



QUEEN'S STUDENTS' UNION

## EDUCATION OFFICER REPORT

Jason Bunting



### ACADEMIC YEAR 2019/20 ANNUAL BUSINESS MEETING REPORT

Contact at: [su.education@gub.ac.uk](mailto:su.education@gub.ac.uk) / 028 9097 3724

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#### Outline

A chairde,

In this academic year, you have all been Student Councillors, Officers, School Reps and most importantly students, at a time of unprecedented challenge. We have experienced a general election, two periods of national UCU industrial action and then a global pandemic which has irreversibly changed the Higher Education sector. Throughout it all, these challenges came at a time of enormous change for our Union. This was the year that we moved closer to autonomy and independence, watched our old beloved SU come down before our eyes, wrote a new Strategic Plan and so much more.

When I took office as Education Officer, we needed to tackle the issues that are nowhere more pronounced in Higher Education than in Queen's. Namely, a University where the inclusion of students in decision-making has often been passive, infrequent and tokenistic, based on a shallow and superficial student partnership, a broken academic year structure with outdated assessment practices, characterised by an institutional hostility to equality, all in the context of a marketised education system which fails students and staff alike.

In this report, I want to take a moment to reflect on what we have achieved in the last ten months and where we can go next as a Union and as a student movement. I can honestly tell you that through the experiences so far, I have learned a hell of a lot and I will start my second term with a renewed passion for delivering for you.

Looking ahead, the next academic year will not be anything close to normal but while the challenges ahead are daunting, the truth is that normal wasn't working for so many of us. This will offer the student movement an unprecedented opportunity to change the way education is delivered for the better. I can promise you all that QUBSU will play a major role in leading this change on education.

Finally, I want to take the opportunity to say thank you. Thank you to my wonderful Officer team, who had my back throughout the year, who cheered successes and supported me during setbacks. Thank you to the Student Voice Team for everything you have done this year, especially Louise who loves the reps ALMOST as much as I do. Finally, thank you to QUBSU Council 2019/20, especially my incredible School Reps for all your work this year. If you are a student next year, I want to encourage all of you to run for Student Council again, volunteer to be an academic representative or run for Student Officer. When you get involved, you make your Union stronger. Moreover, we will need you in the movement during the time ahead as we face these challenges together.

Ní neart go cur le chéile. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

## Key Priorities in academic year 2019/20:

- Academic Rep Review
- Feedback Team and Toolkit
- Review of Academic Year Calendar
- Lecture Recording/Online Learning
- The Peer Mentoring Forum
- Covid-19: I have discussed the ongoing issues relating to Covid-19 in my March-April report but have reproduced it here for ease.
- Other Issues/Achievements

## Academic Rep Review

This year, we conducted a major institutional project to examine every aspect of our network of academic representatives and their engagement with the University.

The Academic Rep Review included desk-based research, the surveying of former academic reps, holding Faculty-based Course Rep Forums, conducting interviews with School Reps, presentations at the Senior Managers' Meeting, discussions at DE Forum, Academic Board, a workshop of DEs and School Managers, a meeting of SSCC Liaisons as well as ongoing informal consultation between the Students' Union and Schools.

We found a number of areas for improvement. Too often our academic reps operate as a valuable network, but are under-utilised and are often not afforded the opportunities to extensively develop their professional skills. Student academic representation largely operates without a defined framework or structure. The roles and responsibilities of each partner are not clearly defined. Students often lack the informed perspective to make contributions. Too often, the relationship between the Students' Union and Schools is disjointed. Student-staff partnership is confined to infrequent consultation at student Staff Consultative Committees, for which there is little standardisation between approaches and low visibility among students.

Students want to volunteer as academic reps to make a difference on their education, make the voices of their peers heard and develop professional skills which will serve them in the future. Despite this, we currently offer little ongoing training or support.

We want to make Queen's the best University in the UK or Ireland to go to for student representation. We want our student representation to be best practice.

The Academic Rep Review therefore recommends:

- (i) Student academic representation should become a structured volunteering program of student engagement and professional skills development delivered in partnership by the Students' Union and University. Students will be empowered through ongoing training, reflection and development.
- (ii) The implementation of the agreed Student Academic Representation Code of Practice, developed this year through consultation
- (iii) The changing of a University requirement to hold SSCCs, to a requirement that all elements of the code of practice are implemented and enforced.

- (iv) The development and delivery of central resources by the Students' Union, to be used by all Schools.

DASA and I have written a paper for the Academic Rep Review to be brought to Education Committee on 25 May and then Academic Council in June. A core group to oversee the implementation of the Academic Rep Review will be formed and we will consider forming a working group as well of wider stakeholders.

I am confident that this will deliver for students and allow us to start to build a University where your voice is truly heard and you are a partner in co-creating your educational experience!

