Guidance on the Operation of Student-Staff Programme Forums

Date of approval: Academic Board approved this guidance in June 2021

This Guidance contains the following sections:

1. Introduction

In late 2019/early 2020 the University undertook a review of existing Programme Boards. The following constitutes a summary of the changes approved by Academic Development Committee.

The term Programme Board has been deleted and replaced with that of the Student-staff Programme Forum. This reflects the fact that student input is not secondary and subservient to the needs of 'the programme', but – rather – is at the heart of the entire process. The changed in name gives prominence to students' contributions, and defines the activity as an open discussion about the programme, rather than something more formal and bureaucratic.

The following guidance sets out how the new Student-Staff Forums should operate at St Mary's. The guidance allows for some flexibility which reflects the differences in cohort size, nature of student cohort, semester structure and programme content across the university, and even within faculties and institutes.

2. The purpose of the Student-Staff Student Forum

Programme Forums are intended to be student focused and student led, and students should feel that they provide appropriate opportunities for the expression of the student voice across the university.

The forum should be structured to foreground the contributions of the students. It should be 'student-led', while still being chaired by the Course/Subject Lead. Students should be well-supported throughout the process to enable the contributions of as wide a range of students as possible to be heard and considered.

The Student-Staff Forum is an essential part of the functioning of a degree programme, alongside other, perhaps more informal opportunities for student voices to be heard, as it allows for student feedback and suggestions to be minuted, and so put on the record.

3. The format of the Student-Staff Forum

Meetings should be at least 1 hour in duration – experience suggests that 1.5 hours may be preferable to avoid the meeting feeling overly 'rushed'.

Two basic models of Programme Boards were found across the university, and these can continue to inform the operation of Student-Staff Programme Forums:

1. A focused meeting outside of scheduled teaching times at which the student cohort is represented by student reps who come with pre-gathered student feedback. Also present, as well as the programme team, are representatives of services such as Employability, TEL, Library). The benefits of this format is that it is easier to minute, and more convenient for services personal (TEL, Employability etc) to attend, as otherwise they would have to attend a meeting for each year group. Also, it allows for cross-fertilisation of ideas and information across different student year groups
2. A more freeform meeting organised during scheduled teaching times that gathers student feedback then and there from all students. This option is more useful in programmes where student reps are hard to recruit and motivate.
3. Meetings can be 'virtual' (online) and conducted via Zoom/MSTeams where this is deemed to be more appropriate and convenient, and where it may facilitate student attendance.

4. An agenda for Student-Staff Forum

Regardless of the format in which the Forum operates (e.g. Format 1 or 2 above), there should be an agenda to guide the discussion and ensure that key issues are considered.
Course/Subject Leads are therefore asked to use the following agenda as a 'guide':

Guide agenda:

1. Action points from the previous Forum/Board (previous semester)
2. Programme Feedback (and staff response) from current semester (i.e. What's going well , what's not going so well and constructive proposals for solutions)
   - Teaching on the programme
   - Learning opportunities & Learning community
     - Have you had the chance to work with others and develop ideas & understanding?
     - Has the programme allowed you to develop your understanding of specific topic areas?
   - Employability
     - Has the programme helped students develop professional skills and an understanding of how these and their degree relate to graduate careers?
   - Assessment and feedback
     - Do you understand what is being asked of you in the assessments?

- If you have had feedback, have you understood it and has it helped you develop your academic skills?
- Academic support
  - Have you been able to contact your tutors? Have they responded in an appropriate timeframe?
  - Are you happy with the level of support?
- Organisation and management
- Learning resources
  - Access to books, journals etc… and usefulness of Moodle pages
  - Range, diversity and accessibility of resources?
- Equality, diversity and inclusion
  - Is the programme reflective of the multiplicity of cultures, identities, and experiences in the UK and internationally?
  - Are opportunities offered by the programme structured in such a way as to be inclusive of a broad range of student experiences, strengths and needs?
  - Student Wellbeing- are students aware and making use of support available from student services? How can the programme help ensure student wellbeing?

3. Timeline for staff responses to student feedback
4. External Examiner reports (semester 1 meeting only)
5. TEL feedback
6. Library feedback
7. Careers feedback and the development of employability.
8. Action points from module evaluation feedback (previous semester)
9. AOB

The agenda should move as quickly as possible to the students' contributions. Standing items such as External Examiner (EE) reports can be moved further down the agenda. It was noted that starting with the EE report can set up a defensive tone, with the Programme team accentuating the positive before the students even get to comment. Discussion of action points from the previous Forum/Board can remain at the head of the agenda, as these demonstrate the programme team's willingness to respond to student feedback.

