

# A Toolkit for Effective Learner Engagement

This resource has been co-created by sparqs and Education Scotland to support student engagement in Scotland's colleges in this 'recovery year'. The resource is aligned to, and intended to be used alongside, the new Education Scotland resources '[Our Best Future](#)' and sparqs' [Student Learning Experience tool](#) to effectively support colleges and staff to engage their students to better understand the impact of the pandemic on the Student Learning Experience.

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## Effective Learner Engagement

Capturing and responding to the experience of learners over the course of the pandemic will be vital in better understanding the impact COVID-19 has had, and continues to have, on the student experience.

The Education Scotland resources are based on four themes:

1. Curriculum, learning and teaching, and assessment.
2. Services to support learning.
3. Transitions.\*
4. Evaluation to facilitate improvement.

Within each of these themes, there are expectations that support colleges to explore the extent to which they are engaging with learners to effectively plan adjustments to provision and services considering COVID-19.

sparqs has redeveloped the Student Learning Experience (SLE) tool in response to COVID-19; specific questions have been added to facilitate discussion with learners on how their learning experience has been affected. sparqs is currently developing several activities that will support colleges to engage with this tool, including a series of national events for specific student cohorts, as well as tailored workshops for individual colleges that will facilitate these important discussions. The SLE tool is intended to be used across all levels and can be embedded into different feedback mechanisms, such as surveys and student staff consultative committees, to enable colleges to better understand how the student learning experience has been impacted.

This joint resource is designed to provide guidance for staff in colleges to make use of both sets of resources. It will illustrate how the sparqs' Student Learning Experience tool can be used to engage learners in planning adjustments to provision and services; a selection of the questions is included under each theme, but there may be other relevant questions from the tool that may be useful for your college. It will also illustrate how the 'Our Best Future' materials can be mapped to the Student Learning Experience tool.

It is also important for colleges to consider how learners are not only engaged in the short-term planning and delivery of change, but how they will be engaged in longer-term evaluation and enhancement and planning for the future.

## How to use this resource

Each section is aligned to the Education Scotland 'Our Best Future' themes and includes Education Scotland's expectation for colleges within those resources. There is also a series of questions developed by sparqs to support colleges in exploring how they can meet those expectations in learner engagement, and suggested questions from the Student Learning Experience for colleges to be asking learners.

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\* The transitions theme is not covered by this resource as it is mainly for Schools, Skills Development Scotland and Local Authorities.



## Curriculum, Learning and Teaching, and Assessment

### Arrangements to adjust the curriculum to take account of changes to the learning landscape emerging from COVID-19

It is vital to ensure that there is meaningful engagement and discussion with learners to better understand the ongoing adjustments and developments needed within the curriculum, and the impact the pandemic continues to have on the Student Learning Experience.

'Our Best Future' shows a clear expectation that learners will be fully involved in decision-making processes around the redesign of the curriculum. This is particularly important where significant changes are being implemented as a result of COVID-19, such as placements having to be postponed or apprentices not being able to undertake parts of their work-based learning.

The following questions from sparqs will assist colleges in focusing on engaging with their learners to shape and influence adjustments to the curriculum; teaching staff should work alongside course reps to encourage engagement from students in feeding into curriculum changes. It will also be important to think about the major role the students' association can play in supporting learner engagement, and how colleges can work in partnership with senior student officers to facilitate meaningful engagement.

#### Self-reflection questions – questions for colleges

1. How have you engaged your students' association in discussions to better understand the impact of the pandemic on the curriculum?
2. To what extent have senior student officers been involved in decision-making processes with regards to the curriculum, in particular where significant changes have been made?
3. What tools are in place to work with learners when planning changes to the curriculum, and to support them to shape and influence the curriculum in response to the emerging challenges from COVID-19?

