



**THE ROLE AND  
RECRUITMENT OF CLASS  
REPRESENTATIVES**



**National Student  
Engagement Programme**  
Clár Rannpháirtíochta Náisiúnta  
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To find out more about the national student engagement projects and to view the other resources produced as part of this project, please visit [studentengagement.ie/resources](http://studentengagement.ie/resources).

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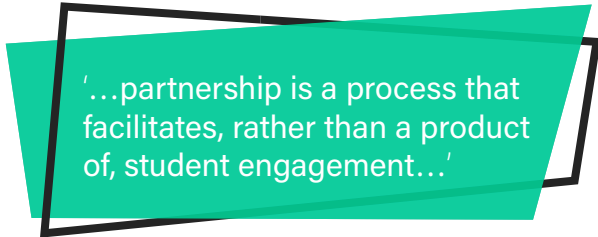


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# 1. CLASS REPS AND “STUDENTS AS PARTNERS” PRACTICES

The “students as partners” (SaP) model has recently gained considerable momentum in the higher education sector as it “challenges traditional assumptions about the identities of, and relationships between, learners and teachers” (Matthews, p. 1), thereby providing an alternative to the “student as consumer” (SaC) model. The SaC and SaP paradigms are informed by higher education being viewed as either transactional or transformative, respectively, with the former reducing the role of the student in their learning to that of a passive recipient, while the latter provides students with “opportunities to assume more active positions in their learning and asks faculty and others invested in this practise to reconceptualise their authority” (Cates et al, p. 34-35). In this context, partnership is best thought of as a “collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualisation, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather et al, p. 6-7).

Understood in this way, partnership is a process that facilitates, rather than a product of, student engagement, one that is “motivated by a desire to enhance the student voice in higher education, to challenge traditional institutional structures, and to disrupt traditional student-faculty power relations” (Kehler et al, p. 4). However, without an appropriate means of valuing what is collectively said by students as an essential contribution to the evidence that informs decision-making, this desire to enhance the student voice remains simply that. As the embodiment of the collective student voice in HEIs, Class Reps must be empowered by being listened to and their evidence acted upon if the first step toward genuine partnership is to be taken.



‘...partnership is a process that facilitates, rather than a product of, student engagement...’

While a certain scepticism persists regarding how closely SaP practices align with their aspirational and transformational ideals, defining the role of the Class Rep within a particular HEI provides staff and students with a unique opportunity to create a space for open dialogue on what SaP discourse actually means in the context of their institution and for critical reflection on how the ideals of SaP are realised in practice. Regardless of how advanced they are, genuine staff-student partnerships are simultaneously sustained by and serve to further enhance the principles of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (Cook-Sather et al, p. 7) upon which a democratic learning community is built.


# 1. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO DEFINE THE ROLE OF THE CLASS REP?

Class Reps have a vital part to play if a HEI wishes to enhance the engagement of its students beyond conventional learning and teaching activities, i.e. to involve students in decision-making activities “intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution” (Trowler et al, p. 2). However, as explained in *Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision-Making* (2016), the report of the working group on student engagement in Irish higher education commissioned by the HEA, the challenge to enhancing the student voice and involving students in evidence-based decision-making is often posed by this very role.

Due to the lack of conscious, coordinated decisions between the institution and the students' union on the purpose of the Class Rep System (CRS), a confused sense of ownership occurs, which in turn leads to a lack of (i) clear information about the scope of the role, (ii) training on the purpose of the role and (iii) resources for supporting the function of the role, something which affects both staff and students. This situation is not unique to the Irish higher education sector. The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) completed a study of student academic representation (SAR) in HEIs in England, identifying mixed understandings of SAR and misunderstanding the remit of representatives' role as a major challenge to enhancing the student voice and involving students in evidence-based decision-making (Flint et al, p. 32). This often consequently results in more complex challenges, such as variable levels of engagement amongst staff and students with the CRS, the development of formal structures that are unsuited to meaningful representation, and resistance to embedding within the institution the inspirational and transformative values underpinning the CRS.

Mixed understandings and misunderstandings of the Class Rep role can be avoided, however, if all interested parties collaborate in defining the CRS and participate together to evaluate the effectiveness of the existing structures and processes within it. Not only can this shared understanding between staff and students be used to ensure both parties are fully informed of the mutual benefits of an effective CRS, it also allows for the first steps to be taken toward realising an inclusive learning community characterised by less hierarchically structured relationships between its members and with dedicated spaces for enhanced engagement that are not owned solely by the institution.