Students' discussion of the programme should be focused on **teaching and learning topics/issues**, rather than going through the programme **module by module**.

They should be presented to students as being an opportunity for students to reflect holistically on the programme as a whole (with the emphasis on on eliciting good and best practice that students are finding useful, helpful, supportive) rather than individually on each module.

The reasons for this are:

o Some programmes have very large numbers of modules, so going through each module would be time-consuming and potential repetitive.

o To avoid potential negative focus on individual lecturers and module convenors, and a defensive/oppositional tone to the meeting.

o To focus students on the aspects of teaching and learning as defined by the National Student Survey (NSS) and Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES). This has the double effect of helping programme teams identify problem areas well ahead of these surveys actually being filled

out, and of acquainting students with the kinds of questions they will be asked on these surveys and – hopefully – helping them see how their programmes deliver on them.

However, there also needs to space for students to raise issues relating to specific modules so actions can be targeted if necessary.

It is also important to be aware that some programmes include cross-validated modules (i.e. shared with other programmes) and the Forum meeting can also, therefore, provide a useful way for their experience(s) to be considered and passed to other programme teams – their experience may differ from host programme students.

Calling the meetings a 'Forum' rather than a Board' encourages students to think of their contributions as part of a discussion, both amongst students and between students and staff, rather than a report. This discussion allows for more open and informal commentary, and also allows for conversations to take place across year groups. Forums conducted in this way represent a significant opportunity for examining issues of equality, diversity and inclusion within programmes, whether in relation to curriculum content, delivery, assessment or student experience

For example, a comment or question from a second-year student about a module in that year's teaching that is addressed to the room at large might be answered by a third-year student who has done the module themselves, or know about it from the cohort at large, rather than a member of the programme team; this might be more reassuring and convincing to the student than a response from the staff.

5. Timing of Student-Staff Programme Forums

Obviously, the Forums is just one of many opportunities for student voice to be heard during the process of the year. Others might be:
- A module or year group **introductory session**, in which expectations and learning outcomes are discussed.
- An informal **'check-up'** by module convenor or Course/Subject Lead at some point between Weeks 3 and 5 to make sure the module is running broadly to students' expectations. This should be followed in Week 6/7 by a mid-module evaluation process of some kind, in accordance with guidance already provided by CTESS to Faculty staff. Mid-Module evaluation does <u>not</u> need to be either online or involve lengthy questionnaires. It might make use of a simple 'Stop/Start/Continue' info-gathering exercise (which could be led by the student reps). A mid module evaluation should be conducted in the middle of both the autumn and spring semesters, and Programme Teams can and should draw on this 'informal' feedback in the Student-Staff Programme Forum. This would be followed by a 'You Said, We Did' session or a brief report/written summary provided via Moodle the following week so all students can access it.
- The Date of the Forum should be published to all students and they should be reminded that their rep will be seeking feedback – time needs to be set aside for the student rep(s) to to do this within a core module. Students should be aware how they can raise issues with their rep – ensuring that rep's name and e mail address are available on the programme Moodle front page is the best way of ensuring this.
- If issues are numerous and need further discussion then another meeting and/or more time can be devoted.
- Standard (i.e. end of module) **Module evaluation forms**, filled in anonymously by all students, usually in the last week of teaching (week 12). These are useful as a simple quantitative measurement of student experience, in terms both of metrics and textual feedback. At the

point when Module Evaluation forms are completed by students, they should have a good sense of their preparedness to complete any final assessments.

- It is assumed that Forums would take place sometime between weeks 6/7 in the semester, by which time students will have had the opportunity to receive some formative feedback, and have a sense of their preparedness for any final assessments. In cases where a programme is mostly delivered in evenings and weekends or in non-standard formats, appropriate adjustments to the timing of Forums need to be made and communicated to students.
- The timing of this may fluctuate according to programme, but it is assumed that the Forum should be held:
  - far enough into the module that students have a real sense of how the teaching and learning is operating
  - not so far into the module that the programme team has no time to make useful changes to the module during that academic year, based on student feedback.

