

College learner representative systems: the fundamentals

Purpose – this briefing provides a fundamental guide to the creation and success of learner rep systems.

Audience – any college staff involved in the day-to-day operational design and delivery of learner rep systems.

Welcome!

This guide is an introduction to everything *learner reps*. Whether you’ve been working with reps for a while or are just starting out, this guide is here to help you build and maintain a vibrant learner rep system—one that brings real benefits to college life, as well as helps learners build useful knowledge, skills, and experiences.

What’s the best learner rep system in Wales?

This is a trick question (sorry!) - there isn’t one “best” way to run a learner rep system. Colleges across Wales each do it very differently, depending on their priorities, the types of learners they have, and the resources available (amongst other factors).

This means every college’s system will look a bit different, and what works for one college won’t necessarily work for another. But what is important is that whatever system a college has, it works for them and their learners.

This guide is designed with that in mind. It doesn’t tell you exactly what to do. Instead, it shares ideas, principles, and good practices. You can then decide what works best for you and your college.

What does a learner rep do?

A learner rep is someone who speaks on behalf of learners or groups of learners – they share opinions, perspectives, ideas, and questions. They act as bridge between the college and the learner body. If the college wants to know what learners think, learner reps are a key source of information.

Learner reps usually have a specific remit, like representing learners on their course or campus.

A learner rep *system* is how all this is organised and co-ordinated across the whole college.

Why is having a learner rep system important?

A well-run, active learner rep system can be a fantastic way to help the college understand what learners are thinking, what they care about, and what they need. This

feedback can improve many areas of college life, from scheduling classes, to making sure campus spaces are safe and accessible, to sharing cultural understanding and cohesion. Overall, centring the learner voice can help build a supportive and responsive learning community.

How do learner reps give feedback?

Reps can give feedback in a wide range of ways, including:

1. **Helping with decisions:** Reps can share learner opinions when the college is making decisions, like changing library hours. The college can proactively ask the reps for input and use what they say to help inform their decisions.
2. **Raising issues:** Reps can let the college know about issues that they feel are important to students. This means they may be raising important issues that the college was not aware of, or they raise small problems before they become big ones. For example, if the poor lighting in a learner carpark makes it feel unsafe at night, a rep can tell a staff member about it, so the college can fix the issue.
3. **Sharing important news:** Reps can help spread important information to learners. For example, if a big lecture hall floods and classes are moved to the gym, reps can share this update with other learners. This way, learners hear the news in different ways, not just by email or text message. And therefore, more likely to absorb it.

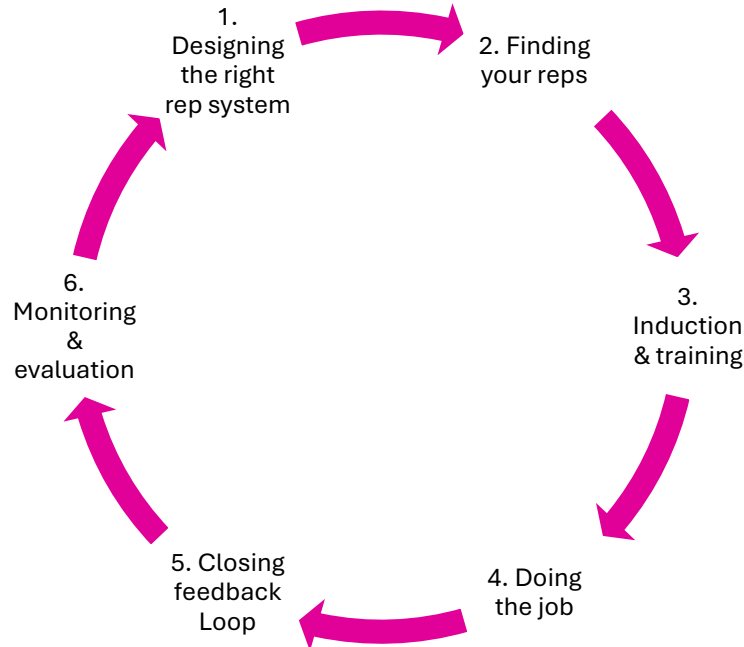
Core principals of a learner rep system:

While there is no one blueprint for a learner rep system, there are some core principles which any functioning, healthy course rep system would be based upon. We've taken these principles from the [Learner Voice Framework](#). These are:

1. **Partnership** – A dynamic, respectful partnership between learners and the college creates a positive college community. Working together fosters a shared vision for quality education, which ultimately improves the whole college experience.
2. **Empowered learners** - This means helping learners find and use their voice in a meaningful way. When learners are skilled, knowledgeable, and confident, they bring something special and valuable to their college. When colleges support learners in shaping their education, every learner has the chance to make a difference.
3. **Inclusive** – Inclusive practices celebrate diversity and amplify all voices, especially under-represented groups. Colleges that listen and support diverse perspectives enrich the experiences of all learners.
4. **Embedded and valued** – Learner engagement is done best when it is meaningfully integrated into all decisions across college life– from course reps to elected officers, to student governors, from course quality meetings to EDI initiatives, to the governing board.
5. **Invested, strategic, and sustainable** – the rep system is part of a wider eco-system of learner voice, which is adequately supported and resourced to have a meaningful long-term impact.

Establishing and maintaining a learner rep system

There are several phases in the life cycle of learner rep system. This section will take each of these stages in turn.



Stage 1: designing the right rep system

Now is the time to think about what the college and learners need from a rep system. When you first create this system, remember that it will change and improve over time. In the first year, don't try to do too much; focus on testing ideas and learning what works without getting overwhelmed.

Think about:

- **Grouping learners:** How can you group learners so they have good representation? At first, you might focus only on course reps. As the system develops, consider adding faculty reps, campus reps, part-time learners, evening learners, and learners with disabilities etc. But at the beginning, keep it simple.
- **The big issues:** What topics do learners want to discuss? What do they care about? There might be big changes happening at the college, like new building projects. There are also everyday issues, like catering and transport, that affect learner life. Gain an understanding of what learners are concerned about and tailor your rep system towards those issues.
- **Existing forums for reps:** What forums can give the reps a useful platform to speak?

- Can they attend faculty meetings? They may need some training and support to help them navigate these.
- Is there a group working on specific tasks that a rep can join? e.g. revamp of the sport facilities.
- Could the Head of Department meet with faculty reps for 30 minutes each month to discuss issues and let reps bring up their concerns?

Engaging with college staff

Staff need to understand how important the learner voice is and what the rep system does. Some will support it right away, while others might be unsure or worried. Everyone should know the purpose of the rep system and how they can help make it successful. Staff who sit on boards with reps should also know why the rep is there, what their role is, and how they can help support the rep.

Training for staff doesn't have to be complicated or add to their workload. It should simply help them understand how to work with reps to support learners and improve the college.

For example, tutors can help promote the election for reps, and members of committees can help by being warmly welcoming to new reps on the committee and by showing understanding as reps settle into their roles.

Stage 2: Finding Your Reps

Who can be a learner rep

Any learner who is registered with the college can be a learner rep. A rep dedicated to part-time learners would ideally be a part-time learner, and a rep dedicated to the science faculty would ideally be from the science faculty.

Recruiting reps

First, create a clear description of the rep role. Learners need to know what to expect. If they need to attend meetings, include the dates if you have them. Also, tell them they will receive training (see the section on induction and training). Make sure to list the benefits of being a rep, like developing skills, gaining professional experience, and training. Include as much information as you can.

Spread the word as much as possible. One big reason learners don't participate is that they don't know about it. If you already have reps, let them help. Use posters, announce it in lectures, share on social media, ask staff to talk to their learners, ask current reps to give class shout outs or upload social media messages. It's important to use multiple methods to reach as many learners as possible.

Having learners elect their reps is helpful as it gives the role more gravitas, and the person more legitimacy, plus the election itself helps raise the profile of the rep system.

For the election of a course rep, you could invite learners to express interest in the role. This can be a short statement, maybe 50-100 words about why they would be a good

rep. Set a deadline for submitting the statement, maybe one to two weeks. Then share these statements with the class and take a vote at the end of a lecture using a show of hands. Some colleges will use an electronic system. The most important quality is that the process is transparent.

1. Ask expression of interest statements from interested learners
2. Share these statements with the voting learners
3. Count the votes!

Sometimes, reps are chosen when a lecturer asks if anyone is interested and takes a quick show of hands. But this can cause problems with inclusivity as research shows it is usually the more confident people, often men or those in the majority group, that will raise their hands. This can leave out shyer learners, women, and people from minority backgrounds. A better approach is to have a more organised process that helps include everyone.