Given the diversity in the strategic and operational organisation of class rep systems across the sector, there is no single universal model. Instead, an effective CRS must be capable of adapting to different contexts and organisational cultures, and accommodating the perspectives and requirements of a diverse range of interested parties. Furthermore, the multiple understandings of the role of the Class Rep and the emphasis on different purposes by different interested parties means misunderstandings can just as easily arise. For these reasons, guidelines on the definition of the role are required. However, rather than being seen as prescriptive action recommendations, these guidelines should be viewed as a way of developing a shared strategic purpose for the CRS and of outlining the operational roles and responsibilities of each interested party within it. Whilst a restrictive definition of the Class Rep within a highly formalised CRS would preclude the flexibility and adaptability needed by Class Reps to respond to the different contexts they most frequently encounter and the diverse requirements of the activities they are most frequently involved in, decisions regarding the structures and processes of the CRS must be made through collaboration and active participation by all interested parties, especially if an institution wishes to realise partnership in a meaningful and sustainable way.



'Deciding on the definition of the Class Rep role and the scope of its function within the CRS is the first step toward realising partnership and positioning Class Reps as the core determinant in, rather than the primary challenge to, enhancing student engagement in decision-making.'

Deciding on the definition of the Class Rep role and the scope of its function within the CRS is the first step toward realising partnership and positioning Class Reps as the core determinant in, rather than the primary challenge to, enhancing student engagement in decision-making. The intention is not to espouse the principles of best practice but rather to offer these guidelines as a springboard for institutions that both attends to and encourages a diversity of approaches to enhancing student engagement through an effective CRS and a clearly defined Class Rep role within it.

### 3. DEVELOPING A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH TO CLASS REPRESENTATION

Defining, or even redefining, the role of the Class Rep provides HEIs with an opportunity to assess their current capacity for engaging students as partners in a learning community. Whether the institution already has an effective CRS or relies on informal arrangements between staff and students, creating a formal definition of the role allows the interested parties to:

- (i) Explore what they individually expect of the role and how they in return can collectively support Class Reps to meet these expectations.
- (i) Determine if the institution provides sufficient spaces in which the Class Rep can exercise the collective voice of their classmates without fear of sanction.
- (iii) Examine existing academic governance structures and quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms to decide if they allow them to actively listen to the student voice, to respond in a timely manner and to affect appropriate changes in a meaningful and sustainable manner.

The process of re/defining the role of the Class Rep, therefore, should:

- (1) Outline the **function(s)** and **effectiveness** of the existing Class Rep System as distinct from the role of individual Class Reps (see Resources 1, 3 and 4).
- (2) "Regardless of the maturity or scale of an institution's CRS, there is always scope to reflect on whether the actual operation of the current system corresponds with its intended purpose and to explore how existing structures, processes and definitions could be more closely aligned with this purpose".
- (3) Involve an initial **partnership agreement** that receives formal endorsement from a senior representative of the Student Body and the Governing Body.
- (4) "All interested parties should be given the opportunity to participate in the process of collaboratively defining the role of the Class Rep and deciding on the processes and structures required if all interested parties are to effectively discharge their responsibilities within the Class Rep System".
- (5) Give suitable consideration to the **expectations** being made of the Class Rep and what is required to meet these expectations (see Resource 2).

"HEI" recognises the transformational potential of the Class Rep System in terms of both enhancing the student learning experience and the psychosocial and personal development of Class Reps themselves. Accordingly, we are committed to providing Class Reps with the training and support required to realise this potential".

Ensure that for each opportunity to provide **feedback** as part of the HEI's quality assurance mechanisms there is a corresponding opportunity to **feed forward** into decisions regarding the issues institutional staff will address in their quality enhancement activities.

Result in **co-created** documents that clarify the roles and outline the responsibilities of each interested party, and are distributed and reviewed using a **co-owned** document control mechanism. This will reduce the internal dissonance within an institution regarding the CRS that results from mixed understandings and misunderstandings of its purpose and the role of each party within it.