Obviously, neither Programme Forums nor Module Evaluation Forms can collect responses to **final assessments** that are submitted after the end of a 13-week semester, but they should both be able to collect responses to formative feedback and preparedness for assessments.

6. Minutes of Student-Staff Forums
Forum minutes should be circulated and posted on Moodle pages as soon as possible after the event. These should clearly highlight student comments, external examiner comments, action points completed or not from previous Forums, and action points set from this Forum.

7. Follow-up Programme Team Meetings

Programme teams should ideally meet to reflect on the comments and feedback received during the Forum, and these reflections should inform the outcomes.

8. Accommodating programme diversity

Programmes taught in the evening or off-site, or taught through blended learning, will need to adapt this guidance so as to be practicable and enable contribution from all students.

Joint honours (JH) programmes: where it is not practicable to run separate Forums for all combinations of joint honours programmes, it is suggested that appropriate steps are taken to elicit feedback from Joint Honours students as a category or community of students. Two approaches may be appropriate here:
1) Heads of Department convene a meeting of all Joint Honours students each semester so students have the opportunity to feedback more generic, cross-programme issues.
2) ADSEs convene a meeting with Joint Honours students once a semester and consider any issues they are having that wouldn't always be picked up at Forums.

9. Leadership and composition of Forums

Programme teams should remain alert to the diversity of student voices being heard and should endeavour to ensure that sufficient opportunities are available for a range of students to contribute.

It is expected that Chairs of Staff-Student Programme Forums will normally be staff from the programme in question, but can also (if felt desirable) be drawn from outside the programme.

It is recommended that Programmes explore using student 'co-chairs' to facilitate greater student voice and active engagement.

Chairs of Staff-Student Programme Forums are encouraged to invite academic/service/professional staff from outside the programme (as deemed appropriate) in question in order to share practice and provide objective input into discussions.

10. Student Representatives

Recruiting and encouraging student reps is obviously key to the success of Staff-Student Programme Forums. Reps are elected under the auspices of Student Union. Student Reps are normally elected in the spring of the previous year for continuing students so they are ready to carry-out their role(s) at beginning of following academic year.

The Forum is an opportunity for undergraduates to engage meaningfully with their teachers in a broadly equitable format and for some students this professional aspect will be appealing in itself, and can be reflected on their CVs.

Careful consideration should be given to issues of diversity and inclusion in recruiting and encouraging student reps. It is essential to consider the diversity of students undertaking the programme and the students volunteering, or being approached, to undertake student rep roles. Where a range of student demographic groups are not being reflected by student reps, the possible reasons for this should be examined by programme teams, and ways to mitigate this sought. Alternative ways of eliciting student voice may also be appropriate in these circumstances, and can be facilitated (as appropriate) by the Students Union.

Once elected, please ensure that you refer your student representatives to the '**Guidance for Student Representatives'** contained in **Appendix A** of this document.

Student reps have FOUR main functions in the programme Forum organisation:

1. Gathering and filtering information from students to share at the Forum (though there are other important channels for student voice). This aspect is particularly important in that reps are able to be neutral channels for students' feedback, especially where individual students might be nervous about communicating directly face-to-face with team members.
2. Provide feedback notes from the Student-Staff Forum to the faculty reps regarding areas of good practice that can be passed on to other programmes and other areas that may need the attention of the faculty reps.
3. Reps must also be able to reflect the experience of all students, including those who may be not be 'typical' of the programme. For example, the views of mature students with home commitments may be different from those of young students living locally, and student reps may need support in fulfilling this function effectively.
4. Disseminating information back from the Forum to students (though again there are other channels for this feedback). Please draw attention of your Programme representatives to the '**Programme Representatives Feedback Form'** contained in **Appendix B** of this document.

Numbers of student reps per year may depend on student cohort numbers. Guidance for staff on SimmSpace says that "every programme (at all levels) should have at least one representative position". Staff discussion suggests that **two as a minimum** is more useful as this i) gives students confidence to speak in the Programme Forum ii) makes collecting feedback from students easier, especially in a programme with many different modules and iii) protects against a programme cohort not being represented in case of possible non-attendance.

Course/Subject Leads should hold elections for Student Reps at the start of the academic year (e.g. weeks 2-3) and should notify the SU of the reps who have been elected. Again, issues of diversity must be carefully examined in relation to elections and support may be required to ensure that as wide a range of students as possible are selected over a period of time. Reps for level 5/6 should be appointed prior to the end of the previous academic year.