Gower College Swansea: *Gower College Swansea use the mandatory British Values tutorials as a way to elect their reps (as well as sabbatical officer and student governors). The democracy/voting session is taught the same week across the college, and as part of this, learners are invited to participate in the college elections.*

Not only are they learning about an important subject, but they get to engage with a real-life democratic election – bringing the teaching to life and contributing towards a healthy voter turnout for the election.

NPTC Group of Colleges: *as a way to promote the ethos of the college, as well as the learner rep system specifically, on induction learners are told how they should consider themselves as partners within the college community, and that a way they can get involved with this is via learner voice activity, including their active rep system, students' union, ambassador scheme, and becoming one of their two student governors.*

Monitoring diversity

Inclusivity is a key part of a good rep system. To make sure you're doing well in this area, it's important to keep track of the diversity of your learner reps. If you don't measure it, you might not notice if diversity decreases or becomes imbalanced.

The easiest way to track this is to ask elected reps to fill out an optional, anonymous diversity survey, similar to what job candidates do when they apply for a job. Your HR department can likely help you with the wording of the survey and how to protect the data.

Once you have the information, you should compare it to the wider learner population. This will help you see if there are trends, such as proportionally lower number of females putting themselves forward. If you notice any problems, think about how you can improve this next year.

If you want to be really good at this, you can also monitor the diversity of learners who apply to be reps.

Stage 3: Induction and training

Now that you have set up your learner rep system and your first group of reps have been chosen, it's time for their induction. Ideally you will find a few hours when all the new reps can meet for their first session. During this meeting, you can explain the learner rep system, what is expected of them, what support they can get, and how communication will work. It will also be good for them to meet each other, and the key staff involved in the rep system.

Remember, being a rep should be meaningful. It's crucial that they are prepared to succeed in their role. Reps may need help understanding how the college works, how committees work, and reassurance that their role is to speak up. Training is key.

The type of training they need will depend on how the rep system is designed. Be mindful that the training itself can be a key motivator for people putting themselves forward for the role.

Training might include:

- **Committee meeting etiquette:** Formal meetings are different from other settings. There are agendas, papers, rules about behaviour, acronyms galore, the specific role of the chair, ways to raise points, and the importance of checking minutes. Don't assume the learners know this; they will likely need guidance to participate effectively.
- **How to engage with other learners:** Even though they are learners and represent others, don't assume they know how to do this well. Inform them of the Core Principles of the rep system, about how they should seek out opinions from quieter learners, those they might disagree with, and move far beyond their social circle.
- **Effective communication:** This includes how to formulate an argument, having robust/respectful debate, disagreeing agreeably, and giving and receiving constructive feedback.
- **Introduction to the college:** They should learn how the college is run, how decisions are made, and the big issues it faces. Understanding the bigger picture will help them analyse the key topics and connect with other learners on them.

They also need to know about the resources available to help them in their role. For example, will they have access to learner survey results? Will meeting rooms be available if they want to hold small discussion groups on certain topics?

Coleg Cambria: *all positions within their learner voice eco-system receive specific training, e.g. governors with the clerk to the board, sabbatical officers with learner voice staff, and student reps via two Student Rep Conferences (held on the two largest campuses). These conferences offer a whole host of information, advice, and guidance on how to be a brilliant student rep, for example, learners are supported to develop the*

skills and mindset to represent the views of all students, not just themselves or their friendship circle. As a way to encourage their engagement, the learners are also provided with a range of other training opportunities, such as debate sessions, Welsh language, and first aid.

NPTC Group of Colleges: *the 250+ reps are provided training on both key information, such as conflict of interest and how the college works, as well as skills, such as how committees operate. Across the whole first term, they are given an option of ten dates for this training, to ensure they can fit it amongst their studies and wider lives.*

Stage 4: Doing the job

At this point, hopefully the reps have been trained and know what their responsibilities are. The academic staff should also be aware of the reps, and activities should start happening. What happens next depends on the system you created. The reps might begin attending committee meetings, joining task groups, and meeting with academic staff regularly.