#### Student Learning Experience - questions for learners

1. Considering the changes made because of COVID-19, does the overall curriculum taught still match your expectations from the information provided about the course? Are the skills and knowledge you expect to obtain being met, albeit in an alternative format?
2. Have you been unable to undertake a placement or study abroad? What has been the alternative provided and how have you been supported through this change?
3. Where significant changes have been made to the content of your curriculum due to the pandemic, have you been given the opportunity to help redesign courses alongside staff?

### Arrangements to support staff and learners to engage in changes to the curriculum emerging from COVID-19

For most students, there will be some changes to their curriculum as a result of COVID-19. Even those subject areas that can be transferred wholly online will still probably include some adjustments due to the nature of delivery. For others, the changes will be significant; practical subjects, those who undertake placements and work-based learning students may see their curriculum undergo a radical transformation and this may mean they need to engage in a very different way. Supporting students to engage with these changes will be key to the student's learning experience, and also on whether or not the student continues with their studies. If learners feel the curriculum no longer matches their expectations, that key parts of their course are missing, or that the changes have not been clearly communicated or explained to them, they may choose to withdraw from the course.



A key role in this will be that of the course rep; learners will naturally take arising issues or challenges to their student representative, and as it is likely these issues will be significantly different to previous years, reps will need to be adequately trained and supported to fully enable them to undertake their role in this recovery year. Colleges should be considering the initial and ongoing training provided to course reps, as well as the offer of support provided to equip reps with the tools needed to do their job. It is equally important to consider the ways in which staff are supported and equipped to work with reps in the digital environment.

Keeping learners, and vitally course reps, informed of changes that happen over the academic year, and what this will mean for their learning experience, is a priority. If alternative provisions are put in place, students will need support to understand what this means and how to access these, ensuring they are still meeting the intended outcomes of the course.

'Our Best Future' shows a clear expectation that learners are engaged in planning for the delivery of the curriculum during and post COVID-19. This includes scheduling of programmes and taking account of learners' access to digital resources on and off campus.

The following questions from sparqs are designed to support colleges in ensuring that learners are fully engaged in planning for the delivery of the curriculum.

<b>Self-reflection questions – questions for colleges</b>
1. What steps have you taken to ensure learners are aware of changes to the curriculum and the knock-on impact this might have on their learning experience?
2. What support do you have in place for learners where significant changes have been made to their curriculum?
3. Have you reviewed and/or made reasonable adjustments to your provision of training for student representatives (course reps) to enable them to undertake the role? How will they be supported in their role during this recovery year?
4. Have you created space for student reps to discuss changes and the ongoing impact on the curriculum?
5. What steps have you taken to ensure programme leaders and teams understand the importance of consulting with learners, and are able to do so in a digital format?

<b>Student Learning Experience - questions for learners</b>
1. Are there any parts of your course that you feel have not been substituted by the move to online teaching and are missing?
2. If you are studying a practical course, do you have access to the resources/tools/materials you need? Once in-person delivery ceased, did you continue to have access to these resources or appropriate alternatives?
3. Have you been supported to access subject-specific facilities (e.g. labs, studios, theatres, computing rooms, etc.) in a safe way, or been given alternative options where this has not been possible?
4. Are you supported to use learning technology, including any new technologies you may have started using due to studying online?
5. Have you been effectively communicated with and kept informed of changes to your curriculum as a result of COVID-19?
6. Were your learning expectations clearly outlined?
7. Is there a curriculum outline provided?
8. Do the learning outcomes correspond to what you are learning?



## Arrangements to take account of the current and future needs of learners, industry and communities, emerging from COVID-19

We are in an unprecedented time in the sector, where we just don't know what is going to happen over the coming months and even years. Further lockdown measures, spikes in cases, and localised breakouts could all impact on the planning and implementation of changes a college has made. As such, colleges will need to take full account of the challenges and needs of their current and future learners. One way of doing this is to work closely with the students' association, student officers and local student representatives to gather, analyse and respond to feedback. This feedback will support colleges in determining arising issues, and the students' association can support the college in finding solutions to challenges that can be shared across the college.

