OU. This however to some has not come without its struggles.

There were further comments that the organisation needs to ensure it is making efforts to represent the wider student body, and that staff have expressed that it has previously been difficult to approach the Students Association in order to get 'genuine' feedback from students.

There was also a piece of feedback that stated that whilst some of the students that are activity engaged in the Association with very clear and strong voices, their views (and the views of the organisation) might reflect a minority of students as there is low take up of students engaging with the organisation. This might be due to lack of awareness of students not realising that they are a member of the Association. It was also mentioned that whilst the Association has opportunities for those who have the time and inclination to be involved in work, there was a concern that some student representatives take on too many roles.

There were also comments that both expressed that the organisation should grow and develop, which would be helpful for student participation and engagement, however one response said the organisation was an expensive cost – and instead of funding the Association, more efforts should be made to develop the tutor / student relationship.

“It does as information is sent out on a regularly so that students can read, and become involved in activities, or comment on information about The Open University. It is up to the individual to decide how actively they participate.”

“I'm not sure as I'm not very familiar of the OUSA culture so may not be best judge of this. There perhaps should be opportunities for more voices other than the president's be heard at Walton Hall / Regional events.”

“It sometimes looks like a small business and has all the issues facing a small business and you could again forget that it is in fact a student focused business and see it (as with all student unions/guilds/associations) as a political body.”

Question Six: Are there clear processes for involving students in decision-making, or are they informed or consulted on decisions that have already been made?

There was some belief that there were clear processes for students to be involved in decision making, and that partnership did exist. However the majority of the commentary and feedback to this question was either neutral or negative, and said that students were informed of decisions at a later stage. There was an understanding throughout the responses that the University is attempting to move towards a more partnership style of working, but at present it probably does focus more on consultations on decisions that have already been reached - rather than valuing and embedding real partnership.

“I don't think students have a voice in decision making nor am I too aware as to where students can best go to actually pursue change.”

Mostly the feedback to this question indicated that amongst staff there is a feeling that student involvement is not consistent, and that there is not a standard approach – with each faculty or unit instead sometimes attempting to design a process that will suit them rather than getting consistent advice on how to involve students.

There were several suggestions as to why student involvement in decision making is unclear or non-existent:

- Low student engagement and awareness on the activity that is available for students to give their feedback
- Because of the nature of distance learning students
- OU processes are too complex
- Working timescales are limited and inviting student views can be difficult to suit these
- The culture of the OU (staff are also informed rather than involved)
- Anxiety / caution about what decisions students can be involved with making
- Overwhelmed staff teams
- No consistency or core activity to identify issues at a root level
- Lack of joined up information, feedback and data
- There is an ability to listen to different group, but it is hard to act on feedback

The Student Consultation process was highlighted as a good example of involving students in decision making with the understanding that the team have aimed to integrate the student voice at all levels. However there were comments that whilst this is a good activity to engage students with, and it does have influence – Awareness among students could be low, and that opportunities are difficult to find. ¹There was feedback that emails that have been sent to students, remain largely unopened. There were further comments about consultations with staff being unclear about what student views are representative, what decisions have been implemented, and whether consultation activity is tokenistic.

“I’ve recently been involved in moderating a consultation forum; and it did seem that student views were being sought at a stage where they really could influence the development of degree programmes.”

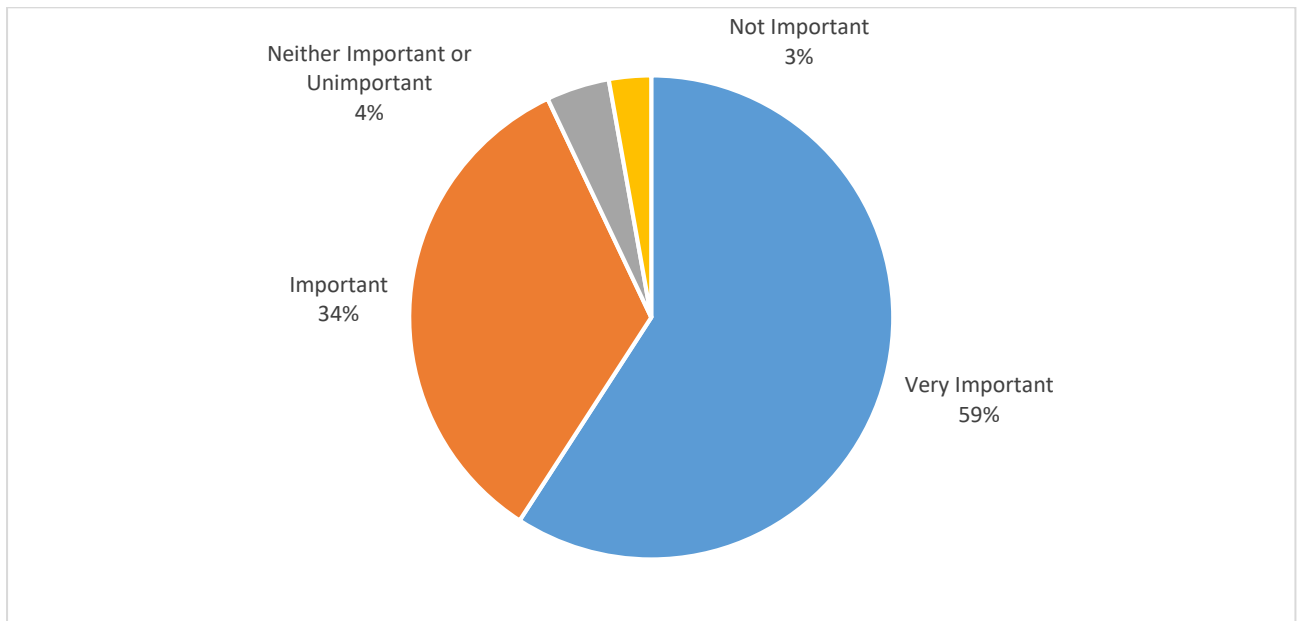
There was also acknowledgement that there were formal committee structures with Association Representatives on them, and by default these would have clear processes for involving and inviting student views. However on there was a belief that whilst committees do give some involvement in decision making, this is often at a late stage in the decision forming process and for approval only.

“There are processes for involving student representative however whether this equates to a student voice is another matter.”

There were other groups that answered this question unsure if it was relevant or applicable to their role at the Open University.

¹ This may also be due to recent feedback from students that stated whilst communications are at times emailed directly to students about opportunities to be involved, the OU email formatting is unappealing and uninviting.

Question Seven: To what extent is listening, responding to and taking action on Student Voice important to you?



A few of those that described Student Voice as important, also commented that listening and responding was also a core part of their working role at the Open University (Associate Lecturers / Front Line Staff) and relationships with students were important. For some responders this made up their perceived aptitude for their role / profession, as well as described the nature in which they are advocates for the student body and Student Voice. Another point was made that the individual wanted to work together with students to make things better, and not always receive / take note of criticism sometimes received from student when inviting their views.

Other comments included that of the role of students as a consumer, and therefore the student then having expectations on the quality of their education - however several people described how the OU is not always able to deliver on student needs, wants and demands.

