Food for Thought: Menti Questions

Rethinking Representation at York

Session Objectives:

To learn about a fresh approach to academic representation.
To use this as an opportunity to reflect on the system you currently use.
To consider the current challenges students and the sector is facing and what we can do to keep students engaged with academic representation.

Setting the Scene:

Medium-sized University - 20,735 students in 2022/23 academic year.
38% of students identify as BME - increasing year on year.
Growing international student population.
2 Student Unions - separate postgraduate specific SU
Only one of 2 UK Universities to still have this.

ABFM - First Year	👥👥👥
ABFM - Second Year	👥👥👥
ABFM - Third Year	👥👥👥
Actuarial Science - First Year	👤
Actuarial Science - Second Year	👤
Actuarial Science Year 3	👤
BA Business and Management - First Year	👤
BA Business and Management - Second Year	👥👥👥
BA Business and Management - Third Year	👥👥👥
BSc Business and Management - First Year	👥👥👥
BSc Business and Management - Second Year	👥👥👥
BSc Business and Management - Third Year	👥👥👥
Marketing - Year 1	👥👥👥
Marketing - Year 2	👥👥👥
Marketing - Year 3	👥👥👥👥👥👥👥👥

Course Reps
(base tier)

Department Rep
X 30

Faculty Rep
X 3

Academic Officer

Traditional System:

- **Course Reps - elected or co-opted roles; at least 1 Course Rep per course.**
- **Department Rep - recruited role; 1 per department; team leader to Course Reps.**
- **Faculty Rep - elected role; 1 per Faculty (3 in total)**
- **Academic Officer - elected role; one of 5 Sabbatical Officers; leads academic representation.**

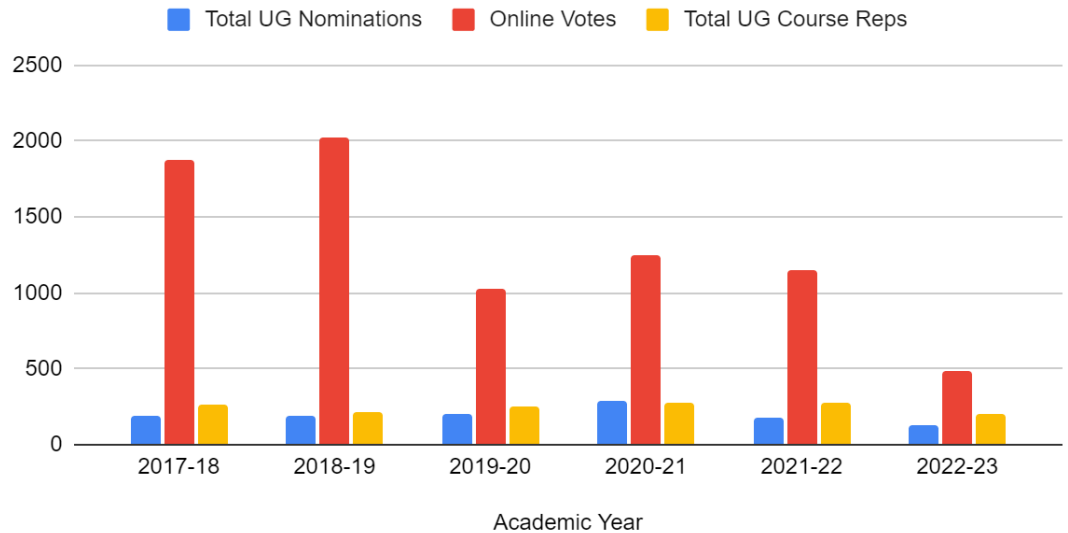**All roles are voluntary except the Academic Officer which is paid.**

Love York.

Engagement levels & student nominations have fallen significantly over the past five academic years.

Coupled with it being a decade since we last looked at our representation system, we felt the end of 2021/22 was a good opportunity to review it.

Total UG Nominations, Online Votes and Total UG Course Reps

■ Total UG Nominations ■ Online Votes ■ Total UG Course Reps

Academic Year

How did we get to the pilot project?