How reps can connect with other learners

There are many ways reps can engage with their fellow learners. This will depend on how the learner rep system is set up and what the reps prefer. Here are some ideas to suggest during their training:

- Social media
- Announcements in lectures / classes
- Talking face to face
- Hosting events or drop-in sessions
- Sending emails
- Creating posters

Coleg Cambria: *Twice a year each campus will have a Campus Council. This is attended by learner representatives from the site as well as members of college SMT. In these forums various issues can be raised and discussed. Learners are encouraged to raise their own issues, as well as asked to comment on topics presented by the college.*

NPTC Group of Colleges: *Learner reps are invited to present at SLT meetings if they feel they have relevant topics. For example, learners took a proposal to SLT about how the student body might support victims of the conflict in the Middle East in ways that would not be considered too political (the proposal was to fundraise for the Red Cross). Learner voice staff supported and attended the meeting, but the agenda item was learner-led and came to a successful conclusion.*

Merthyr College: *Each division has course representatives who represent a broader cohort of students, these meet with Heads of Division regularly to discuss key issues relating to their course and learning environment and to reflect the views of their peers. A learner Senedd meets monthly to discuss topical issues. While open to all learners, it is largely attended by course representatives and ambassadors. A range of*

staff from across the college also attend to take questions and participant in discussions. There is a Chair and Vice Chair, who are both learners, and they lead the agenda development and discussion.

Coleg Gwent: *there are learner reps on various committees across the college. Examples of such committees include Learner Experience; Curriculum and Quality, and the EDI Steering Group. The feedback from the staff involved is really positive and the learners are viewed to make a valuable contribution.*

Cardiff and Vale College: *learners got together and pitched to the college that they wanted an event that celebrated the wide diversity across the college. After getting the green light, the learners organised a Culture day. This involved various learner groups and community groups hosting stalls that showcased foods and cultural aspects from across the globe, all of whom were also represented in the college. It was a great way to create community and understanding across college life.*

Getting the best out of the reps

It's not simply about having reps, but about having reps who feel able to fulfil their role with meaning.

The staff in charge of the rep system should keep an eye on how everything is going. Some reps will be more active than others, and some may not get involved at all. Some may be active at first, then dis-engage. This is all quite normal. Depending on the situation, staff may need to step in to help those who are struggling or re-invigorate those who are less active.

Also keep a pulse on the staff views. For example, you might have a colleague say "I don't see the point; they came to the meeting and didn't say anything". This might have happened because the rep was intimidated by the committee of staff members and they might have felt underprepared. It might be daunting, especially if they are not confident in speaking up.

This is why training and engaging staff is key:

- The training they hopefully will have received should help them understand their role and that it's ok to speak up, and how committees work.
- The staff engagement will hopefully encourage staff to pro-actively welcome and support the reps fulfil their roles. It's important the Chairs of the committees are prepped for this.

Ideally there would be ongoing support for reps, should they have questions or concerns. This could include regular meetings with all reps to check how they are feeling about their role and any needs they might have. It might also involve surveys or an open-door policy with the staff running the system.

St Davids College: Reps are provided training at the start of the year in terms of what's expected from the role and how they can fulfil it. Each term the teacher will leave the classroom, and the rep leads a feedback session with their peers. The rep will then meet with the teacher, and depending on the issues raised, action will usually be taken, and this will be communicated to the learner body via "you said, we did" communications. While reps are constantly in touch with their peers about issues, this structured time, both in terms of reps speaking to learners and then speaking to staff, ensures there is space for these vital conversations.

What if the reps get too passionate about issues?

It's great to see learners passionate about topics, but sometimes staff might feel overwhelmed by that passion, especially if it turns into frustration or anger. This is a chance to help the learners channel their feelings into developing constructive points, engaging in healthy debate, and the art of compromise. Really useful skills for them. It's worth the effort because their unique viewpoints can be so enriching for the college community. In the end, everyone benefits.

Stage 5: Closing the feedback loop

It's really helpful to close the feedback loop. This means letting learners know what happened because of their input. This is often referred to as "you said, we did". Sometimes learner suggestions can lead to quick changes, go into long-term plans, or they will exist outside of what the college can directly influence. Regardless, letting learners know is key to making them feel heard. For example:

- "You said you wanted more choices in the cafe. We worked with a group of interested students and the catering staff to add more vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, and cheaper options."
- "We know many of you want 4G football pitches. We have included this in our 2026-2031 building plan."
- "Many of you said that the cost of living is making it hard to study. We have added new resources on the learner portal about how to manage your money, shop on a budget, have fun without spending a lot, and where to find scholarships and grants."