Course/Subject Leads should meet with Student Reps at least twice a semester in order to be fully up to date with anything the students may be facing. This should be led by the Course/Subject Lead actively engaging the students and planning to meet with them.
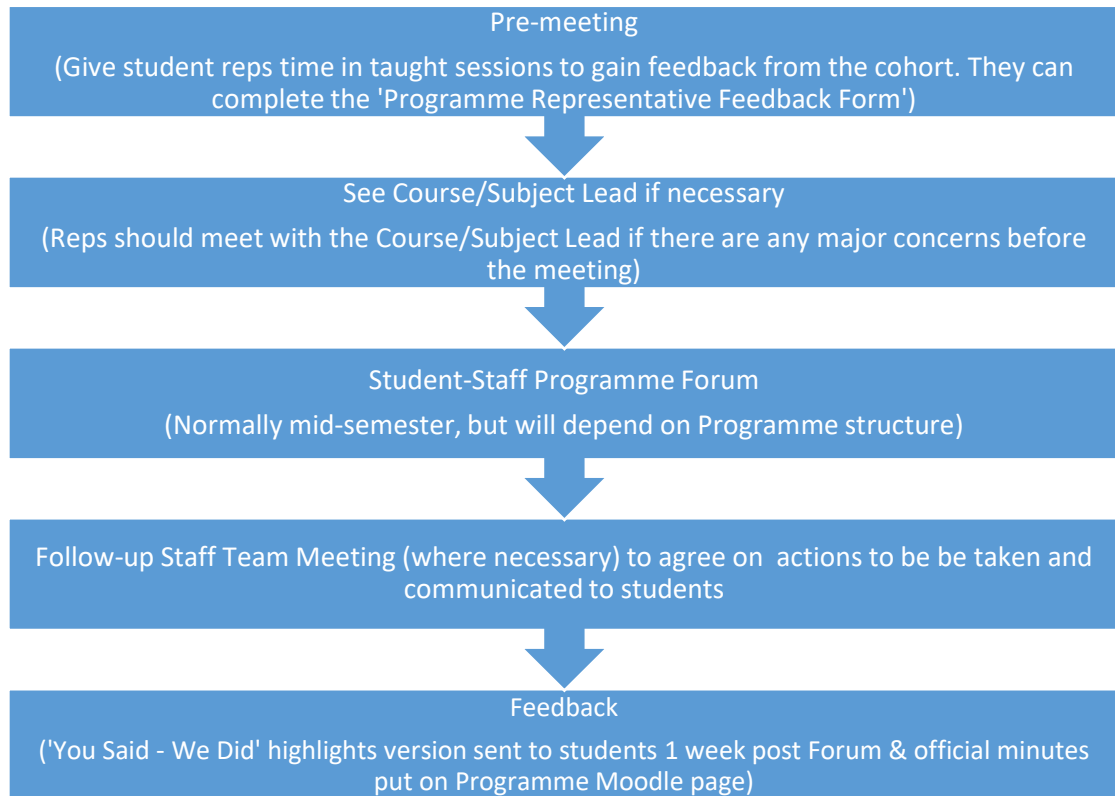
Use of student reps pre-Forum: Student reps should receive training from the SU, but it is important that Course/Subject Leads support their student reps as well during the course of the semester, especially in the lead-up to the Programme Forum.

An **informal meeting** with student reps could take place early in the semester i) to reinforce the importance to the programme of the reps and ii) to give the student reps the opportunity to share ideas and concerns amongst themselves, and let second- and third-year reps guide and support first-year reps; this is especially important in the first semester. Course/Subject Leads could therefore organise informal meetings in Week 3 or 4, whereby they could chat with reps and then leave them to talk themselves. This meeting might of course be an opportunity to hear feedback from student reps, but this would not be its primary aim, or indeed the primary opportunity for students to give feedback.

Student reps should be given time during timetabled sessions in core modules (so all students are present) prior to the Forum to speak to module cohorts and solicit feedback and comments. Student reps should be do with knowledge of how the Forum agenda is structured, i.e. so that they can ask questions in ways that will help provide feedback for the specific questions suggested in the Forum (i.e. NSS/PTES topics).

In programmes with joint/combined honours pathways it is important to ensure a spread of reps across pathways. Having only Single Honours students might not represent full student voice across the programme, but obviously Joint Honours students attend fewer modules so will find it more work to gather student feedback. See note above regarding informal Joint Honours programme meetings. Photographs and contact information for student reps (with permission) should be posted on the Moodle pages for the programmes.

