

Student Staff Liaison Committees

Building on good practice

A paper for Learning and Teaching Committee

# Introduction

This report is based on a summary of the research undertaken by staff of the Loughborough Students Union based on SSLC minutes from all departments 2010-11.

This analysis focused on;

* Student representative attendance levels
* the apparent level of student involvement in the meetings
* the clarity of points being actioned and the follow up of these actions at subsequent meetings
* any mention of NSS results
* any mention of discussion of Module feedback reports.

Overall analysis showed that there is still a significant level of variety in the conduct of SSLC meetings throughout the University.

For the purpose of this summary report we have used the above criteria to categorise a number of Departments as ‘good’ examples of SSLC’s. Within these good Departments there is a variety of practice, but in essence they share a number of key factors we believe are crucial in making them effective.

We have also found examples of interesting good practice that seem to be operating successfully in some departments and we have highlighted some of these.

In the other departments we have similarly found evidence of common practice that we would regard as questionable or unhelpful in obtaining clear, representative and cogent feedback from students on their learning and teaching experience. We have highlighted some examples to illustrate the general points without attributing them to the specific departments.

# Obtaining the minutes

Within the Loughborough University Code of Practice for Staff/Student Liaison Committees there is a requirement for the minutes of SSLC’s to be forwarded to the VP: Education at the Students Union. A few Departments consistently forward these minutes to the VP: Education, however in the majority of cases this does not occur. We would like to thank those Departments who consistently forward minutes to us, or who replied in a timely fashion to our request for SSLC minutes.

In some cases it required 8 separate approaches to be made to a department over a period of 2 months in order to achieve compliance with this University Code of Practice . It is difficult to attribute such a difficulty simply to disorganisation or pressure of work, as a result in future after three reminders the Union will resort to Freedom of Information Act arrangements. We trust that the University will put suitable arrangements in place to make this unnecessary.

Many departments produce minutes promptly following the meeting while others seem to produce them closer to the date of the next meeting. The prompt production of minutes is obviously vital in maintaining interest and momentum from students.

# Good Practice

**The following Departments showed considerable evidence of good practice and were rewarded by relatively strong levels of engagement from the Student reps.**

* Aero and Auto
* Business
* Chemistry
* Chemical Engineering
* Design
* Electrical Engineering
* Geography
* Information Science
* Materials
* Maths
* Physics
* SSEHS

NB SSLC’s in Wolfson and Civil and Building are conducted in a seemingly different approach to other Departments throughout the University, whist there may well be some merit in this approach it doesn’t lend itself to valid comparison, we have therefore excluded these departments from this report.

# Common Characteristics of Departments classified as ‘good’ include:

* An average attendance rate over the year above 55% (the highest rate was 86%)
* Encouraging all students by year group or programme to make comments about their course during the SSLC by including a standard agenda item for that purpose.
* A relatively traceable path of points being actioned and followed up at further meetings
* An introduction to SSLC and its importance
* A good 2 way communication process with the department feeding back information to Programme Reps as well as Reps feeding back to the Department

## Other positive practice

* Mention of report on module feedback data with the summary of the plans of action as a result of module feedback being circulated at the meeting.
* Departments consulting students on the causes of low scores in certain modules / elements of department

# Characteristics of other Departments and examples of questionable practice:-

* An attendance rate of below 55% (the lowest rate was 29%)
* Giving students an ‘Any other Business’ section at the end of the agenda rather than every student having the opportunity to comment
* Little or no clear actioning and follow up of points raised by students.
* In one case the AOB student section was the only one where there were no arrangements for minutes to be converted to action points.
* Concerns raised by students being ‘managed’ rather than addressed e.g. students being told that do not really want feedback in the form they asked for it.

Throughout our analysis we uncovered examples of excellent practice as well as examples of practice which is less positive than we would expect. We feel it beneficial to highlight a few of these illustrative examples within this summary report. (For the purpose of the report any identifying features have been removed and replaced with ‘Staff Member’)

* NSS mentioned in terms of importance of completion and “Staff Member asked that finalist student representatives encourage all students to complete the survey, and to consider giving a score of 5 rather than 4 when they wanted to respond positively.”
* **“** Some students feel that they are not getting enough out of the lectures; some lecturers are just reading from slides that are on Learn.

**Action** –Staff Member will raise this issue at the next staff meeting.”

This practice is of concern as the vast majority of points are referred to various staff meetings where students are not present and never followed up at subsequent meetings.

* In a Department there was evidence of a point being actioned in the first meeting and never being completed. - Programme Reps requesting details on how to email other students on their course and being told this would be possible during the first meeting of the year and then appearing on the agenda unfinished for the rest of the year.

These are simply illustrative examples based on minutes. Anecdotal evidence from student representatives suggests that student items are not always minuted effectively and this is a source of some frustration to student reps.

# Conclusions and Proposals

We believe that SSLCs have a vital role in closing the feedback loop by being the forum where department leaders and student representatives discuss what conclusions may be drawn from student feedback and what plans for improvement would be best.

It is evident that there are examples of excellent practice with regards to the running of SSLC’s within Loughborough University, it is also evident that this practice is not University wide. Our analysis has shown that in the student focused SSLC’s attendance in significantly higher and students appear more readily willing to engage in honest and open two way communication.

1. Good practice as outlined in this report should be shared and used more widely.
   * For these committees to be as effective as possible all parties need to engage in this activity in an atmosphere of mutual respect, giving each other space and time to set out their perspectives.
   * The good practice outlined in this report embraces that principle it would be highly beneficial if it was more widespread.
   * Compliance with the existing University code of practice would be a basic first step.
2. All module feedback data must be available to all members of SSLC
   * In this context it is vital that all the available relevant information is shared by all parties in the room. This represents a primary reason why student representatives must have access to all the module feedback data supplied by their fellow students. This, with the NSS data, should form the shared evidential background to any discussions and it is unacceptable for some people to have access to vital information while other do not.
   * Student representatives will be able to add context and background to based on their personal experience and that of their colleagues and be able to discuss the extent to which new approaches are likely to be successful from a student perspective.
3. The Student Union Student Voice support Unit should provide stronger support for student reps
   * To do this successfully the Students Union will need to provide representative teams with substantially more support and advice and we are committed to doing so.
4. Stronger Department rep teams should be led by a Programme Rep President
   * We are also developing plans to form much more effective department representative teams to be led by a Programme Rep President. We are also developing a recruitment campaign for programmed “your Education” and we should look for full support for this from Departments.
5. Reports to students
   * We propose to publish reports to students from each department including key data and information about proposals for change jointly authored by Student representatives and Department staff.
   * These reports would allow students to look at progress on their issues of concern over a longer period and provide a record of progress.
6. Conclusion

We believe that these proposals, including more widespread use of the strong practice outlined in this report will have a dramatic effect on the quality of student representation. This stronger feedback loop will enable departments to deliver an even stronger academic experience to students.

This will, in turn, increase student satisfaction and be reflected in key indicators including the NSS enhancing the University’s reputation and supporting our future recruitment and on-going success.

The Union is committed to promoting the spirit of partnership and mutual respect that is the heart of the Loughborough Student Experience.