Tool for developing a forum for students on online courses

This tool was developed by sparqs for use at Hibernia College Dublin (see case study on page 8 of the sparqs guidance on *Engaging Students in Online and Distance Learning*, published in June 2018). It consists of a number of headings that relate to various features of a student rep forum, and each heading contains a pair of opposing statements.

By working together, staff and students can identify what they like or don't like about each statement, and agree a statement that reflects their collective view of what the features should look like. Taken together, the new statements can form the basis for the operation of the forum.

1: Formality	
Formal	**Informal**
The student rep forum takes place in the same way as college committees: it uses formal meeting procedures and is minuted so that there is a clear record of what's been discussed and what action points have been agreed. Papers are called for and circulated in advance so people can prepare for the meeting thoroughly. There is a chair elected at the first meeting of each year.	The student rep forum is a relaxed affair. Although there is one person to facilitate the meeting, conversation tends to be relaxed with no real structure to the deliberations other than the issues brought forward on the day by those who join the meeting.

2: Leadership	
Staff-led	**Student-led**
The chair and minute clerk of the student rep forum are members of staff. This spares students the responsibility and means that professionalism and continuity is provided in the way the forum operates.	The chair or clerk, if they exist, plus any positions designated within the forum are for student reps only. It's their meeting so they alone are responsible for its conduct and success.

3: Activity	
Reactive	**Proactive**
The student rep forum is a useful "focus group" for the college to get a snapshot of what reps think of key issues. Sometimes group work is used to allow reps to think deeply about the issues the staff want to ask them about. Ultimately, though, the real decision-making power lies in the college committees, and this is only a sounding board.	Student reps have not only a right but a responsibility to steer the agenda of the forum. They're not just there to pass comment on issues the staff ask them about, but to get the staff to pass comment on issues and suggestions they as students want to raise. Decisions that come out of the meetings shape college committee meetings, policies and planning documents.

4: Content

Themed	Issue-led
Student rep forums are themed – so each meeting explores only one particular topic in depth, for instance the VLE; the curriculum; workplace application; assessment; support for learning; and so on. Relevant staff can make introductory presentations to spark debate.	Student rep forums are shaped purely by the issues that are raised by those participating. That means that meetings and discussions are very responsive and could end up covering a whole range of issues all at once, time-permitting, that can't be predicted beforehand.

5: Ethos

Democratic	Partnered
The student rep forum is all about students. In essence, it's the college's students' union council. Therefore participants must have the space and freedom to talk about what they want. The only staff who attend do so to answer specific questions, and are there only at the invitation of the student reps.	The student rep forum exists to foster partnership in the learning experience between staff and students. Therefore a wide range of management, teaching and administrative staff attend, so that reps can learn more about their work and inform lots of staff at once about student views. It really ought to be called the staff and student rep forum.

6: Student membership

Limited	Inclusive
The student rep forum is for the student reps to share their views with each other (and with staff, if present), and participation is in the reps' job descriptions. No other students need (or are expected) to attend.	Although it's the student rep forum, it's really for all students if they would like, because it is important for student reps to be transparent and inclusive in their work. All students have valid views and it doesn't even matter whether the student reps themselves get involved – just as long as there are enough participants to ensure informative and engage discussions.

7: Frequency

Frequent	Infrequent
The student rep forum should meet at least monthly. It is important for there to be regular exchange about the learning experience across the rep team, and it helps everyone to get to know each other and build good relationships.	The student rep forum only needs to meet once or twice a cohort. That way there is less time commitment, and discussions can be deep and rich. Student reps are busy enough with their course work and day jobs, so it's important not to overload them.

8: Format

Face to face	Online
Although students study online, there is something different about the work of reps and so meetings should be face to face. It's an important role and reps need to work as an effective team, so it is worth the expense and time of gathering everyone together for meetings. After all, staff at the college regularly work face to face with each other.	This is an online learning experience, so it makes sense for the work of student reps to match this. Although some meetings can be by video chat, the VLE has the advantage of not needing synchronous engagement – discussions can stretch over days if needed. This will make forums more efficient and effective.