Comments from OU Staff included:

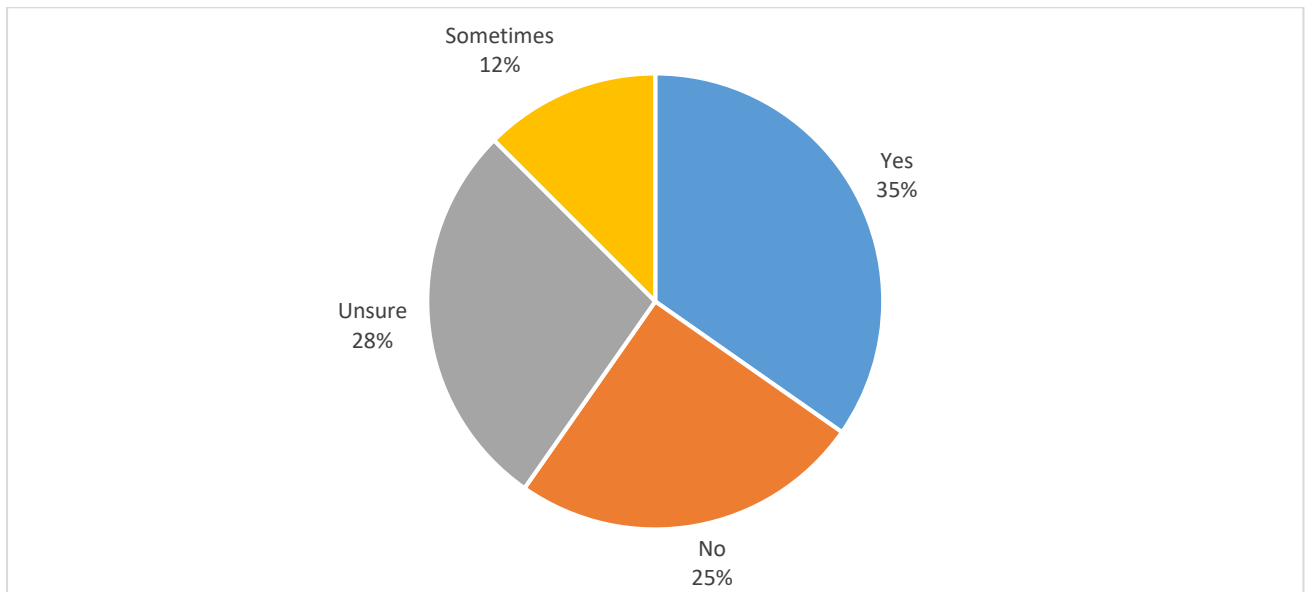
“Our students are central to what we do. However, as said above sometimes knowing which voice to listen to and how to respond within the constraints placed on us by the university is often challenging.”

“Although I don’t work directly with students, I believe it is incredibly important because the university relies on building and maintaining student numbers both for income but also reputation.”

“Students can have powerful influence on policy makers we are trying to influence re part-time, mature and distance learning students in England.”

“If we respond to the student voice we will have a higher retention rate of these students as they feel that they can play an actual part, in their university.”

Question Eight: Do you think Staff, Students and the Students Association share the same vision for student voice?



Comments from OU Staff included:

“There is probably more work to do to bring the vision to reality.”

“There are definite pockets where it's 'all about getting the job' done rather than meeting students' needs.”

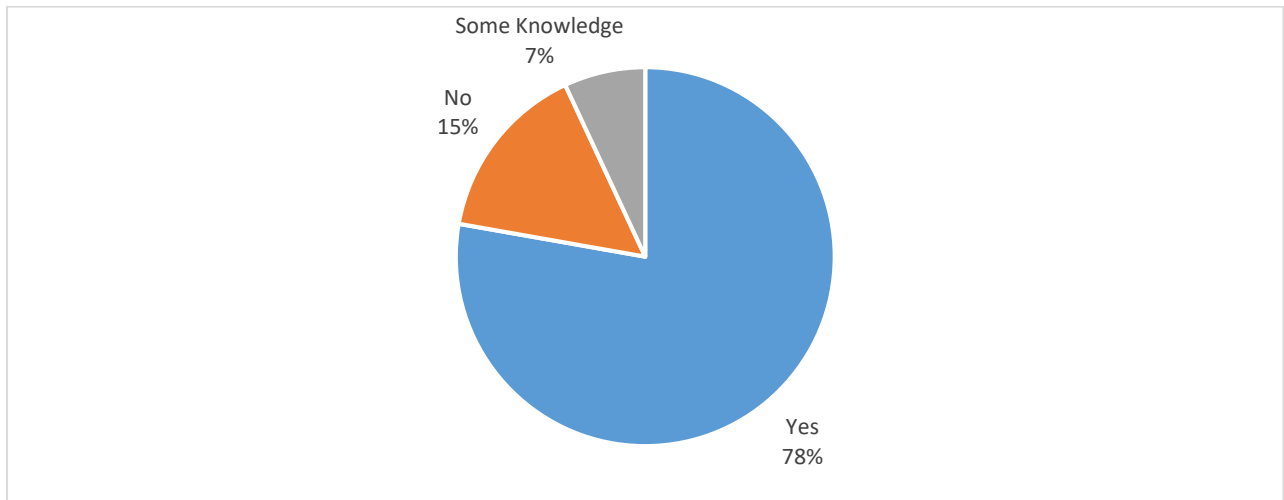
“The systems, processes and workloads we are subject to make it difficult to pursue this vision”

“The OU community is 180,000 individuals. They all have different needs and contributions to make. That diversity should be celebrated, and therefore student voice cannot just mean one thing.”

“I suspect that many students don't have time to play an active role in Student Voice activity, and are happy to entrust the vision to the Students' Association.”

“I often hear students say that OUSA is a closed shop and the people representing them don't have a clear and balanced view of the whole student body.”

Question Nine: Are you aware that students have a voice through the University Governance structures?



Although there was some understanding that there were students involved in University Governance, it was their understanding that the Students Association elected team was involved mostly with top tier committees, rather than student volunteers involved in anything at a faculty or departmental level.

Comments from OU Staff included:

“I wouldn’t know how a student would access this or what impact this has on student life”

“This is a self-selected group and does not necessarily represent the wider OU student population.”

“I had to research and ask several people to find out about the mechanism - this is not actively promoted or communicated”

Other comments / recommendations from staff:

- On formally recognising student representatives, there was a comment to say that they thought the volunteers already were – however also another commenter said that student representatives should only be formally recognised if Associate Lecturers Representatives were too.
- That is was difficult for staff to answer some of the questions in the survey, due to limited knowledge of student voice.
- There was a comment that staff should have more of an understanding of CCRs and access to the wider student body would be valuable, as they have had advice that consulting with CCRs was not consulting with the Students Association.
- It would be useful to investigate effective mechanisms for Reps to gain the views of the broader student body, despite the challenge due to the size and nature of the student body / university.

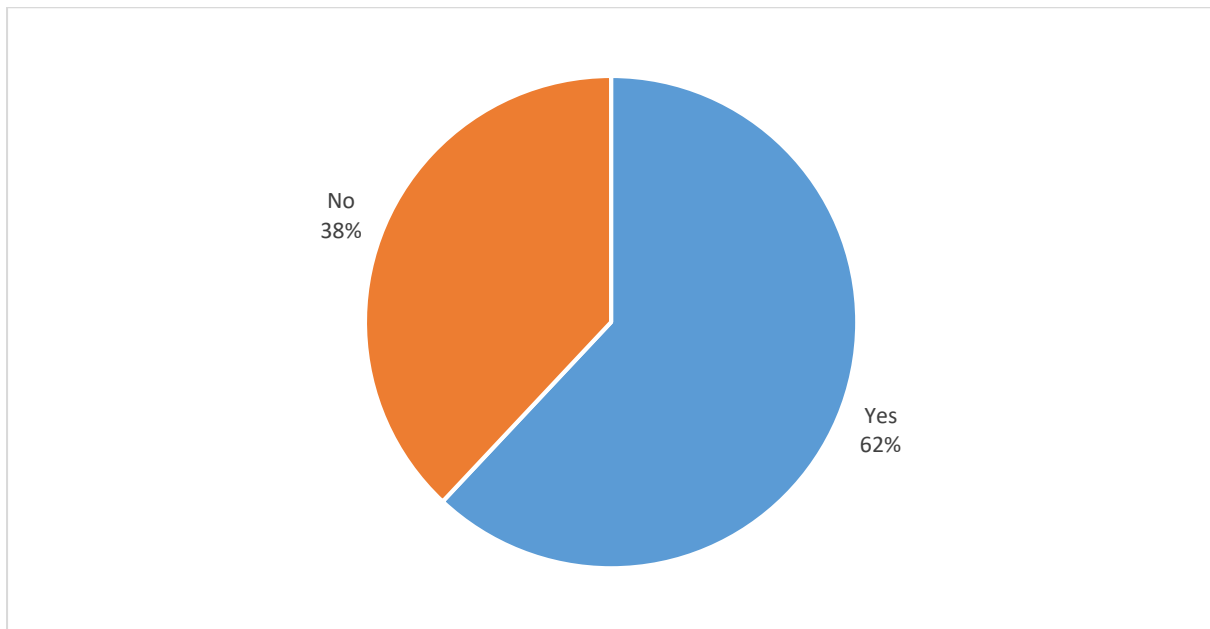
Central Committee Representative Survey

Question One: What do you believe is your role on a university committee?

