In the week beginning Monday 29th January, we held our second round of Class Rep meetings, with options to join in-person at Sighthill, Granton and Milton Road campuses, as well as an online meeting option. Overall, we gained good attendance at each campus, with 68 Reps actively participating in the meetings. If we take each Class Rep to represent the views of 15 students, in total, 1,020 student views were represented.

We were delighted to welcome two members of the College's Board of Management to our Class Rep meetings at Milton Road and Sighthill, as part of our Reverse Shadowing scheme, which we hope was an interesting insight into the workings of our student representation system.

Meeting objectives

- To gather feedback about the sense of belonging at Edinburgh College

- To find out what is impacting the Class Reps' overall learning experience

- To present updates and information from EC Students' Association including the upcoming Elections and Student Life Survey

Sense of Belonging at Edinburgh College

Our Class Reps are a key part of the College ecosystem, as their feedback can give us valuable insights into how students are feeling. Our theme for our January meetings was exploring the 'sense of belonging' at Edinburgh College. In this context, 'belonging' means feeling safe and accepted, knowing where to get help and support, and connecting with others by having the right sort of spaces and opportunities to do so. By grouping these conversations under the theme of 'belonging' some interesting feedback emerged, which we hope we will be able to draw upon as we work with the College to enhance the overall student experience.
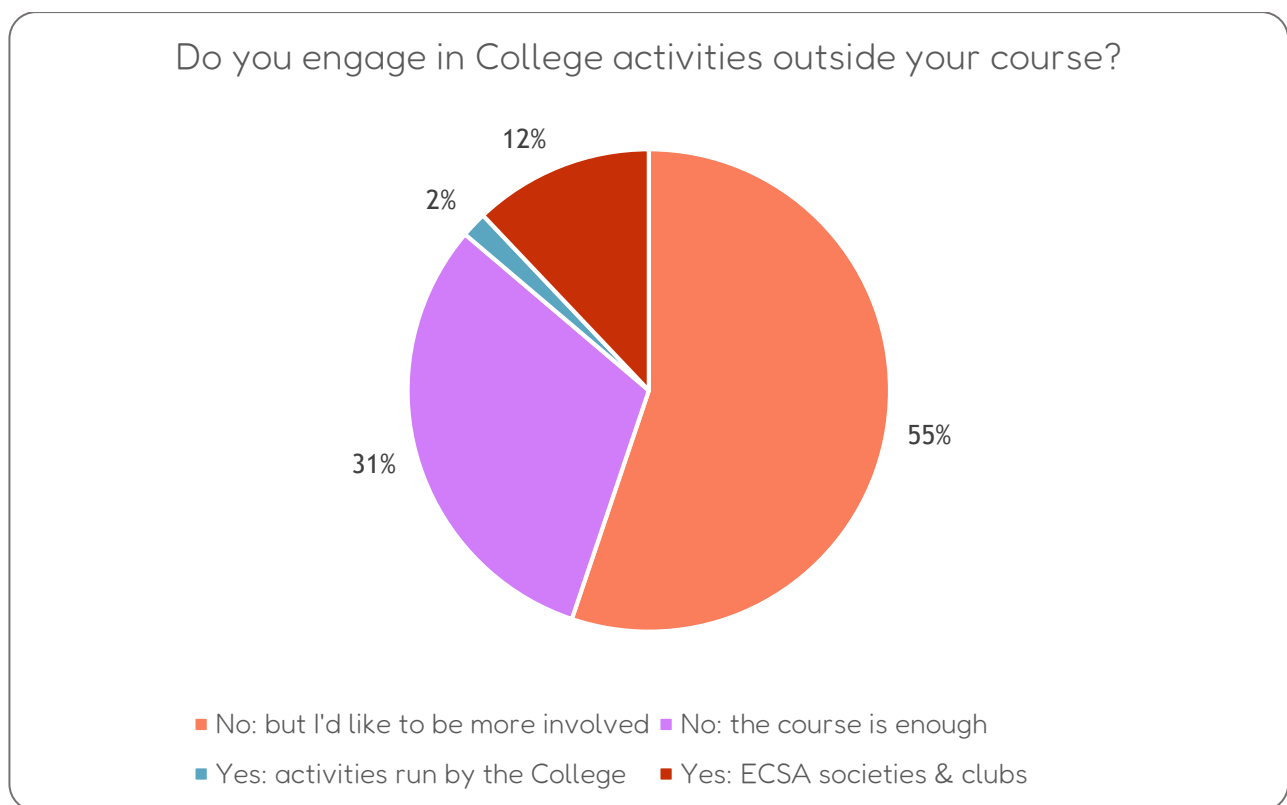
When Reps were asked if they felt Edinburgh College was a welcoming place, the overwhelming response was positive, with 88.3% responding 'yes'. When asked what would make the College more welcoming, there were a variety of suggestions:

- More welcome events, prior to the course starting

- Increased opportunities for students to meet people outside of their classes/courses, such as taking cinema or museum trips together

- Fun events, "like a fashion show including fashion design, catering, hair, makeup etc with music and ticket funds go to college", and end of year events like a Christmas party

- Making it easier to book spaces for groups

- Discouraging vaping/smoking at entrances

- Better accessibility for disabled students (lifts are frequently out of service) and LGBT+ students (trying to find a gender-neutral bathroom).

- Clear explanations of how students would go about arranging their own clubs and events

- A wall where students can post their artwork

When asked "Do you feel you belong at Edinburgh College" the results showed that while the majority responded positively (72% said yes) there was a fairly large proportion of students who responded, "not really or only sometimes" (24%), while the remaining 3% responded no.

We asked students whether they would like to be involved in activities at college outwith their courses, and gathered the results shown in the chart below. While 14% are already engaging in activities outside of their courses, 55% said they would like to be more involved. The second largest group said that their course was enough, and they didn't need to engage in further activities.

Do you engage in College activities outside your course?

- No: but I'd like to be more involved ■ No: the course is enough
- Yes: activities run by the College ■ Yes: ECSA societies & clubs

We followed up this question by asking what sort of activities the students would like to participate in, and got a hugely varied response, from sports clubs (football, volleyball, basketball, bouldering, boxing, yoga and race cycling were all mentioned) to arts and crafts, DnD clubs and board games, and trips off campus. Students also said they would like to have access to a pool table, better access to the campus gyms, and more accessible quiet rooms and prayer rooms.

It was clear from our research that the facilities available for students at Edinburgh College go hand in hand with increasing a sense of belonging among the student community. A particular example of a good use of space was the Music Box at Sighthill, where there is a relaxed area for students with sofas and music playing, with a display wall covered with posters promoting events and opportunities for students. The 'ambient' settings, for instance the type of seating and lighting can go a long way to create a comfortable atmosphere, encouraging students to socialise on campus, rather than going off-site for lunches and breaktimes, which is the general trend we are seeing across all Edinburgh College sites.

It was highlighted several times that more varied areas for studying, for both study groups and quiet individual studying, would be a positive change, with requests for the library to extend its opening hours. There was a strong desire to see more outside spaces for students to hang out in, as some of the benches (especially at Milton Road) are broken or too close to the designated smoking areas.

For the final part of this section on belonging, we asked students to respond to the following question, and you can see the diverse range of responses listed in the word cloud below:

"Your friend is due to start at Edinburgh College in August. What three words would you use to describe it to them?"

As is often the case at our Class Rep meetings, the feedback and responses we gain can vary hugely based on each individual's experience. The word cloud shows negative feedback including 'disorganised', 'expensive', 'confusing' and 'stressful', alongside 'friendly', 'welcoming', 'fun' and 'helpful'. Even when analysed on an individual basis, student responses contained both negative and positive feedback which could indicate that the College is performing well in certain areas and worse in others.

Key issues facing students

Our Class Rep meetings give us a unique opportunity to 'take the temperature' amongst the student body. An important part of this process is allowing Class Reps to raise matters affecting them and the students they represent, and the following issues repeatedly came up.