## 4. GUIDELINES ON THE DEFINITION OF THE CLASS REP ROLE

While it is important to define the Class Rep role so that its function is properly understood by all interested parties across the institution, it is equally important that this definition is flexible enough so that the Class Rep can actually meet the different, and sometimes conflicting, expectations of these parties. In other words, the Class Rep role should always be seen as context dependent, particular to each HEI and therefore capable of functioning within the academic governance structures of that institution and responding to the requirements of its students and staff. For this reason, the definition of the Class Rep role should:

1. Empower them as:
  - (a) The **legitimate voice** of their class (“The main purpose of the Class Rep is to act as the voice of their fellow students...”)
  - (b) An official **point of contact** for their class (“In doing so, the Class Rep will be a point of contact between students, the Students’ Union and the institution”)
2. Distinguish between representing the class and assisting with individual issues by addressing the **4 Core Functions**:
  - (a) **Listening** – being available to students to voice their concerns and impartially gathering their feedback on positive and negative aspects of the student learning experience
  - (b) **Signposting** – directing students to the appropriate support service to have individual issues resolved
  - (c) **Representing** – being the representative for a diverse cohort of students and voicing a diversity of opinions at all in/formal meetings
  - (d) **Informing** – reporting to students on how their feedback has informed the decision-making process and providing reasons as to why particular issues cannot be immediately remedied
4. Include an explicit commitment to staff-student partnership, whether already in place or yet to be implemented, and emphasise CRs’ duty as facilitators of this process.  
“The Class Rep will work in partnership with students and the institution to create a culture of continuous improvement by identifying best practices and finding solutions to common problems”
5. Indicate their involvement in the **quality assurance** and **enhancement** of the student learning experience by helping the institution improve the quality of, or at least maintain threshold standards in:
  - (a) Teaching and Learning Processes
  - (b) Curriculum Design
  - (c) Learning Resources
  - (d) Student Supports
  - (e) Assessment and Feedback
5. Emphasise the importance of understanding **equality** and representing **diversity**.  
“Class Reps have a duty to represent all their classmates and should endeavour to voice a diversity of opinions in all in/formal meetings, keeping in mind that each student’s learning experience is different. In turn, the institution and the SU have a duty to ensure Class Reps are effectively trained in inclusive representation practices”

6. Outline (i) the **expectations of the role** and (ii) what they can **expect from the role** in return.

The definition of the role of the Class Rep should not simply comprise a list of the associated duties. Instead, the list of duties should be used to outline the expectations of the Students' Union and the institution regarding the role and what Class Reps can expect from these parties in terms of support and personal/professional development opportunities.

7. Identify the responsibilities that lie **beyond the scope of the role**.

When defining the role of the Class Rep, equal attention should be given to determining what a Class Rep is not in the context of that institution. In order to discharge their responsibilities effectively, Class Reps need to know where their responsibilities end and those of others begin.

## 5. BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR THE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF CLASS REPS

Having a single, coherent definition of the Class Rep role is a crucial first step toward having a Class Rep System that functions effectively across the institution and accommodates the requirements of all parties involved. However, this must be supplemented by appropriate recruitment and retention strategies if the transformational capacity of the Class Rep System is to be realised within the institution and a learning community based on active participation, equity of authority and continuous improvements is to be established. The following guidelines, therefore, are intended to highlight best practices in the recruitment and retention of Class Reps for institutions wishing to position the student voice at the core of its student engagement activities and quality enhancement initiatives.

1. Inform students about the Class Rep System at the **earliest possible opportunity**.

To improve awareness of the Class Rep System amongst students, they should be made aware of its function as early as possible. This can be done by incorporating information on the Class Rep System into other communication strategies, which also provides an opportunity for collaboration between different interested parties in the institution. Pre-Enrolment/Welcome packs and induction/orientation programmes can each include information/materials relating to the purpose of Class Reps and provide examples of how their involvement in the HEI's quality assurance structures have led to particular enhancements of the student learning experience.

2. Ensure the **right staff** have access to the **right information** at the **right time**.

The effective promotion of and recruitment to the Class Rep role requires the full support of institutional staff. To avoid the common issue of mixed understandings and misunderstandings of this role across the institution, only definitions, terms of reference and documents that are co-authored and co-owned by students and staff should be made available. As the Class Rep will engage with a number of different stakeholders in the institution, consistent language and concepts should be used when explaining the purpose of the Class Rep System and the function of the Class Rep within it.