- **Student Voice / Perspective (individual) - 13%**
This is where the respondent feels that they are giving their own views only
- **Play a full part in the Committee - 12%**
Where the respondent feels that they are full committee members (specifically states that they engage in discussions)
- **Student Voice / Perspective (collective) - 40%**
This is where the respondent feels that they are expressing a view held by other students
- **Represent the Students Association - 6%**
This is where the respondent believes they are there at a committee to solely represent the Students Association.
- **Feedback to the Students Association - 21%**
Where the respondent feels that their role is to keep the Association team (elected and appointed) informed
- **Feedback to Students - 8%**
Where the respondent feels that their role is to keep other students informed

(Responders committees: Boards of Studies: 53%, Teaching Committees: 23%, Institutional Committees: 15%, Faculty Assembly 9%)

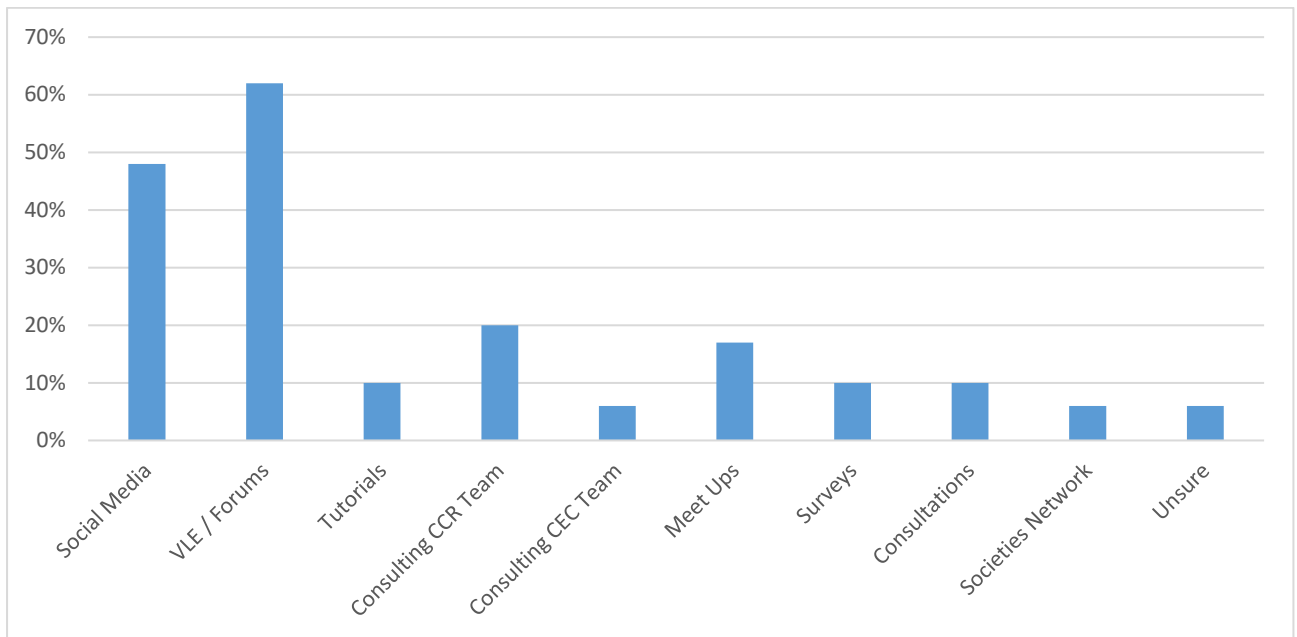
Question Two: Did you know: That Central Committee Representatives have no mandate to represent the views of students?



Question Three: Do you need to regularly consult with OU students in order to be an effective representative on a committee?

Yes – 53% No – 47%

Question Four: What methods and tools (if any) would you use to support representing the authentic OU student voice? Are these methods suitable?



Commentary from Central Committee Representatives include

Utilising Social Media	Appointment VS Election
<p>“I do see a lot of students sharing views on the society Facebook groups. Although this is seen by student reps and discussed amongst other students, how often these views are passed back as part of the Student Voice I am not sure.”</p> <p>“Straw polls on social media, noting trending topics either on social media or forums, use OUSA research to back up a point”</p>	<p>“To represent the OU student voice the CCRs would have to be elected rather than appointed. The Student Voice should come from a member of the CEC who asks CCRs to raise something.”</p>
Meeting students	Forums
<p>“I wonder if Adobe rooms could be used to set up a drop-in environment where students could chat with CCR reps about issues. Perhaps arranged around faculty areas with FAR and CCR reps attending on a rota.”</p> <p>“I think a version of SRG (Senate Reference Group) would be useful for someone on a Boards of Studies i.e. a group whose views could be heard prior to the BoS. I don't think it's realistic to consult "normal" students on all the issues given that some of the papers are confidential.”</p>	<p>“Mainly by keeping up to date with OUSA forums, and to a lesser extent, social media. I'm not sure how representative these are of the student body as a whole, as they are dominated by a small number of highly committed individuals. The 'silent majority is not represented.”</p> <p>“I find useful information from the Forums, but unfortunately this information is partly valid as there is lot of input from existing OUSA members and this makes us focus more on the issues the Student Association believe are important, and not listen what students are actually saying.”</p>

	<p>“Discussions with fellow reps and using OUSA forums and personal intuition/experience and limited contact with students outside of OUSA business; Feels quite limited at the moment.”</p>
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Question Five: How do members of committees seek student views and are student views influential? Can you provide an example?

Majority of respondents to this question expressed that students views are sought by members of committees using a variety of methods. These were mostly via online tools (which would be appropriate considering the nature of OU students):

- Student forums
- Student Surveys
- Consultations
- Adobe connect

(Majority of respondents did not express directly in their responses on whether online student views were influential or not to their committee.)

Other responders mentioned having items on the agenda that is specifically for Student Voice, and Boards of Studies specifically seeking their student view via the representatives. The perception from some respondents was that since they are given opportunities to express their opinion in committee meeting, it automatically implies that their views are influential. There were a number of examples given to show how influential their voice was:

“I’ve only been to one BoS study so far and I am impressed at how much account was taken of the views we’d expressed at the meeting. For example, the issue of multiple exams happening in the June slot was considered and they are considering options to avoid clashes.”

“My committee excellent at making sure the student voice included. Hence my peer mentoring I proposed is still on the agenda and getting taken forward in some form.”

A very small number of the respondents felt that their student views are not that influential.

“Although I feel involved in the meetings and listened to, I’m not really sure of the depth of influence”

“In some cases, when it is obvious that a contribution from students is relevant, the chairperson will ask us for a response, but in general we just speak when an appropriate occasion arises. It is not often possible to determine how influential students’ views are”

A large portion of respondents were in agreement that committees do seek student views and also felt that student views were influential as expressed in the various examples they mentioned however, it raises the issue whether committees need to do more in terms of letting student reps know how their contributions have impacted on decision making and how this is detailed.

