Josh Wright – VUWSA Vice-President (Academic)

For most course coordinators the Class Representative is someone who puts their hand up in the first lecture and is rarely seen again, but Victoria University Students Association Vice-President (Academic) Josh Wright said they can play a vital role in introducing internationalisation to courses.

Josh met with Vicky Mabin, Karen Commons and Xiaodan Gao to discuss the Internationalisation at Home project and how Class Representatives could play a role.

“We didn’t have the chance at that stage to incorporate Internationalisation into our Class Rep training. But that’s the ambition. While we all know course coordinators can use Class Reps for feedback, many neglect to realise Class Reps can play a very important role as organisers of class events that encourage integration and exchange,” he said. “We had an Education paper with a high number of Malaysian students in Trimester 1. There was a very clear social divide between the Malaysian contingent and the rest of the class. The Class Rep took the initiative to organise an ‘ethnic breakfast’ to integrate the class. The students were delighted with the outcome. It worked well as an almost enforced integration system between the Malaysian and non-Malaysian students. The feedback was good. In endorsing the Class Rep for a Class Rep Scholarship, the Malaysian students said how it really benefitted them and the class as a whole. It’s an example of just how effective Class Reps can be.”

VUWSA-organised funding was available for such events or activities, like study groups, quiz nights, or end-of-Trimester parties.

“The role can be used well. But it takes the right person. Class Reps tend to choose themselves and then good stuff happens in very specific places,” Josh said.

He doesn’t see Class Representatives as role models, because they are essentially peers of the class. “It depends on the class and the context. Ideally a Class Rep is a peer who can direct students to useful things.”
A survey of Commerce Faculty Class Representatives was undertaken asking them to reflect on their experiences and any activities that had fostered an international class community. A key finding was that giving students no choice but to integrate provided the best results. “There is a lot of emphasis on group assignments at 300 level, so perhaps having members allocated to groups rather than freedom in choosing members would encourage diversity,” one representative said. “TAXN201, doing group presentations where you didn’t choose your partners – the tutor allocated them randomly,” had been a positive way to foster community, said another.

Class Representatives could help, they said. “Get-togethers, utilising the Class Rep funding that is available, and creating opportunities for communication and collaboration, such as social media, study groups,” said one rep. “Study groups are the main one, but also using the fund available to Class Reps to organise a situation where everyone can get together and get to know one another – preferably at the beginning of the year – to help break the ice right from the start,” said another.

Almost inevitably success depended on the course coordinator and the course structure. The Class Representatives said “Class Reps are there to be used to help connect students with each other and with the staff so that everyone is more comfortable and everything runs more smoothly” but only one lecturer in INFO102 had really taken advantage of this, and encouraged it.

Lecturers could help by calling on examples of different cultural values. “For example, a lecturer may be talking about globalisation or managing diversity/workplace conflicts. A lot of theory is westernised management. Questions could ask students how that might be perceived in their culture. I do this as a tutor and it includes the international students in discussion and their contributions/insights are really deep!”