It will also be important for colleges to ensure they are engaging with a diverse range of learners, capturing the experiences and needs of those voices which may not be easily heard. Student representatives are well placed to assist with this. It is also important to consider that learner circumstances may have changed as a result of the pandemic (for example, some may now have caring responsibilities) and there may be other challenges facing learners that colleges need to be aware of, that are different to what would previously have been monitored or captured.

'Our Best Future' shows a clear expectation that the needs of learners will be considered when programmes are being planned.

The following questions from sparqs are designed to support colleges to consider how they can better understand the needs of current and future learners.

<b>Self-reflection questions – questions for colleges</b>
1. What tools and mechanisms are in place to ensure learners can feed back responsively to current or emerging challenges and issues, specifically within a digital environment?
2. How are you engaging your students' association and senior student officers in operational planning and reactive, decision-making processes, with regards to the current and future needs of learners?
3. How are you using the feedback gathered from learners, and how are learners engaged in the analysis and identification of emerging needs?
4. How is data and feedback shared with staff and the students' association, who can then action change?
5. What processes are in place to ensure you are hearing from a diverse range of learners and are you able to identify gaps of who you are not hearing from?
6. How are you working with your students' association to explore what the needs of current and future students are, and how are you working together to address challenges?

<b>Student Learning Experience - questions for learners</b>
1. Have you experienced any challenges progressing from one year of your course to the next, or transitioning between providers (for example, from school to college, or college to university)?
2. Have you identified any gaps in your knowledge because of missing particular content due to the impact of COVID-19?
3. Before the start of the semester, were you kept up-to-date on what is being done to prepare for students' arrival and kept informed of what your student experience may look like this year?
4. Have you had the opportunity to attend induction events, either online or in-person? Did you experience any particularly creative approaches to the delivery or content of these events?
5. Are you able to progress easily from one module to the next?
6. Are you able to evaluate and report on your own personal progress through your course?
7. Are further course opportunities and pathways made clear to you?



## Learning and Teaching – Planning and Delivery

### Arrangements to plan and deliver learning and teaching to take account of changes to the learning environment emerging from COVID-19

It is important that arrangements for the planning and scheduling of learning and teaching take full account of learners' individual circumstances and preferences. This will only be achieved through working effectively with learners and student representatives.

The delivery of teaching will look and feel very different for all learners; learning predominantly online rather than in a physical classroom, even if the curriculum and course content remains relatively similar, will be a new and, perhaps at times, challenging experience. The informality of face-to-face teaching (those quick chats before or after class, the conversations that happen in the corridor outside a classroom, etc.) are harder to replicate in an online teaching environment, and these conversations can be where many queries or questions are raised and answered effectively. As such, staff may want to consider a range of ways to ensure learners can effectively engage in this adapted teaching environment and provide space and time to address the additional barriers or challenges learners may be facing. The lack of peer-to-peer engagement may also be a challenge. Consideration will need to be given as to how learners can interact, support and work with one another in an online environment.

'Our Best Future' shows a clear expectation that the needs of learners will be considered when programmes are being planned and delivered. This will include the expectation that learners' circumstances and preferences are taken account of when planning, scheduling and delivering learning and teaching.

The following questions from sparqs will support colleges in considering how staff can engage with learners to shape learning and teaching practices and ensure learners' circumstances and preferences are considered.

<b>Self-reflection questions – questions for colleges</b>
1. How are you supporting staff to engage with learners in the delivery of teaching, in particular with the use of new or innovative online platforms?
2. Have you considered what additional opportunities may be needed to provide time and space for learners to reflect and feed back on how their learning environment has changed?
3. How are teaching staff supported to interact with learners' immediate feedback on their teaching practices, and make reasonable adaptations to suit learner needs?
4. How are learners supported to feel confident and comfortable in feeding back what is and isn't working for them on an individual basis?
5. How as a college are you able to capture learner preferences and expectations and the adjustments made in response, especially around the sharing of good practice?
6. In what ways can staff be supported to develop and enhance the skills required to adapt teaching practices to individual learner needs, specifically within a digital environment?