Access	Several Class Reps complained of issues with the lifts frequently being out of service, especially at Granton and Sighthill, and there are some instances of lifts being misused by people who don't necessarily need to use them. There were also concerns about Health & Safety with disabled students being left at refuge points during fire drills. The Quiet Room at Granton is not wheelchair accessible.
Poor communication	Students are overwhelmed with all the different modes of communication used by the College, lecturers and LDTs. Emails, Teams messages and groups, Moodle notifications, the MyEC app means that communications are getting lost and aren't easy to follow. Students made the point that some lecturers dislike using Teams (or have slow response times) even though that is the preferred mode of communication for most students.
Staff absence	There was a lot of concern around staff absences, either due to illness, or due to them leaving, which is impacting on students' teaching and learning in a significant way. Cover lecturers are not experienced or prepared to support the students' learning properly.
Continued impact of strikes	The six-week strike at the start of the academic year is continuing to have a negative impact, particularly around students feeling elements of their courses have been rushed through or disorganised, or feeling unprepared for assessments and exams. In some courses, there has also been high student dropout rates following strikes, which has raised concerns the courses may have to move campus or be shut down altogether
Facilities	• Granton students have requested more water fountains as there is currently only one in the Hub. • Milton Road students flagged that now all classroom doors are locked, there is a lack of seating during breaks, and this also impacts class time when lecturers don't have keys and have to wait for security staff to open the doors • Student computers on campus don't always have the relevant software for specific courses • Students on all campuses flagged that communal areas can be loud and crowded

Unmet expectations	A number of students have said that their expectations were raised for certain elements which have not been delivered. For example: • HNC Accounting students were promised to be able to progress on to a HND course but that is now no longer running, resulting in students having to apply to university at the last minute • Light Vehicle Maintenance students at Midlothian were told they would get tool kits at the start of the year, but nothing has happened • Social science students at Milton Road were told that they would be getting access to a common room, which has not materialised In part, these unmet expectations could be being worsened by communication issues between lecturers and staff, and misunderstanding of the 'promises' that were made to students at the start of term.
My EC app	There have been issues surrounding the App, Reps particularly found that the new system for SAM forms was confusing.
Catering	Students complained of an inadequate and expensive catering offer, with little choice of veggie, vegan or halal options. Concern was raised on the lack of healthy options, and the over-reliance on vending machines.
Disparities between campuses	There was a feeling that the College is biased towards the larger campuses, both in terms of the activities that take place and the choice of catering options available.
LGBTQ+	Non-binary and trans students are frequently misgendered in classrooms which causes discomfort and negatively impacts their sense of belonging.
Timetabling – an increase in part time provision needed	There has been a point raised about the College providing more part time courses for students who want to continue above Level 6. Students who are receiving benefits (e.g. child benefits) are being put off from progressing at College because if they take on a full-time course, this will impact the benefits they're entitled to. We are also seeing that increasing numbers of people want to come to College part-time, so that they can fit in jobs and caring responsibilities around their courses.

Have your say

At every Class Rep meeting, we ask our Class Reps to respond to the same series of statements reflecting on their overall experience at Edinburgh College. Respondents rated a series of statements on a scale of 1 – 5, where 1 = "strongly disagree" and 5 = "strongly agree". We ask these questions via Mentimeter, an online presentation and data collection tool which allows students to respond anonymously and share feedback in a variety of ways.

Statement	Weighted Average Score (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)			
	Sighthill	Granton	Milton Road	Online
At Edinburgh College I feel cared about as a student	3.4	3.3	3.8	3.5
My course and classes have met my expectations	3.1	4	3.8	3.1
I feel positive about the College facilities	3	2.9	2.7	2.7
I feel positive about the online learning environment	2.5	2.6	2.6	2.6
Since November, College has been going smoothly	3.1	3.8	3.4	2.9
The College communicates well with students	2.2	2.8	2.4	2.1
I'm glad I chose to come to Edinburgh College	3.3	3.8	4.5	3.7

The first four questions, shaded in green, were also asked at our meetings in November. Unfortunately, when compared with the data from that meeting, every score has decreased since then, which indicates that the students feel less positive towards the College now, although still on the side of positive. Generally, students felt neutral to positive about their courses meeting then expectations, feeling cared about as a student, how they've been getting on since November and being pleased they came to Edinburgh College. The College's facilities, the online learning environment and the communication received the most negative ratings.