Question Six: Are you able to contribute to all of the necessary items on the agenda at committees? Can you provide an example?

Most respondents felt that they were able to comment on the items discussed during committee meetings, with 20 students responding with a clear 'yes'. Responses contained several positive comments highlighting the Chair's role in inviting student feedback, which made students feel that their views were taken seriously; in parallel, respondents also highlighted good practice such as starring items for discussion and raising one's hand before speaking.

"Yes. I always receive the papers well in advance in hard copy because that is my preferred method and the Chair of BoS always ensures I am asked for my views."

"Yes but this comes in time and it can be difficult to hit the ground running."

"I have no problem in getting my voice heard on the Board, not least because we have a very good chair, who is genuinely interested in student opinion!"

"Yes, I am treated with equal consideration as other committee members and always given a chance to speak should I want to. At Senate the students are usually the first to be allowed to speak if we raise our hands."

However, respondents distinguished between having the opportunity to contribute, and their contributions informing decision-making. This points to a need for committee Chairs/Secretaries to close the feedback loop with the students on their committees, so that they are aware of how their contributions have been taken forward. This would also support the impact reporting that we undertake at the Association, and help us showcase the work of Central Committee Representatives (CCRs) to the wider student body.

"Yes - and usually any contributions that students make are reflected in the Minutes (this can easily be verified by looking at Senate Minutes for example). Whether what we say is taken on board and acted on can be a different matter. For example, the issue of recording tutorials, which has strong student support, has still not been resolved."

Various examples of CCR contributions to committee meetings were given:

- Commenting on student participation in end-of-module surveys
- *"securing a place for a student on a workshop"*
- Commenting on student involvement in recruitment of a new Vice Chancellor for the OU
- Contributing to 'you said, we did' responses
- Commenting on areas directly relevant to the student experience, such as recording tutorials
- Participating in Periodic Quality Reviews (PQRs)
- Raising concerns over the workload of students taking an apprenticeship degree

Some students were unable to give a clear yes/no response; these were new CCRs and had not attended enough meetings to be able to comment. In the 3 cases where respondents felt they had not been able to contribute, the reasons cited included the agenda items not being relevant for students, poor facilitation of the meeting, and a need for more communication between the elected team (the Central Executive Committee) and the CCRs:

“No. Accounting aspects, manpower and vast bulk of module content we don’t and in most cases cannot contribute. Which is natural.”

“No I wasn’t because I attended remotely and my request to speak was not notice/acknowledged.”

“I believe committees are sometimes rather short and it is sometimes difficult to contribute as much as may be necessary. I have also identified that there are lots of meetings with CEC members however, CEC would benefit from more, in my opinion, from getting more feedback from other student representatives who spend more time with the wider student community and obtain more face to face feedback.”

Respondents also mentioned the factors that impacted on CCRs’ ability to contribute during committee meetings. Feeling they had good knowledge of the topic, confidence from past experience of the role, and effective facilitation of the committee meetings all helped CCRs to contribute to discussions.

“I like the way the Faculty meetings usually involve a table top group exercise where I get my views noted within the table and then we share them with the whole Assembly.”

Question Seven: Should Representatives drive their own agendas or issues at meetings, or should they be steered by other members of the committee (e.g. Chair), or by the Students Association elected team?

The responses to this question indicated a range of CCR preferences. The most popular option was to have a steer on Association policy from the elected team. Other responses indicated that students’ contribution to committee meetings were dependent on the facilitation of the meeting and some preferred a mix of all options. Only two responses specifically mentioned listening to the wider student community.

For those who preferred to have a steer from the Students Association, responses included suggestions for policy briefings and communication from the elected student members on the Association’s Central Executive Committee (CEC). Respondents also mentioned CEC posts such as Vice President Education that they felt were particularly relevant, and that students on committees could proactively seek advice from the elected team.

“Within reason reps should be able to raise issues within the remit of the committee they are sitting on. If the matter is contentious they could contact the Office or CEC to get some advice e.g. from the relevant FAR or VPEd.”

“My view is that there should be more guidance on policy from the elected team. In order to be taken seriously, we should be speaking with one voice.”

“I believe the Students Association and the CEC should be giving reps clear direction as to what the issues are. It would get very messy if all reps went with their own agenda.”

Respondents also mentioned the need for CCRs to listen to the views of the wider student community.

“Ideally I think reps should be active in engaging with students. Taking forward their concerns and ideas. Also the views of the elected team would allow a consistency of approach.”

“Reps should not drive their own agenda they should be driven by the student body in general/cohort they represent.”

Some respondents suggested that raising an issue at a committee meeting was dependent on context, and enabled by effective facilitation by the Chair and the committee Secretary. This is similar to the feedback received for Q6, where considerable stress was laid on the role that chairs/Secretaries play in inviting feedback from students on committees.

“Depends on Committee. I am asked by the Secretary if I have A O B before meeting.”

“Chair of my particular Board is very student thinking and often proposes ideas, welcomes feedback on items and issues presented.”

“If we want to discuss something not on the agenda, then we can let the chair know and it is brought up in AOB [Any Other Business]. Also let the chair know if there is something on the agenda that we would like to discuss and then the chair brings us in on that.”

A very small amount of respondents cautioned against raising ‘personal’ issues at committees and considered it inappropriate for CCRs to do so. Another respondent also stressed the importance of “independence and objectivity”, especially when listening to the views of different groups of stakeholders. Interestingly, this respondent also mentioned (and disagreed with) the idea of Central Committee Representatives being ‘mandated’ by a certain view or group of people.

The comment about mandate highlights some of the issues that students undertaking the CCR role need to navigate. While they are appointed to participate in committees in their capacity as individual students, their collective impact as a group of student volunteers is contingent on a joined-up approach and consistent messages. As respondents pointed out:

“Ideally, the Students Association elected team would be seeking student approval for specific policies at our biennial conferences and issues arising between conferences should be agreed by the CEC or at least discussed in the appropriate forums. Representatives should not be making up policy on the hoof or driving their own agendas without first informing and seeking input from elected members.”

“The student representative can only speak with authority on their own personal experience but it is hopefully representative of the views of other students. I have mentioned before the importance of having a consistent approach on key issues with ‘lines to take’ that can be shared with all reps.”

Question Eight: Should Central Committee Representatives take relevant items for discussion, or produce any reports for the committees that they attend? If yes - What would be useful for them to bring?

After reviewing the responses of this question, a number of replies stated that if there was an issue to be raised at a Board of Study (in particular), the representative would require a briefing from an appropriate member of CEC such as the VP Education, or a member of Association or OU staff to ensure that policies and items are understood. It was also stated that Association Research could also be beneficial to the discussions in committee and should be presented as part of having discussions about particular conversations.

There is also a high level of agreement that Central Committee Representatives should be able to take relevant items for discussion to their committees, and introduce / item their own reports however some need support in how to do this appropriately. Some responses stated that it could be difficult to get items on agendas due to the way some Board of Studies (in particular) are organised as some do not have a time allocated for either student related items or even “any other business.” Suggestions were that if a report were to be submitted by the CCR for the agenda at their committee, then this can also be circulated to all other representatives prior to the meeting taking place as well as the committee members.

“Other than responding to agenda items and A-O-B this has not happened as yet, although could be developed to impact more on the committee.”

Recommended items for CCRs to bring to the committees were:

- Association Research and Policies
- Student survey data and research
- Common themes / topics as highlighted by other representatives
- Consultation Topics and forum discussions
- Issues and hot topics affecting students

Reports debriefing the meetings should also continue to be written up after meetings have taken places that that key themes can be communicated with the wider representative group

Question Nine: Do you think that Central Committee Representatives are being listened to by the University?