<b>Student Learning Experience - questions for learners</b>
1. How have you found the transition to online teaching? Is there anything that staff have done to make this transition easier, or anything you would have liked done differently?
2. Have you had the opportunity to take part in group work?
3. If you have been learning in an online environment, have you been given tasks that involve learning off-screen?
4. Does your timetable give you the chance to take regular/appropriate breaks?
5. Have you had a chance to use an online discussion board? Has this worked well?
6. Has your lecturer used any innovative methods for engaging with the more practical elements of your course at home?
7. Are there any parts of your course that you feel have not been substituted by the move to online teaching and are missing?
8. Are you consistently/sufficiently guided to practice your skills throughout your course?
9. Are you able to learn in a way that suits you?
10. Are your classes stimulating/engaging and informative?
11. Do you have enough contact time with your lecturers/tutors?
12. Are there opportunities for peer-to-peer learning?
13. Do your classes motivate you to learn independently?

## Assessment

### Arrangements to **plan and deliver** assessment to take account of changes to the learning environment emerging from COVID-19

Similarly to the quick changes needed to deliver learning and teaching online, assessments had to adapt to suit an online format. For some courses this modification is simple, for others the amendments necessary could be both challenging and vastly different to prior arrangements. External verification, or those with additional professional, statutory or regulatory assessments can also mean additional challenges.

Managing expectations here will be key, as will clarity and clear communication around what assessments will look like and how they might vary. The changes colleges have made to the curriculum and the learning and teaching process will inevitably have an impact on the delivery of assessment; from the range of assessment, to perhaps a move from formative to summative assessment, and even the removal of exams, are all options to be explored. Practical subjects may find providing alternative assessments more challenging, and innovative methods may be required to replicate these approaches; for example, hair and beauty previously would be assessed using live models to showcase the skills learnt and this may no longer be possible.

'Our Best Future' shows a clear expectation that assessment schedules are planned, communicated and agreed with learners at the start of programmes. There is also an expectation that learners are supported to become familiar with, prepare for, and engage in, different types and modes of assessment.



<b>Self-reflection questions – questions for colleges</b>
1. How have you ensured learners are aware of any changes to the way they will be assessed?
2. What measures have you put in place to ensure learners are given adequate time to plan and prepare for changes to their assessments?
3. How have staff supported learners to engage in alternative assessment formats?
4. How are you making sure learners are kept informed of national decision making with regards to assessment, and the links between SQA and/or employer requirements and assessment changes?

<b>Student Learning Experience - questions for learners</b>
1. Has your course been assessed in a new or different way because of the pandemic, e.g. removal of practical assessments? Have alternative assessments been adequate at measuring your knowledge and skills?
2. Did you receive clear guidance from your department relating to how assessments would be run during COVID-19 and, especially, to any changes in assessments?
3. Have you experienced any barriers to engaging in any of your assessments?
4. Do you receive adequate feedback from your assessments?
5. Does the feedback you receive following assessments help you understand what you did well and what you need to do to improve?
6. Are the assessment criteria clear to you?
7. Are there opportunities to discuss your progress with staff on a regular basis?
8. Are your assessment deadlines close together or are they scheduled to ensure that you do not have multiple assessments due on the same day?

## Services to Support Learning

### Arrangements for planning and delivering services to support learning to take account of changes emerging from COVID-19

It is important that arrangements for the planning of services to support learning take full account of learners' individual circumstances and preferences. This will only be achieved through engaging effectively with learners and student representatives in the planning of the service. The delivery of these services will look and feel very different for all learners as they will be delivered predominantly remotely, rather than face-to-face in the same location. One of the key services to support learners is the students' association and it will be important to consider how colleges and the students' association might work together to provide support for learners.