It is also worth noting that while we have developed standardised resources and written the Student Academic Representation Code of Practice, we have also made a number of other changes to our rep program as it currently stands:

- Establishing Course Rep Forums
- Changing the timings of the elections to the second semester
- Embedding reps in the SU Constitution
- Creating the School Rep Committee
- Successfully lobbying for Faculty Reps to have a seat on Faculty-level committees
- Embedding Faculty Reps in the structure of student academic representation
- Revamping and condensing training
- Working with CED to introduce a framework for a new portfolio for international students to become course reps
- Working with the PG Officer to introduce PG School Reps
- Creating rep social media accounts
- Working with the SU Marketing team for a new look and feel for student reps
- Establishing School Rep E-mail accounts
- Introducing new materials for the promotion of recruitment and elections
- Creating an induction form for Faculty and School Reps
- Purchasing new video software to design training
- Starting the design of a new space in the SU for our reps

These changes are testament to the hard work of our reps. Through it all, I continue to engage constructively with the Student Voice Team to train, mobilise and support our current cohort of reps.

### **Feedback Team and Toolkit**

I want to pay tribute to each of our feedback interns this year who have done a fantastic job making changes on education.

Through staff engagement and student consultation, they have prepared a number of resources and made a tangible difference to the education practice at Queen's. This was particularly difficult in the current climate, where their projects were prematurely ended as a result of not being able to conduct the appropriate research. However, they reacted and adapted their practice admirably.

In particular, the development of assessment and feedback literacy training for course reps and peer mentors will prove a valuable tool for students to become fully engaged as partners with an informed perspective.

Moreover, the preparation of the feedback toolkit as a practical tool for engagement in utilising feedback will address the critical issue of engagement raised in both the literature and by our own students. We will give our students the practical tools necessary to fully engage as partners in the quality of their feedback and academic provision.

### **Review of Academic Year Calendar**

This year, we lobbied the University to fix our broken academic year calendar. The bunching of deadlines, outdated assessment practices was causing undue and unacceptable pressure on our students. The OMNI survey identified academic pressure as the number one factor impacting on student mental health.

At the beginning of the year, staff members across the University told us in no uncertain terms that changing this was impossible. We proved them wrong and the University committed to re-designing the academic year calendar in partnership with us.

Now, while covid-19 has understandably taken up the agenda of most of our meetings over the last two months, it is more important than ever before that we keep the pressure on Queen's for an academic year calendar which works for all the students of the University!

### **Lecture Recording/Online Learning**

Lecture recording has been a subject of debate for many years at Queen's. Fortunately, this year we were able to agree to pilot lecture recording across the University.

The delivery of online teaching in the first semester will make this an essential part of our pedagogic practice a lot sooner than we had anticipated. We need to ensure that over the next six months, our online learning practice is consistent with best practice. We also need to ensure we hold the University accountable to provide a high-quality student experience.

### **The Peer Mentoring Forum**

This year, we began the Peer Mentoring Forum, to bring together the Lead Peer Mentors from across the University. It was really clear that it was a very valuable exercise to have these peer mentors in the same room discussing their shared challenges.

It is our intention this year to develop this Forum into a useful network for our Lead Peer Mentors to come together, and develop a structure so it is sustainable.

### **Covid-19 Response**

Throughout our response to covid-19 as a Students' Union, we have lobbied to ensure the University realises that it is paramount that no students suffer an academic disadvantage as a result of the current crisis.

It is also of critical importance that we ensure that our student reps are properly supported during this period in their efforts to represent their peers.

To that end, we have started a number of measures, including:

- I successfully lobbied for SU representation on the Academic Sub-Group of the Major Incident Team;
- We successfully lobbied to ensure that the Class of 2020 will have an in-person graduation ceremony at the next safe opportunity.
- The Student Voice Team and I regularly monitor and respond to issues raised on our Student Ideas Forum, where reps can raise the issues you are facing on a public forum;
- We have established Rep Facebook pages: AHSS Student Voice, MHLS Student Voice and EPS Student Voice;
- We are conducting weekly Teams calls with the Course Reps on our virtual Course Rep Forum to enable us to raise issues and a weekly virtual drop-in time for School Reps as well;
- I am attending any SSCCs and Teams calls with Course Reps to which I am invited;
- I continue to work with Schools to address issues arising as a result of assessments.

We are continuing to work hard on your behalf to ensure that your voice is heard during this period.

#### **Other Issues/Achievements:**

- **Social spaces:** We secured £20,000 of investment for a new social space on University Square.
- **Rights of Gaeilgeoirí:** I was pleased to have a really productive relationship with An Cumann Gaelach and our Oifigeach Gaeilge this year. Although the Covid-19 crisis delayed our plans somewhat, I am hoping to build on this strong relationship next year. Key aims will be: an Irish beginner's stream, working with An Cumann Gaelach and the next Officer team to normalise Gaeilge on campus, introducing more combined pathways and protecting Gaeltacht funding from the economic impacts of the pandemic.
- **The Partnership Project:** We have continued to lead on the Partnership Project and commit to sustainable, student-led partnership.

As always, fire me an email at [su.education@qub.ac.uk](mailto:su.education@qub.ac.uk) with any and all issues you are facing.

Thank you all again for supporting me throughout this year- you have all been a pleasure to work with and I hope to see you campaigning for the things you believe in for many years to come.

Go raibh mile maith agaibh,

*Jason*