Yes – 90% No – 10%

Further Comments from Central Committee Representatives:

Representatives have made several comments throughout this piece of research about circulating information such as CCR reports to the wider student body, and that there should be a formal mechanism in place to support this. This kind of activity was suggested to support improving student’s awareness of academic representation, and “students working on their behalf”.

There were some concerns about confidentially reported by representatives, however this could be workable if information was redacted from CCR reports and then shared.

“I find the signing of confidentiality agreements both stifling and frustrating!!”

There were also comments that CCRs would see the benefit in being able to consult students on topics prior to their meetings, and committees have and would continue to welcome CCRs being able to provide a wider perspective (whist the CCRs would also still like to have the ability to provide their own personal opinion too on matters.)

“I am not accustomed to being a representative without a constituency with whom I would be in contact”

“We cannot claim to be the voice of the students if first we are not the ears of the Association and listen to them.”

There was also additional commentary from Central Committee Representatives about Postgraduate Research Representation, and how this can be perceived to be a very different model in representing students. This is an area to explore further. There was also a comment that some representatives do not feel the need to be caught up in the “OUSA bubble” and be caught up in matters affecting the elected team.

Positive Feedback (Association)

“CCR Forums are extremely useful, though again, meaningful feedback should be monitored and collated where applicable (help from OUSA Rep Officers for example?) Training provided is excellent and timely.”

Critical Feedback (Association)

On policy matters: *My experience as a CCR has been that I am a fish out of water in many matters being discussed and especially feel a lack of support from OUSA. I have recently written to the President of OUSA seeking information about OUSA policies and the need for briefings.*

On the selection of CCRs: *I have no idea how they are selected - I know there is an appointments committee but that's about all I know, so I cannot say if the selection process is fair and transparent.*

On measuring impact: *I don't know how OUSA can do that and if they do it and how they can present their findings to OU. Even if I have ever influence a change, that would have been the work/result of many CCRs saying the same thing and I cannot claim that to be my achievement.*

Critical Feedback (OU)

“I have come across staff who resent our presence and other staff who encourage our engagement.”

Exploring these topics further / ideas:

- A CCR has suggested that recognition for undertaking the role, could be that the volunteers are able to request references of their work in committees, in academic / professional statements and references.
- That the “Tick to Agree” statements can be interpreted in a number of ways, and that they should be opened up for further discussion. (As will be the case)
- That CCRs need training on how to write minutes for their meetings.
- That CCR experiences should be collated and then publicised in order to raise awareness, and demonstrate how valuable student input is.
- That CCRs should be accountable to the Students Association.

Case Study - Central Committee Representative:

“Most of these questions cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. I, like all CCRs, hope I know my role and what is expected of me, but whether my hope is justified is for others to judge. I have no idea whether the recruitment process for CCRs is fair and transparent. I applied for the position and my application was successful. That is all I know about CCR recruitment.

My intention is to represent all students, but it is obvious that even in the best of cases we only have a very broad idea of students’ wishes. More generally, information comes from a tiny sample of students who comment on forums or take part in consultations, or perhaps those we speak to personally.

There is no way to be certain that information gathered in this way is representative of students as a whole, and it is simply absurd to imagine that all groups are represented or that information is sufficiently detailed to distinguish between different demographics. Even volunteers are expected to meet certain standards, but low level volunteers such as central committee representatives should only be blamed when it is certain that paid and elected staff have fulfilled their responsibilities.

The NSS is only relevant to a tiny fraction of the topics discussed at boards of studies. I am not aware of any Association Research that touches on my work. Perhaps it would apply more to higher level representatives. I would not be in favour of releasing minutes of meetings, although some other summary of matters discussed could potentially be made available. I doubt the number of readers would be high.

I am sure most CCRs hope they take forward the issues that matter to OU students, but no one knows for certain what those matters are. The staff-student committees sound like they could be a good idea, but without further details it is difficult to answer this question. To me, a CCR’s role is rather modest. I do not think in general it warrants extensive publicity, although it may do in certain cases. I would say the Students’ Association provided adequate training, but perhaps it should aim at more than adequate. The forums dedicated to CCRs are useful, but their usefulness is proportional to engagement from representatives, and this seems to have declined during my time as a volunteer. Only the Students’ Association will know if it is able to measure the impact of CCRs. I cannot see the point of asking CCRS this question.”

Student Survey Results

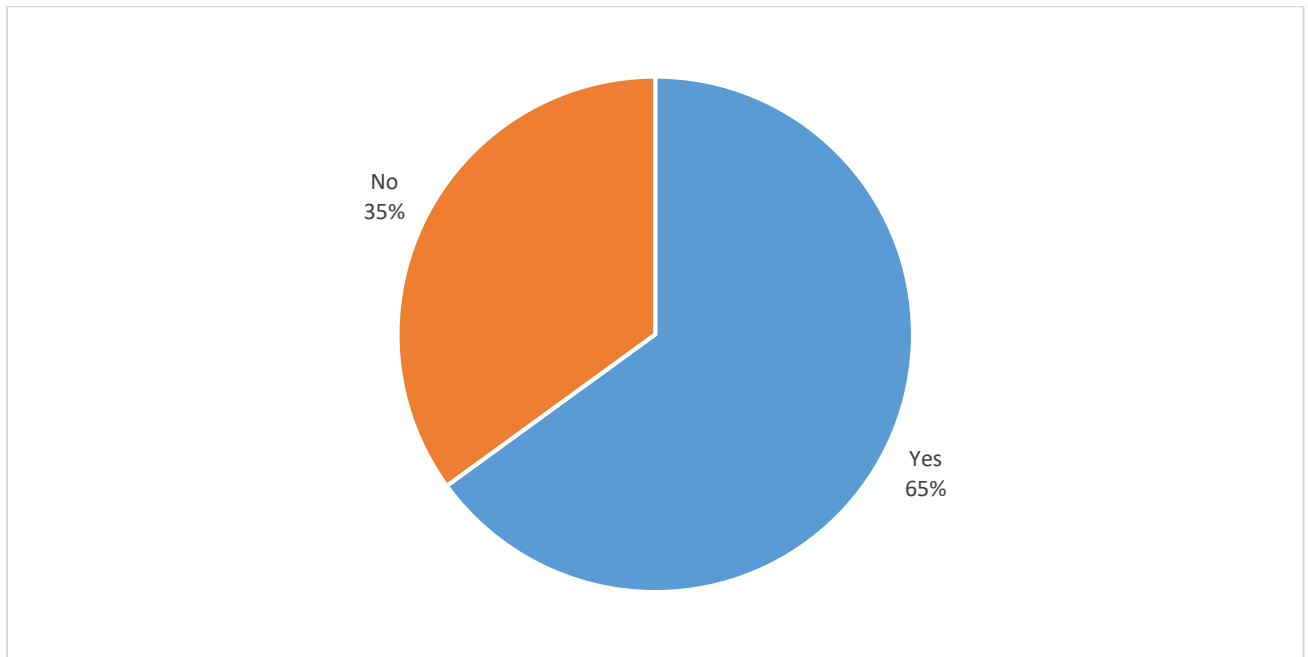
Which students responded to the survey:

- 23% STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths)
- 30% FASS (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences)
- 12% WELS (Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies)
- 9% FBL (Business and Law)
- 1% OPEN / MAODE / ACESS
- 25% Unknown

Question One: Did you know there are volunteer Central Committee Representatives, acting on your behalf in your department and over the whole institution?