It would be useful for colleges to explore how their student body may have changed as a result of the pandemic and to what extent this will impact on the support learners need. Different groups of students may have been adversely impacted, and it may be wise to further explore who they are and to what extent. There may also be an increase in the number of students who access support (many of whom previously did not have the need to) as their circumstances have changed. There are also particular cohorts who, pre-pandemic, would have accessed many services to support learning, and now face an additional barrier of accessing that support digitally; colleges may need to consider the longer-term impact that this may have on these groups of learners.



'Our Best Future' shows a clear expectation that learners' views, circumstances and preferences will be taken account of when services to support learning are being planned. The expectation is that services will have been reconfigured to take account of the current and emerging needs of learners on and off campus. There is also a clear expectation that the delivery of services to support learning will take account of variations in the levels of access to digital resources for learners. The expectation is also that colleges will take account of the variations in the digital skills levels of learners when delivering services to support learning.

<b>Self-reflection questions – questions for colleges</b>
1. How have you engaged with your students' association in planning and delivery of college support services?
2. How are you supporting and sharing the work of the students' association as a support service for learners?
3. In what ways have student representatives been able to provide feedback on the needs of students, and help shape and plan support provision?
4. How are you and your students' association working jointly on support provision for learners?
5. How are you ensuring the range of services to support learners considers the needs of a diverse range of learners?
6. To what extent have you thought about how course reps can capture the additional mental health and wellbeing challenges faced by learners as a result of the pandemic, and how they are supported to signpost these effectively?

<b>Student Learning Experience - questions for learners</b>
1. Have you been given any careers support specific to the context of COVID-19 and subsequent changes in the job market?
2. Have you been given clear guidance on who you should contact if you need to discuss extensions or apply for special circumstances due to COVID-19-related circumstances?
3. Have you been made aware of hardship funding available through your institution?
4. Have you been made aware of how to contact and access support services, including mental health services, either in-person or online?
5. Have you been provided with support to learn or enhance new skills for engaging in an online environment, for example in accessing specialised software, or using VC programmes (such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom)?
6. How much support are you getting with your academic work?
7. Is there a place/person you can get help from if you're struggling with your work?
8. Are staff and students aware of the channels for dealing with issues?
9. Have you been given the option to access academic, personal, and careers support, previously accessed on-campus, in an online format?
10. Have you experienced any innovative ways of developing and maintaining a sense of community on your course whilst students cannot be physically on campus?
11. Has your institution or department offered a way for you to engage with students and staff more informally?
12. Is your personal tutor or advisor of studies helpful?



## Evaluation to Facilitate Improvement – Infrastructure and Engagement

### Planning for **evaluation and improvement** to take account of changes emerging from COVID-19

The changes that colleges have made in response to COVID-19 will be significant. Although many will have been a result of necessity, there will still be successes to be celebrated, innovative practice to be captured and shared, and the nurturing and embedding of some new practices across the college, long-term. Understanding and acknowledging where things have or haven't work (and why) will be critical in future planning and improvements. There will be a balance to strike here; we must be cautious not to just adopt all changes permanently because anecdotal evidence suggests it was a success, but neither should we return to 'normal' just because that was the way it was always done. As colleges plan for future years, there will be many lessons to take away from how they responded to the pandemic and it is vital that measures are in place to adequately evaluate and reflect on this and ensure learners are engaged in these conversations.

It will be important for colleges to create time and space for learners to reflect, provide feedback and evaluate the impact of changes emerging from COVID-19, both positive and negative. Colleges would benefit from a clear process to continually monitor and evaluate the changes made, engaging senior student officers in considering how the data can be used across the college and beyond, e.g. what common struggles have all colleges faced? Student representative systems will be vital here in capturing and sharing the experiences of their peers, in particular from across different cohorts of students, to better understand what courses or groups have been most impacted by changes.