Summer Term 2021/22 - Focus Groups

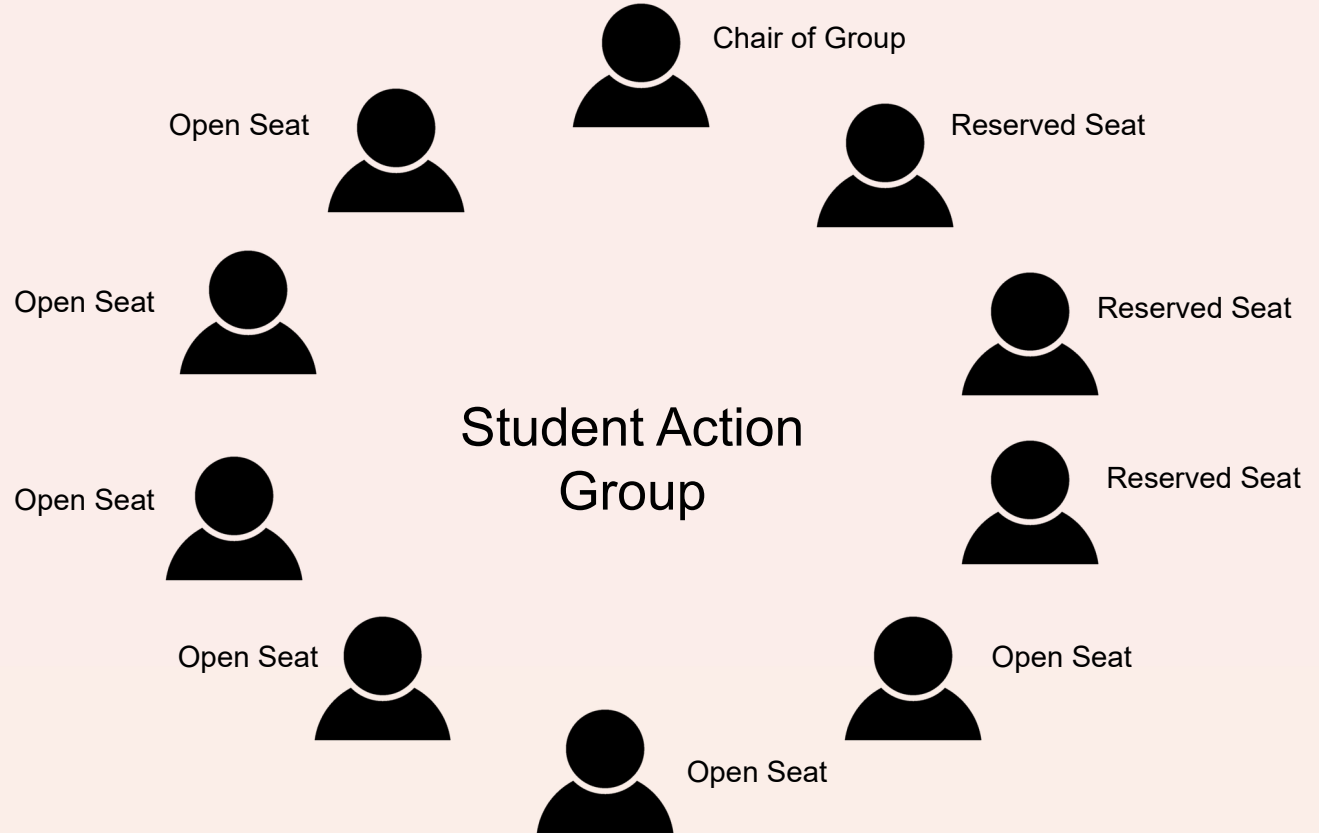Followed by a Subvention Bid to the University

Over the Summer Break - Planning Phase with Departments

How the two systems compare:

Feature:	Traditional System:	Student Action Groups:
Who is involved?	Department Rep, Course Reps	Champions, Chair of Group
Which students?	Undergraduates only	Undergraduates and postgraduates
Voluntary or paid?	Voluntary	Stipended - £600 each over the year
Selection process?	Elections or co-opted	Recruited - Reserved / Open Seats
How it works?	Department Rep acts as Team Leader to Course Reps Course Reps work	No hierarchy in the group Each department's Champions work as a team

Recruitment & Training

1st Stage of Recruitment: Expression of Interest Form - applicants were then invited to the 2nd Stage - a two hour Recruitment Session
Applicants asked to do a group activity and a one-to-one interview
Only 3 seats unfilled after this stage - all posrtgraduate seats.
Followed by two training sessions
Collaboration with GSA and department staff.

Student Action Groups in Practice:

Each Champion signed role agreement - YUSU & departments tracked their participation, with disengaged Champions not receiving the stipend payment.
Their Responsibilities; Attending departmental committees, collecting feedback, representing students, project / academic community work.
Our Responsibilities: Ongoing support, regular meetings with Champions & departments.