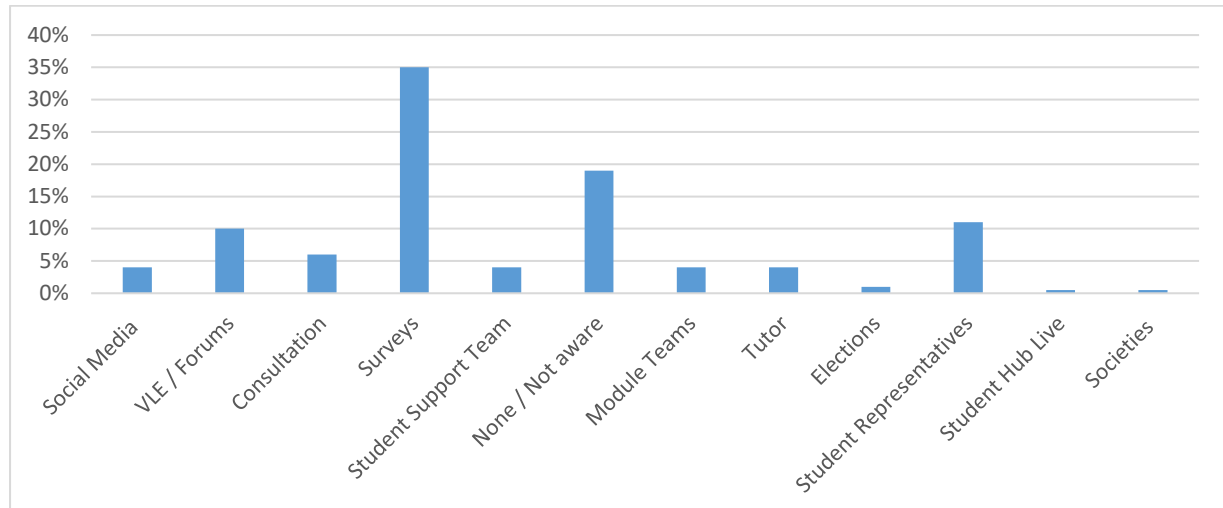
Yes – 49% No – 51%

Question Two: Do you think your Student Voice is listened to at the Open University?



Question Three: What opportunities are there for you to give your views on your study experience?

There were quite a variety of responses to this question which have been grouped to form common themes.



Although one of the largest percentages was from students who were unsure or not aware of any way's students could give feedback, the largest response came from students who completed surveys. The majority mentioned end of module and end of qualifications surveys in this response supplied by the OUs module teams. There were several students who mentioned consultation events / surveys and 'random surveys emailed to me on a regular basis' which could cover a range of topics depending on the sender. This is possibly linked to the data set, in which the sample of students approached with this survey – were willing to take part in OU and Association related research projects.

Another larger percentage of students mentioned module forums and social media to send feedback and give their views on how their studies were going, however use of these might be unofficial and feedback might not be picked up. It was positive to see that around 11% of students mentioned their Faculty Reps and the Students Association to gain information, assistance and provide feedback. Other students mentioned that getting in touch with Student Support Teams and speaking with their Tutor was a way in which they can give their views on their study experiences, and some students also mentioned how they have been given the opportunity to take part in user testing.

“Module forum: direct conversation with the module teams, SEaM, student support. IME module teams are usually open to feedback but some students can be reluctant to give it directly and prefer to do so anonymously.”

“There are structures in place which give you the opportunities to give your views and these are clearly highlighted in course material.”

Looking at similar feedback from the OU staff survey, staff made it clear that there needed to be work done to better understand feedback from students and provide a way to close the feedback loop with the wider student body. A few of the responders mentioned that feedback is not often heard, and nothing is done with it, so ensuring that actions are fed back to students would be an important factor when closing the feedback loop

“Through surveys I am occasionally asked to take part in by the OU, like this one. So far no changes have been made no matter how many questionnaires I have filled out and no matter how many suggestions I have made.”

Question Four: Why is listening and responding to your Student Voice important?

This question invited open comments from students, and several themes have emerged from the feedback. Broadly, the comments can be categorised under student voice and student experience.

- The **student voice** comments are slanted more towards **the process of getting heard** and why the university should invite and encourage student feedback.
- The **student experience** comments are more focused on **the result of student voice activities**, such as improving support services and the learning experience for students.

Student Voice

Respondents mentioned several benefits of listening and responding to student voice, such as:

- ✓ Better representation of student views
- ✓ Inclusivity through listening to different groups of students
- ✓ Enabling students to participate and contribute to change
- ✓ Making students feel part of a community

“To feel connected and valued to the OU as a student.”

“Hopefully, this should improve and/or enhance the student's idea of the OU community, and underscore that he or she or they are part of it.”

Below are the key student voice themes that respondents touched on.

The importance of getting heard as a student: Respondents highlighted the need for the university to engage students through listening to their feedback, but also to close the feedback loop and inform students how their feedback is being taken forward.

“Because we all have unique experiences and diverse needs. Many of us are unable to attend regular university, and, by listening to us, and responding to us as human beings, you are giving us something that many of us have not the benefit of nearly enough. The chance to be heard, and our views/needs be taken respectfully, seriously, and acted upon.”

“It is helpful to know that my views are listened to and to see changes.”

The idea that students are the ‘experts’: This was a view expressed by several respondents, who felt that student feedback carried more immediacy and weight because of their lived experience of studying with the Open University. Student feedback on university policies and the learning experience, they argued, were not only insightful but were also informed by other life experiences that OU students brought.

“Students are experts on their own learning experience and so listening to them is vital for quality enhancement.”

“Because students themselves are the best people to know how policies are affecting them.”

“OU students often have maturity, life-experience; professionalism; valuable independence of thinking: fertile ground for good decision-making.”

The idea that getting their voices heard was a means of helping fellow students:

Respondents also mentioned a sense of helping future cohorts of OU students through their contribution to student voice activities that result in improvements to the learning experience.

“If I can help somebody else not to suffer from the same problem as me because the university has listened then surely that’s a good thing.”

Student Experience

The feedback around student experience was focused on areas where the results or impact of student voice activities would be visible. Below are the key student experience areas that respondents touched on.

Influencing decision-making at the university: Respondents felt that student voice should be considered when introducing new initiatives and should inform policy development.

“It offers or gives real situation or perception on ground to decision makers. Besides, it gives chances to include the needs and concerns in the field to consider in planning or designing new course for the students.”

Improving student support and services: Respondents felt that student voice could inform enhancements to existing support and services, help identify concerns at an early stage, and adapt such support in response to changing student needs.

“Life changes, times change. Services need to adapt and adjust to keep up with changes.”

“To make the University more responsive to student needs.”

“Because through student feedback you can see what is working well and what isn’t, and build on success.”

Creating a better learning environment for students: The comments under this theme were broader in scope and seemed to reflect on the whole learning experience rather than specific services. Respondents felt that a good learning environment makes study more enjoyable, improves learning and raises satisfaction levels.

“Improve student experience and satisfaction leading to improved outcomes.”

“Identification of potential opportunities to improve students’ experience of University, social as well as educational.”

“Makes studying more enjoyable if you are listened to.”

Other benefits of student voice activities were also listed, such as:

- ✓ Inclusivity (comments touched on students who might have a disability or mental health condition)
- ✓ Improved module offering (presentation and course content)
- ✓ Improved advice and guidance

“Improve student support; enhance student experience; increase student satisfaction; identify and remove discrimination and barriers to study; key to student success.”

“To improve content and presentation of modules and degrees.”

“Should provide good practice advice and regular updates.”

Some themes were common to both student voice and student experience, such as:

Student voice activities enabling a better understanding of student views: Comments under this theme reflected on the benefits of student voice activities in bringing to light issues that students are concerned about, identifying trends in student feedback, and identifying areas that are either working well or need improvement.

“In listening to the student, this provides powerful information of what is working and what is not. The ‘student’ is not a fixed idea but continually evolving.”