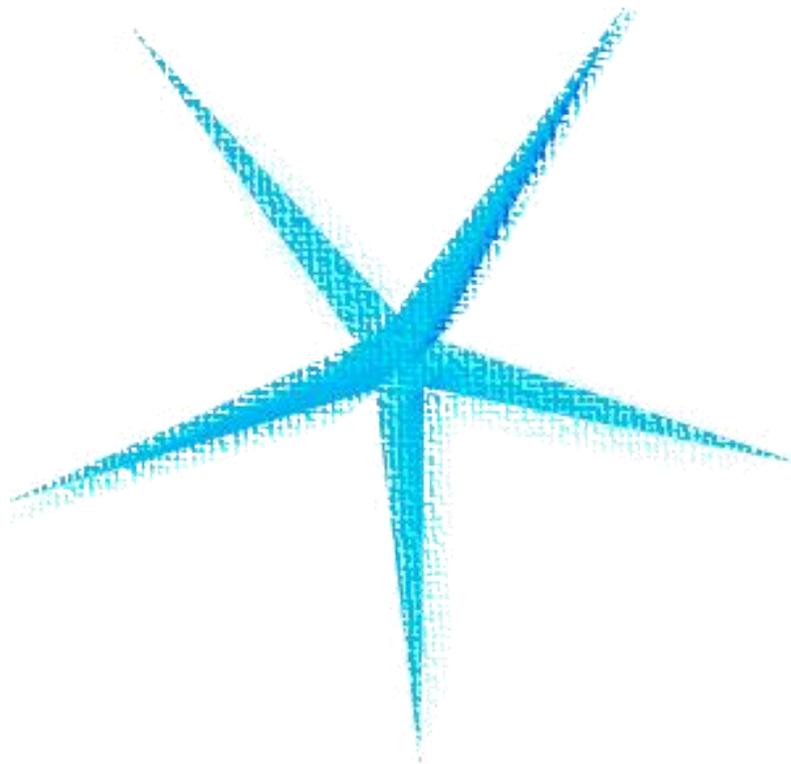
'Our Best Future' shows a clear expectation that arrangements for engaging learners in evaluation processes take account of changes emerging from COVID-19 and that learners are able to contribute ideas/suggestions for improvement.

<b>Self-reflection questions – questions for colleges</b>
1. What evaluation processes are in place at your college to support learners to reflect on the medium- and long-term impact of changes and feed into longer-term strategy and planning?
2. How will learners, course reps and the students' association be supported to analyse and respond to themes that emerge from evaluation processes?
3. How can you support student representative systems to effectively engage in wider college evaluation processes?
4. How can you work with your students' association to consider how you can jointly review and evaluate the data captured?
5. How do you plan on engaging learners to capture and share innovative practices that emerged as a result of COVID-19?
6. How do you plan on engaging learners to capture and share innovative practices of the students' association that emerged as a result of COVID-19?
7. What mechanisms are in place to support learners to review and evaluate the changes made and to influence future planning and improvement?
8. How will you work with the students' association to drive forward improvements?
9. How can you ensure learners are engaged in improvement planning processes and have the opportunity to share experiences and evidence of where changes worked or didn't work?



### Student Learning Experience - questions for learners

1. Have you had a chance to provide feedback on the changes made to your course directly because of COVID-19?
2. Has your institution made any changes to the course rep system so that it can continue to work effectively during COVID-19, e.g. moving student-staff committees online? Have these changes worked well?
3. Have you been given additional opportunities to feed back to senior staff members at your institution on COVID-related issues you are facing, e.g. through the opportunity to attend online 'town-hall' style meetings where students can raise issues directly with senior leaders?
4. Do you feel that the staff and department is receptive to student concerns and suggestions?
5. Do you feel that you and your classmates' opinions are listened to and taken seriously?
6. What improvements have been made to your course during your time of study?
7. Do you consider that there is a strong student voice culture embedded in your course?



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