Such documents can include customisable templates, a staff-student information leaflet or workshop session plans.

3. Use a **variety** of communication methods and media.

Promoting the Class Rep role using a variety of communication methods and media minimises the resources, especially time and personnel, needed in this area and can provide an opportunity for collaboration between different individuals/offices within the institution. For example, producing a message to multiple cohorts while also allowing a variety of individuals/offices to endorse a single

single message across the institution. Alternatively, creating an interactive website will allow for a variety of information to be accessible from a single source while also facilitating collaboration between the Students' Union and institutional staff involved in marketing, media production and website design.

4. Embed a selection process, either voluntary or democratic, that is **flexible** enough so that the students' union in partnership with departments can respond accordingly to the size of cohort(s), the structure of programme(s) and resources available. Whatever the process, it should:

- be transparent and fair across the institution
- include a period for appropriate promotion and/or canvassing
- take place between Weeks 2 & 4 of Semester 1
- be fully understood and supported by institutional staff

5. Develop a **staggered** induction programme based on **needs assessments**.

While it is important that Class Reps are fully informed of their responsibilities and appropriately trained in order to be effective in their role, this should not be done during a single event. Instead, by mapping out what Class Reps are expected to know and by when, a staggered induction programme can be developed. This requires conducting needs assessments to determine what knowledge and skills Class Reps possess and what they additionally require. Such an approach to induction means Class Reps can be trained according to the task(s) at hand and will have an opportunity to immediately apply their new skills in a practical context. Through incremental training, Class Reps can also develop the advanced skills required to undertake more complex tasks as they progress in the role according to their studies.

6. **Incentivise** the Class Rep role by:

(a) promoting what Class Reps can gain from the role.

The list of duties associated with the role could be used to develop a corresponding list of the skills Class Reps will develop. This should be corroborated by an explicit commitment by the institution and students' union to provide Class Reps with the training necessary to acquire these skills and suitable opportunities to practically apply them.

(b) recognising the work and achievements of Class Reps.

Each institution and students' union should endeavour to recognise the work and achievements of its Class Reps. Such recognition can range from the informal, i.e. email circulars, promotional items, professional references, etc. to the formal, i.e. student engagement awards, structured accreditation programmes, training certification, digital badges, etc.

Create a sense of **shared community** between returning, newly appointed and prospective Class Reps.

7. Existing Class Reps are best positioned to promote the benefits of participating in the Class Rep System to students. By encouraging existing Class Reps to continue in their position or recruiting Class Reps for Stages 2-4 before the end of the current academic term, they can be utilised during the recruitment of Stage 1 Class Reps. Involving existing Class Reps in the recruitment and induction of new Class Reps will facilitate the sharing of knowledge and help create a sense of community, while also creating a more structured system wherein experienced Class Reps have additional responsibilities and opportunities for development.

Actively monitor the **"representativeness"** of Class Reps.

8. As Class Reps embody the legitimate voice of students, their mandate to speak on behalf of their classmates can be further legitimised if they reflect the diversity of the cohort they represent. By



actively monitoring the diversity amongst Class Reps, the necessary interventions can be made to ensure they are representative of their respective cohorts and that the recruitment process is inclusive of all students.

## 6. RESOURCES – CLASS REPRESENTATION

(The following resources can be used during the process of defining the role of the Class Rep)

### 1. Defining the Role of the Class Rep Workshop Plan

This workshop aims to encourage dialogue between the interested parties concerning the role of the Class Rep in their institution and to facilitate staff-student partnership regarding how Class Reps are empowered and supported to discharge the responsibilities of this role.

### 2. Incentivising the Class Rep Role Workshop Plan

This workshop aims to encourage dialogue between all parties associated with the Class Rep System concerning how the duties can be seen as an opportunity to incentivise the role and be effectively promoted during the recruitment process to attract the most suitable applicants.

### 3. Class Rep System Self-Assessment Tool

This self-assessment tool is designed to help all interested parties associated with the CRS to evaluate the different components of the system and to identify who owns a particular process and how it can be enhanced.

### 4. Class Rep System Benchmarking Tool

This benchmarking tool will allow all interested parties associated with the CRS to determine how developed their system is as a whole and what steps need to be taken to improve its effectiveness in both the short and long-term.



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