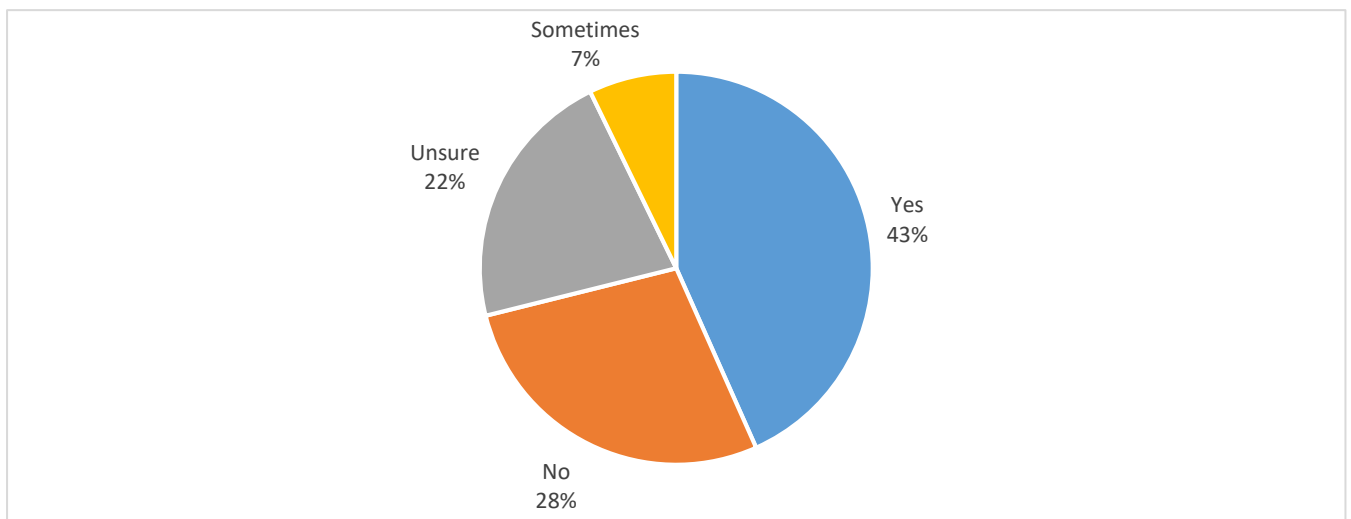
“It gives the university a student’s perspective.”

“It helps create a positive student experience, and for the university to understand the needs of students.”

Overall, respondents felt that listening and responding to the student voice was a key university activity - promoting higher satisfaction amongst students, impacting on key areas such as learning and feeling a part of the student community, as well as helping quality enhancement processes within the university.

“Because it is the only way for the OU to develop in a student friendly way.”

Question Five: Do you think Staff; Students and the Students Association share the same vision for Student Voice?



Just under half of the respondents agree that staff, students and the Students Association share the same vision for Student Voice. Some respondents gave a brief reason to back their assertions as stated below:

“Yes, I think a key aspect of the success of the OU has been hearing the evolving ‘student’ voice.

Yes, it is all a positive, forward looking experience, and the OU responds well to student involvement/feedback and participation.”

A small proportion of respondents that stated no in answering this question, were able to give reasons for why they believe that staff, students and the Students Association don't share the same vision. There were some that stated these groups would ultimately not be sharing their views as they would have different priorities by default.

“They may share the same vision but some elements of staff (higher levels) have in the past seemed to be hell-bent on pushing their agenda without taking much notice of students (I'm thinking specifically of the headlong rush into online-only module materials)”

“I'd be surprised. Different pressures and targets for each group.”

In the final category were those responses that were not sure and didn't give a direct response of either yes or no to the question. Many of these respondents were not sure, which is what some of them stated.

As I am unaware of their views how can I compare them to mine?

“Hard to say as their imperatives are different. But at some point, they'd have to cohere to a common vision.”

“Generally, yes, but perhaps there is not sufficient appreciation of the platforms used for facilitating the student voice and the university's systems needs vs. Student needs”

“I am not certain about that because these are three different stakeholders but holding different ambitions and values. The students aim at looking for fees, for the staff to be able to learn, yet the Association has its own ambitions too in disguise of helping the students but that doesn't happen”

“Not always, but that's because we have our own preferences, eg some hate exams whereas some love them. I believe Staff, Students and the Association want what's best for students and that's the most important aspect but occasionally we have to tell the OU that their vision isn't what students want.”

Further Commentary from Students: On having a representative per module:

There were a mixture of comments and recommendations from responders to the statements about representation, with some students expressing that they liked the idea and found the value in it and other explicitly stating that not only would it be impractical. These students commented that they also wouldn't want to directly hear from a student representative.

There were comments that a set number of representatives per 'Degree Pathway' or faculty would be more realistic, and that they would need to have more of a presence online (module forums and websites) with official contact details so that students could get in touch with them if needed.

“It would be wonderful if each module had a representative, but would take a lot of organising, but may be a way of encouraging new students to become CCRs.”

“Student rep per module could lead to more insight (access to module website to check validity of complaints as distinguishing valid complaints and general moans not always easy) but also bias and lack of experience.”

“A representative per module would be a bit much, but it would be good if the relevant faculty rep could have a presence on module forums (or at least have their contact details displayed somewhere on the module website).”

“The last statement (representation per module) seems particularly important: too often it seems that the infrastructure of student representation only reflects a certain type of somewhat politicised opinion rather than the more mainstream view. This is, of course, the reason for the phrase ‘silent majority’.”

Transparency and Accountability:

Responders to the survey had often remarked that they have not heard about student representatives at any point in their journey, and that if volunteers are acting in a capacity in which it seeks to share the views of students - then more efforts need to be made to ensure transparency. There were comments also that if the role is to benefit the wider student community, then the wider student community should be more aware of the roles and how it benefits them. There were acknowledgements that transparency in communications and sharing information doesn't always come down to an individual student and perhaps summaries and content can be created and shared across the faculties.

“They need to be open and transparent to students, so we know they are representing the whole student body and not just what the committee wants. i.e. allow the students to help steer the ship”

“If a meeting has confidential information, then minutes should not be distributed to people outside of the meeting.”

“The minutes of meetings attended/invited to attend by the student body should in general be public. Like councils/courts/parliament they need to be open to ensure people trust the process - where justified you restrict certain sections only.”

“CCRs need to canvas student more thoroughly to know exactly what students want from their OU and then that should be taken to the Committee meetings and listened too.”

The accountability statement was another item that students had a strong reaction to with some viewing it as too negative and expressing that willing volunteers should not be held accountable for their actions. Others however mentioned that having accountability is an important part of their perceived transparency.

“I feel that the people giving their time willingly to aid students should never be held accountable unless it legal, ethical or university rules have been broken. If a rep has an issue the university and groups have an issue.”

“Accountability is of vital importance. It is an instrument of responsibility and due diligence of work undertaken.”

Hearing more about / from Central Committee Representatives

Mostly when responding to the statements - students had appetite to hear more from their representatives, and that this should be a two way thing in which:

- 1.) Representatives are proactive in sharing information to students who are interested in knowing more about their activity

- 2.) A space should feature on student home or module forums, for announcements and for gaining feedback purposes
- 3.) There should be timely communications, including an introduction at the start of a module / academic year and students should not be spammed with information
- 4.) That emails can be utilised to give an update on student voice news, not at a burden on the representative
- 5.) That the information was concise or summarised

“I don't take OU courses to learn about CCR activities - but would be interested in summaries of CCR comments and Responses on modules I'm taking or are thinking of taking”

“A 5 minute meeting with students at the end of a class or lecture is easy to manage and doesn't demand too much time from the class rep; requiring a student rep to email an entire module group (even if GDPR rules allowed it) would be unduly onerous.”

“I think some CCRs are more effective than others. I do think that their should be some mechanism for people to engage and have their issues represented. May be by announcements of meetings agendas (excluding the confidential items so students can comment if they have anything constructive to say on the topics.”