It's vital for the college to show how it used the input from learners. Sharing this information is not just the right thing to do; it's also important for building a strong rep system. If learners, reps, and potential reps don't see the feedback loop in action, they may start to wonder whether the rep system is effective, which can create apathy and resentment. It's vital for the college to show how it used the feedback from learners.

Cardiff and Vales College: they run engagement roadshows whereby the Principal and other senior staff travel to the various campuses and meet with students. They discuss the big topics relating to college life, taking questions and hearing what the learners have to say. There's plenty of healthy debate and learners and staff alike enjoy these sessions. This then culminates in the "you said, we did" initiative, where the college provides feedback to learners on the action taken in relation to their feedback.

Stage 6: Monitoring impact and evaluation

When the learner reps' term ends (which often matches the academic year), there are some important steps you can follow.

Measuring impact

You will also want to measure the impact of the rep system itself – what changes were made in the college as a result of rep feedback?

Measuring impact means checking how successful the rep system has been. You can look at things like what skills the reps have learned, how useful those skills are, and how engaged learners and staff are with the system. You can also check if the reps positively influenced their fellow learners.

Here are a few ways to measure impact, depending on your resources and what priorities you have:

- **Tracking feedback throughout the year:** Can you get reps to track what feedback learners raise with them? Can you track what happened to that feedback through the college system? This could be as simple as a spreadsheet that is updated by reps or staff.
- **Surveys for reps:** Ask them what skills they have developed and how confident they feel in public speaking and committee skills. You can do this at the beginning and then again at the end of their term to see improvements. Include a space for them to share other comments about their experiences. You can use these quotes in a summary report.
- **Focus groups:** Host a discussion group to dive deeper into the survey results. This will allow for richer conversations that can provide valuable insights.
- **Talk to staff:** Speak with staff to understand how the learner reps have impacted their areas. Include the Chairs of important committees. The reps might have raised important issues, offered unique viewpoints, or helped solve problems. Case studies are a great way to show the value of the rep system to staff and potential future reps.
- **Data:** keep a track of the number of reps you have, the number of attendees to events and training, the number of questions raised in roadshows etc.

After gathering your information and data, you can create a short impact report. You can add case studies/quotes from reps and staff members. Mention any changes you plan to make for the next year.

Once the rep system has been running for more than one year, you can also compare the data over time which might aid your planning and resource allocation.

Coleg Cambria: *The learner voice team is super keen on data. They keep tabs on a rolling basis and are able to predict annual engagement. For example, halfway through the academic year 2024/25 they were able to confidently predict that they'd have 4,000 students engage with learner voice activities by July. Having such stats is powerful for any impact reporting, as well as budget resourcing.*

Valuing your reps and their skills

Valuing your volunteers is an important part of good volunteer management. Can you make a specific effort to show reps you've appreciated their time and effort? This could look like a variety of things – an event, a thoughtful card, or a voucher.

Some SUs and institutions pay their reps for their time – this is something to consider, especially when thinking about the demographics of volunteers and how for some underrepresented groups, finances are a barrier to getting involved in volunteer work, as some people do not have the financial resources to give their time away for free.

It would be helpful to support outgoing reps to explain their role, achievements, and the skills they developed. You might provide them with a few sentences they can use to summarise this for future jobs or study applications. They have volunteered their time to make the college better, and they will always be representatives of the college. Doing this can help them become excellent ambassadors. And their positivity will also help recruit the next year's reps.

Coleg y Cymoedd: *in 2025 Coleg y Cymoedd are introducing a new way to support reps (and elected officers) in their next steps. The Principal will be writing a letter of thanks to each of them for their input into college life. The learners will be free to use this letter to support their future endeavours, whether that's further study, work, or training. References will also be available from relevant staff.*

Remember, even though setting up the learner rep system will take time and resources, it can bring great benefits to the college, learners, and the individual learner reps. In the end, it helps create a strong, friendly, and connected community for all learners. It's a process and will not be achieved in one academic year. Test and learn, be open to new ideas, and focus on the learner experience.

We hope this guide helps you achieve your goals!