So, how did we do?
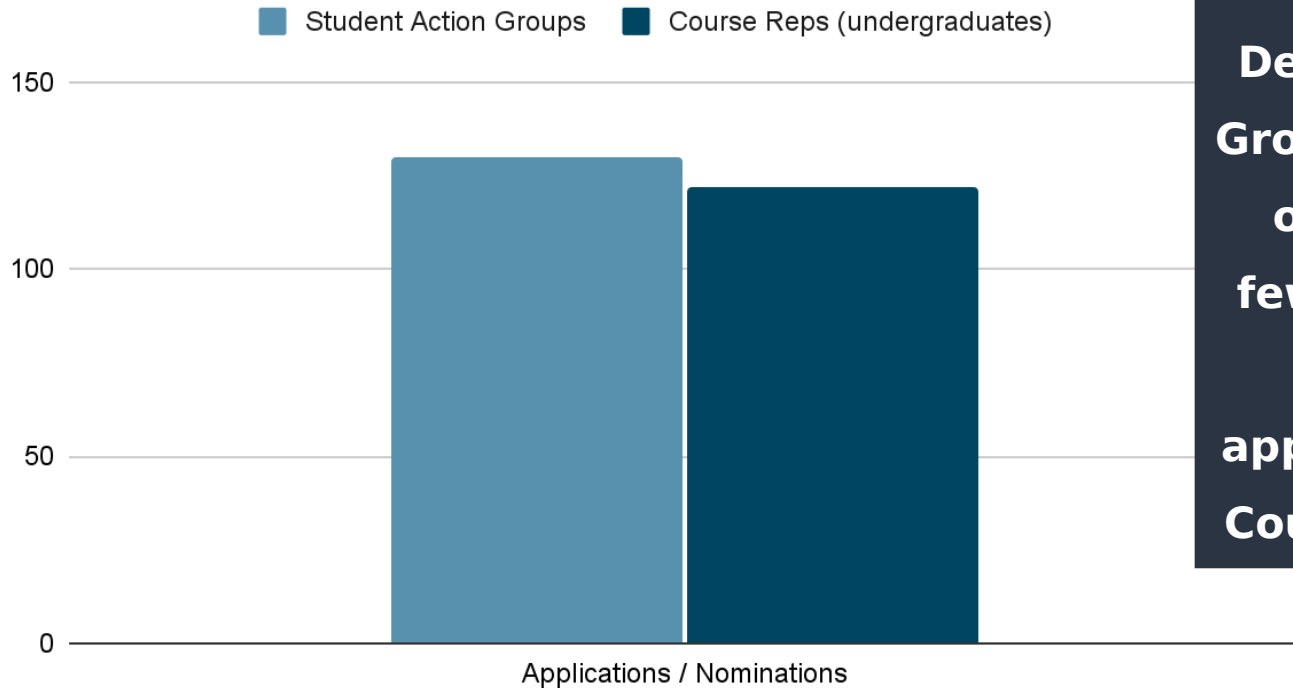
Three ways this pilot project was evaluated:
Quantifiable & quality data - applications, engagement levels, satisfaction levels
Academic Representation Research Project
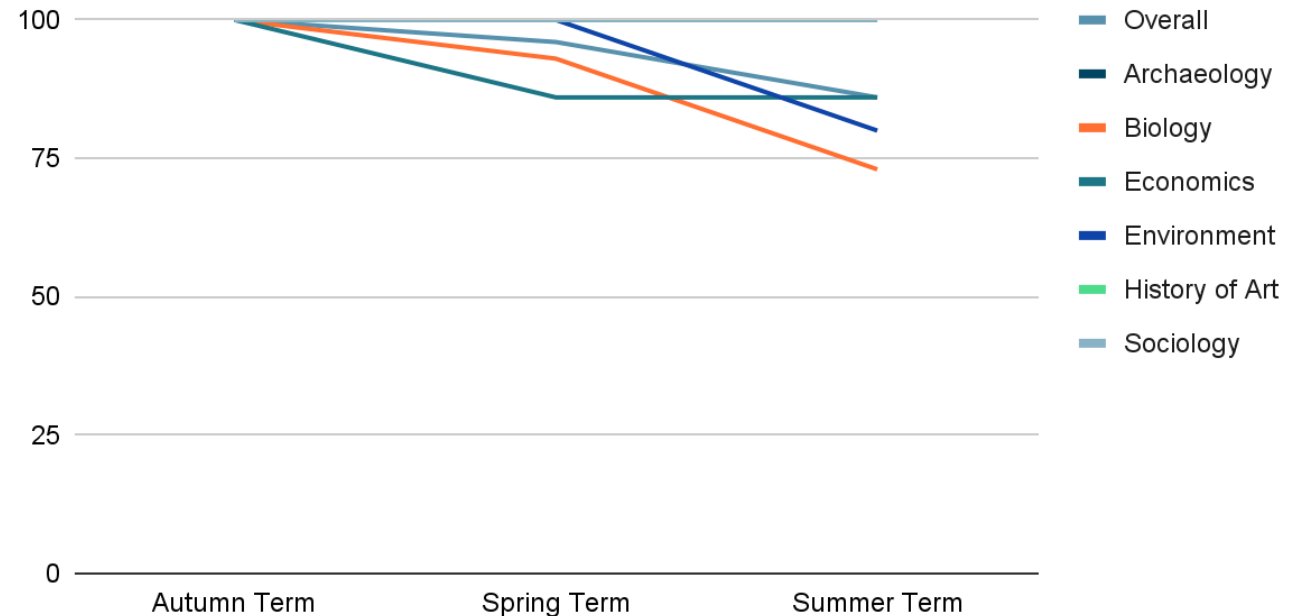External evaluation report - Alkhemy