Updates from us

Elections

Our Class Rep meetings are an active channel for distributing important information from both the College and the Students' Association to students. During the January meetings, our focus was on promoting the EC Students' Association Elections, which are taking place on the w/c 18th March. Our current President, Skye Marriner, shared her views on what the experience had been like and encouraged potential candidates to ask questions.

Promoting the Elections to Class Reps seems to have been an effective strategy, in total out of the six students who have submitted nominations for our President, Vice President Welfare and Vice President Activities roles, four are Class Reps.

We will be sure to circulate more information about running and voting in the coming weeks, both to Class Reps through our Teams channel, and to the wider student body as a whole. We are grateful to

Learning Development Tutors, Curriculum Team Managers and everyone who is spreading the word about Elections.

Student Life Survey

This year, we're launching a new Student Life Survey which aims to get a broad picture of the challenges students are facing. There are sections on digital resources, travel, housing, finance and housing, but the survey also explores the sense of belonging at Edinburgh College, following on from the conversations we had at Class Rep meetings. We do have some comparative data from previous years (housing and finance surveys), but this year's survey has been expanded, so we're hoping for lots of useful data.

We are also collecting demographic information about the survey respondents, so that we can analyse data by gender, disability, ethnicity, age and whether they are a parent or carer. So, far we have had nearly 500 responses, with Class Reps will be playing a key role in promoting the survey.

Focus Group Recruitment

We also took the opportunity at these meetings to ask Class Reps to sign up to the two Focus Groups we are currently running, our 16-19s focus group which is running in conjunction with our Equality Outcomes, aiming to improve the retention rates of our younger learners, and our LGBTQ+ focus group, which is part of our VP Welfare's LGBTQ+ Friendly Classrooms project.

Class Rep Engagement

As we only meet our Class Reps a few times per academic year, it is important for us that we make the experience as engaging and valuable as possible for them. At the end of every meeting, we ask the Reps to rate whether they felt the meeting was useful. It was encouraging to see overall 71.4% of respondents rated the meeting at 'very useful' and 24.4% rated it 'somewhat useful'.

As we have seen with students raising concerns about there being too many communications channels overall, we have focused our Class Reps communication via our Teams channel. This has been a useful tool for engagement, and regular news updates and callouts are featured on the channel. Recently, Class Reps have been using the channel to ask each other questions, which is something we'd like to encourage going forward.

In the next academic year, we plan to introduce campus tags, so that we can promote specific campus-based events by tagging only the students who attend that campus, which will hopefully make students feel they are receiving content which is most relevant to them. We are also benchmarking our Class Rep systems against other Colleges and Universities, to try and build up our engagement in the coming year. We will also be asking Reps to reflect on how the Class Rep community could be improved the experience at our next meeting.

Conclusion

The Class Rep system continues to be an invaluable tool for gaining feedback about the student experience and as a conduit of useful information between the College Management, the Students' Association and the student body. This report has focused on the outcomes of questions we asked the Class Reps around belonging, which has indicated that:

- Most Reps feel Edinburgh College is a welcoming place where they feel they belong

- More can be done in terms of co-curricular opportunities and the spaces we provide, to enhance student life and the inclusivity of our campus spaces

Generally, Class Reps are tending towards feeling more negative about their learning experience than they did at the start of the academic year, matters that have been flagged include:

- Problems around access and facilities

- The online learning environment (including the MyEC app)

- Issues with (mis)communication between College, lecturers and students

We will take these learnings further and will circulate these notes to Class Reps and to the College Board of Management's Learning, Teaching & Student Experience Committee. The data we have gathered from these Class Rep meetings will also be key evidence in the planning and delivery of the Student Mental Health Agreement, which is being launched in May 2024.