Time constraints for volunteers:

There was also a reflection and acknowledgement from students that they understood that the volunteer representatives in these roles, only have as much time as they can offer - and that students themselves have only so much time to engage in topics. A constraint mentioned in the survey about workloads is most likely to have come from CCRs filling in the survey:

“CCRs workload should not be increased any more than currently, they have enough to do with reading meeting papers, preparing for and attending meetings and writing their reports.”

Further Statements from students:

“Central committee reps are chosen in a non-democratic way - which is not in keeping with the ethos of the Association. Every module should have at least one student rep (elected from among the students taking that module) who gathers views of their peers and feeds this back to the university. These student reps should be able to undertake research projects with other reps within their faculty or the wider student body. This would help to make student representation much more accessible to the wider student body. The Association needs to do this in my view as a matter of urgency - as the current system does not go far enough to involve ordinary students and empower people to be involved. At present there is no way to find out who your rep is, what they are supposedly doing / saying on our behalf. The Students Association does not provide enough opportunities for students to get involved and is not a welcoming organisation - too much bickering, negativity and outright bullying online makes it a very unappealing organisation to want to get involved with. The Associations communication channels are incredibly disjointed and it still isn't clear where to read about what reps are doing, this makes it feel like a club for those in the know and everyone else is left on the outside. The overall organisation and difference between CEC reps and CCRs is not clear - there needs to be a much clearer distinction and less overlap between these roles.”

“While some CCRs might be listened to and respected, many appear to be tokenistic and there because they have to be. More attention needs to be paid to engaging the wider student body with the issues under discussion and giving ordinary students the chance to raise concerns in a formal way with representatives. There is no clear training program for people who want to get involved as reps and no recognition for the work that central reps do - there should for example be regular training about student voice, opportunities to work towards an award such as those offered by other unions. This can help students evidence skills and progression and enhance employment prospects. There needs to be processes to not only hold CCRs to account but to hold the CEC to account. The association structure is not fit for purpose and the association needs to address this immediately. CEC and CCR reps seem to largely be able to do and say whatever they want without any evidence to support their claims. As far as I am aware there are no standard mechanisms to find out student sentiment on big issues nor anyway for individual students to raise issues they have experienced directly with the Association. The issues of confidentiality which reps are expected to adhere to (imposed by the university) need to be challenged more forcefully to enable genuine participation.”

Statements on Central Committee Representative – Impact, Awareness and their role

Statements featured in the survey	Committee s	Staff	CCR	Student
	Agree%	Agree%	Agree%	Agree%
I know what the role of Central Committee Representative (CCR) is, and what would be expected of them.	56%	32%	84%	32%
Committee Staff: CCRs are respected within their department, and their opinion is valued and actively sought by staff. CCRs: <i>As a student, I am respected on my committee(s) and my opinion is valued and actively sought by staff during meetings</i> Staff and Students: <i>I believe CCRs are respected within their department and their opinion is valued and actively sought by staff.</i>	65%	43%	90%	28%
The institution engages with reps because it has to – not because it wants to.	0%	13%	15%	25%
Recruitment, Selection and information				
The selection and recruitment process for CCRs is fair and transparent.	21%		62%	37%
I can find information about the CCR role by contacting the Students Association.	60%			
Communication about Representatives and their work				
There is some publicity of what CCRs (Central Committee Representatives) do and the role that they undertake.		47%		37%
CCRs: I am actively involved in promoting my rep work and impact on a variety of channels, including social media. Students: <i>I have seen CCRs promoting their own work / impact on a variety of channels, including social media.</i>			43%	13%
Committees: The activity of CCRs features regularly in/on our (OU) publications and platforms (websites, newsletters, and social media) Other: <i>The activity of CCRs should feature regularly in OU publications (websites, newsletters, and social media)</i>	4%	56%	78%	62%

The activity of CCRs should feature in Association publications (websites, newsletters, and social media)		73%	81%	58%
Committee Staff: I would like Central Committee Representatives (CCRs) to feed back the key issues to students who expressed an interest in knowing more <i>Others: I believe CCRs should feedback key issues to students and staff who expressed an interest in knowing more</i>	52%	73%		66%
Others: I would like CCRs to share their own content to students, including summaries of our meetings, and success stories. <i>CCRs: I would like to share and generate my own content, including summaries of meetings that I attend and success stories.</i>	34%	52%	43%	51%
I would like to be contacted by my CCR, and know how to contact them				34%
Contributions to Meetings				
Others: CRs are restricted by confidentiality agreements, which do not allow them to speak freely with the student body. <i>CCRs: I want to give feedback (at committees) from the student body to meetings I attend, but have no help in arranging this and am restricted by confidentiality agreements.</i>	17%		43%	
Others: Central Committee Representatives go to meetings or committees but speak from their own experience. <i>CCRs: I go to meetings / committees in order to speak from my own experience</i>	73%		71%	
CCRs go to meetings or committees but speak on behalf of the Students Association	21%			
Others: A large number of CCRs regularly use evidence to support their contributions e.g. NSS data <i>CCRs: I regularly use evidence for my contributions e.g. NSS and Association Research</i>	13%		15%	
CCRs only speak when they are called upon and are more likely to raise 'complaints' e.g. resources not uploaded on time.	13%			
CCRs regularly put items and reports on the agenda, and this is welcome	8%			
Committee Staff: CCRs contribute usefully to the meeting, bringing the views of the students that they are representing. <i>Others: The Reps should regularly contribute usefully to their meeting, bringing the views of the students that they are representing.</i>	65%	86%		49%
Others: CCRs speak on items on the agenda and will contribute to discussions on teaching, learning and the wider student experience.	78%		90%	

<i>CCRs: I speak to items on the agenda and will contribute to discussions on teaching, learning and the wider student experience.</i>				
Reps are simply expected to attend the meetings, which is tokenistic		4%		12%
CCRs should be simply expected to attend the meetings and not discuss student matters			0%	
Minutes of meetings that CCRs attend should be released to the rest of the student body and staff.	13%	43%	40%	54%
The Impact of Representatives				
<i>I am aware of the impact that CCRs have had on improving teaching and learning I am able to identify areas where I have influenced changes, which has improved the experiences of OU students.</i>	39%	17%	56%	20%
The OU is able to measure the impact of student representation and demonstrate its success	13%			
Student Association is able to measure the impact of CCRs and demonstrates this to the institution.			21%	
The Student Association widely publicises the impact and effectiveness of CCRs	8%			
I know what improvements to the learning experience there has been as a result of the activity of the team of CCRs.			59%	
I think CCRs are simply expected to attend the meetings, and have little impact				13%
Being Representative				
There should be dedicated staff-student committees to address student issues, either online or face to face.	34%	65%	40%	52%
<i>CCRs have difficulty getting feedback from all groups of students. I would like to represent the wider student body, but have difficulty getting feedback from all groups of students.</i>	39%		78%	
<i>CCRs take forward the issues that matter to students Central Committee Representatives (CCRs) should take forward the issues that matter to students</i>	52%	82%	81%	77%
<i>CCRs reflect the views of various student demographics' that they represent My views reflect the various student demographics' and not just my own</i>	17%		65%	
There should be processes to for students to hold CCRs to account	17%		59%	36%
I go to meetings / committees in order to speak on behalf of the student body			81%	

There should be a student representative per module		39%		56%
Support for Volunteers and Recognition				
CCRs aren't formally recognised for the work that they undertake - and they should be	34%	65%	50%	42%
The Student Association should provide training to CCRs on how they can liaise with the student body			84%	
The Students Association provides adequate training and support for my volunteer role as a committee member.			59%	
The forums dedicated to CCRs are useful for my role.			81%	
There is no useful communication between different levels of Reps, or Reps from different parts of the structure.			37%	