Selection Data for Both Systems - 2022/23 Academic Year

Legend: Student Action Groups, Course Reps (undergraduates)

Y-axis: 0, 50, 100, 150

X-axis: Applications / Nominations

Despite Student Action Group applications being open in significantly fewer departments, we received more applications than we did Course Rep nominations

We usually begin to notice Course Reps engage with us less after the Easter break. This year the Champions generally remained engaged with us throughout the whole academic

Student Action Group engagement with YUSU - 2022/23 Academic Year

Legend:
- Overall
- Archaeology
- Biology
- Economics
- Environment
- History of Art
- Sociology

X-axis: Autumn Term, Spring Term, Summer Term
Y-axis: 0, 25, 50, 75, 100

Reflection Journal / Exit Interviews

Key indicator of overall satisfaction / personal development of Champions.
Reflection Journals: filled in twice in the academic year.
Positives: good relationships with each other; variety of things Champions could work on.
Negatives: frustration with progress; lack of awareness; difficulties meeting each other.
Exit Interviews - almost all Champions would recommend role to another student.
Many Champions felt their communication skills & confidence had grown.
Stipend & switch to recruitment instead of elections generally received very well.

Using NVivo, we ran an analysis to see which were the most frequent words Champions used when we asked them: "Have you set yourself any personal goals?" at the start of the year. Communication and Confidence were amongst the most frequently mentioned goals.

Academic Representation Research

First time we had a full year evaluation of Rep or Student Satisfaction.
2 parts: survey (577 participants) and focus groups (47 participants). Good mix of
undergraduate and postgraduate students participating in both stages.

Survey Findings:	Focus Group Findings:
Not many differences between systems	Students see representation as important & know it's needed, but feel it's ineffective
41% students knew Reps act as a bridge between staff & students; 32% had no understanding	Students bypass Reps when giving feedback
Over half (53%) couldn't name Reps or system	Students don't understand what happens to their feedback, or what happens in meetings

In-depth look at Survey question: "How well do you feel the academic representation system in your department is

Verdict	Number	Percentage
Very Well	37	6% (Lowest)
Fairly Well	170	29%
Not Well	108	19%
Unsure/Unclear	221	38% (Highest)
Verdict	Number	Percentage
No Power to Make Change	48	8%
Not Making Changes	63	11%
Not Had to Use Them/No Issues	58	10%
Acting on Feedback	75	13%
Unaware they Existed	43	7% (Lowest)
Lack of Visibility/Communication	149	26% (Highest)

Alkhemy Report - Context

Conducted external review of Student Action Groups over the year.
Co-produced a number of KPIs with the Champions and departmental staff.
Carried out a number of interviews with Champions and academic departments.
Using this information, Alkhemy evaluated our project against the KPIs, and identified short, medium and long-term recommendations.

Alkhemy Report - Findings

Champions Perspective - Average score of 7.8 out of 10. Satisfied with levels of support & working relationships; would have liked more guidance re. Collecting feedback, and feeling involved with decision making.

Department Staff Perspective - Average score of 5.7 out of 10. More neutrally received; the level of communication, collaboration and engagement with Champions varied across the departments. Again something we had not previously evaluated.

Based on findings, Alkhemy created us recommendations to implement in the future split into three categories: Organisational. Communication, and Training, Community & Support.

So, what's next?

Conclusion: mixed feedback overall BUT we showed this approach worked without representation collapsing & the students gained a tremendous amount from their roles.
Two thirds of the pilot departments continuing with Student Action Groups.
Other departments paying their Department Rep, and switching to recruitment / co-option instead of elections.
YUSU also running more targeted events next year, creating an academic community for Reps and raising their visibility

Discussion Pointers:

Any questions for us? What did you like? What would you change?
Has this inspired you to want to try anything different with your academic representation? Why / why not?
What are the biggest challenges to academic representation today?
Does a system like ours solve any of these challenges? What more could we do as a sector to alleviate these pressures?

We would love to carry on this conversation…

Get in touch with us at
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