11.The Process associated with Student-Staff Programme Forums

Pre-meeting

(Give student reps time in taught sessions to gain feedback from the cohort. They can complete the 'Programme Representative Feedback Form')

See Course/Subject Lead if necessary

(Reps should meet with the Course/Subject Lead if there are any major concerns before the meeting)

Student-Staff Programme Forum

(Normally mid-semester, but will depend on Programme structure)

Follow-up Staff Team Meeting (where necessary) to agree on actions to be be taken and communicated to students

Feedback

('You Said - We Did' highlights version sent to students 1 week post Forum & official minutes put on Programme Moodle page)

Appendix A

Guidelines for Programme Representatives

What are the key functions of the student representative role?

Student reps have three main functions in the programme Forums:

1. Gathering and filtering information from students to share at the Forum (though there are other important channels for student voice). This aspect is particularly important in that reps are able to be neutral channels for students' feedback, especially where individual students might be nervous about communicating directly face-to-face with team members.
2. Reps must also be able to reflect the experience of all students, including those who may be not be 'typical' of the programme. For example, the views of mature students with home commitments may be different from those of young students living locally, and student reps may need support in fulfilling this function effectively.
3. Disseminating information back from Programme Forum to students (though again there are other channels for this feedback). You can use the '**Programme Representatives Feedback Form'** to summarise this feedback. (See Appendix B)

How do I prepare for a Student-Staff Programme Forum?

- Refer to the 'Programme Representative Feedback Form' and use that as a base to collect feedback from your peers.
- Remember to take into account both academic learning, and professional skills development and the degree to which students feel their employability has been supported.
- Try to ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute to the feedback.
- You will be given time in taught sessions in the weeks leading up to the Forum to gain feedback from your peers. Please take notes of what feedback has been provided at this time.
- Asking fellow students for particular examples of what was valuable or what could have been better will give academics the chance to capture good practice or development areas.
- Please note that we value Programme Representative's personal feedback, but the group's feedback should be relayed accurately in the meeting even if you don't agree with it. Staff won't 'shoot the messenger'.

How might I gather additional comments/feedback?

In the past students have used the following modes to gain feedback:
- Create a survey
- Student meetings
- Group emails
- Facebook groups
- WhatsApp groups

- Informal discussions before or after lectures

What is expected of me in the Student-Staff Programme Forum?

- These are relatively formal meetings so please use appropriate language, but don't be afraid to ask for clarification or explanation of anything you are not sure about.
- If there is more than 1 rep per year group, then you should agree who will feedback which points.
- You should go through the feedback points in turn, but please do not mention individual staff by name, but discuss the point generally to a topic area or specific module.

What should I do after the Student-Staff Programme Forum?

Minutes and feedback via 'You Said – We did' highlights will be available for students, if there is anything that is not accurate, then please report this to the Course/Subject Lead.

How do I capture my own professional development from being a programme representative?

You are developing key professional skills by doing this role and after each meeting you can reflect on some of these and write down examples e.g. persuading academic staff in the meeting, presenting findings from surveying students or negotiating changes to the way feedback is given. Attending the training for programme representatives, as well as visiting the *Getting Ahead: Employability for Student Leaders* Moodle pages to which you are enrolled, will give you ideas on how to do this. You can also book an appointment with the Careers Service for further help.

Appendix B

St Mary's
University
Twickenham
London

Programme Representatives Feedback form

Programme Representatives:	
Date of Feedback:	

Comments in relation to the following areas of the Programme:
• Teaching on the programme • Learning opportunities & Learning community • Have you had the chance to work with others and develop ideas & understanding? • Has the programme allowed you to develop your understanding of specific topic areas? • Employability - Has the programme helped you develop your professional skills and an understanding of how these and your degree relate to graduate careers? (Asking fellow students for particular examples of what was valuable or what could have been better will give academics the chance to capture good practice or development areas) • Assessment and feedback • Do you understand what is being asked of you in the assessments? • If you have had feedback, have you understood it and has it helped you develop your academic skills • Academic support • Have you been able to contact your tutors? Have they responded in an appropriate timeframe? • Are you happy with the level of support? • Organisation and management • Learning resources • Access to books, journals etc… and usefulness of Moodle pages