

The role of the Students' Association Academic Co-ordinator during COVID-19

1) Course Rep Support and Administration

Given the rapid transition in the learning experience, student engagement has never been more important. Academic Co-ordinators will need to consider developments to their rep system and how to most effectively implement a move to online operation. For some institutions, this system may already be in place for some parts of the student population, such as online learners, but in many cases an institution may not have developed structures for online student engagement or representation or will not have operated this at scale.

Current course reps need support to continue to undertake their role in what will be, for many, a new remote capacity. This may include technical support, guidance on how to gather and communicate feedback from reps in an online format, and advice on how reps can best respond to and handle topics of feedback specific to the impact of the pandemic.

The Academic Co-ordinator will need to continue to manage the ongoing logistics of the course rep system. In the short term, this could include ensuring course rep handovers are completed and overseeing the administration of the Association's reward and recognition schemes (these practices vary across the sector, but could include student reps achieving recognition on the institution's Higher Education Achievement Report or receiving certification for the role).

Academic Co-ordinators will also need to prepare for the coming academic year and the new cohort of course reps. This will include preparing training arrangements, including format and content. Even for those associations with very developed training packages, significant content changes may be required depending on how the impact of the pandemic progresses. For associations which use their own trainers, this recruitment process will continue to be overseen by the Co-ordinator – if recruitment usually takes place over the summer then this process may need to include online interviews or alternative recruitment practices. As the beginning of the first term of 2020/21 gets nearer, the Co-ordinator will also have to consider if there may be an impact on the recruitment of the course reps themselves, and put measures in place to mitigate this impact.

2) Sabbatical Officer Support

As significant changes to learning, teaching, quality and assessment processes continue to be implemented over the coming weeks and months, it is essential that senior officers are engaged in strategic decisions, which may include contributions to daily leadership meetings, crisis meetings and committees. The Academic Co-ordinator will need to provide support to sabbatical officers and lead reps to ensure that they can engage as effectively as possible in these spaces. This may include providing briefings, undertaking desk research, assisting in the gathering of student opinion and, in many cases, attending meetings either alongside the sabbatical officer or in their place.

Many Co-ordinators are part of these decision-making groups in their own right and play an integral part in communicating the students' association's position. In other cases, sabbatical officers may find that they do not have the capacity to attend all these meetings themselves (particularly as they may now have multiple additional demands on top of their usual meetings) and so the Academic Co-ordinator is often the most suitable attendee to go on the officer's behalf.

Officers are also likely to find themselves receiving more individual questions from students, many of which may be very specific and require time to answer effectively. Academic Co-ordinators will likely need to support the officer in answering these enquiries, particularly where they are discipline-specific or involve significant additional research to answer.

3) Induction and Handover

In most Associations, Sabbatical Officers will begin their new terms of office over May and June. Although some officers may be returning for a second year, there will also be many students undertaking the role for the first time. An effective induction is a hugely important contributor to a successful and productive term of office, and it is imperative that associations can still offer this to officers despite the potential of continuing remote working arrangements. If inductions cannot take place in person, many activities will need to be re-designed to work for an online setting.

Similarly, handover from one officer to the next must be supported during this time. Some Associations may consider an extended handover in recognition of the additional challenges of the current set-up. Whatever format is settled upon, these decisions will have to be made strategically and the Academic Co-ordinator should be part of designing and delivering these changes.

Often, Sabbatical Officers use the summer to meet with key contacts at the institution and begin to build and develop these professional relationships. The Academic Co-ordinator should ensure that these meetings are still scheduled and effectively facilitated in an online setting.

4) Support for Diverse Student Cohorts

Some Associations may have a tier of 'lead reps' that sits in between their course reps and their Sabbatical Officers. These lead reps will also need support from the Academic Co-ordinator in a similar way to that offered to Officers. Many of these reps will represent student cohorts for which the impact of the pandemic and their institution's subsequent choices may be specific to that group. Examples may include (but are certainly not limited to): Postgraduate Taught students; Postgraduate Research students; Student Parents and Carers; Disabled students; and International students. Reps for these cohorts need continued support to engage in their roles and in institutional decision making, particularly when they may be facing their own additional barriers to participation.

In Associations where specific student reps do not exist for these cohorts, the Academic Co-ordinator will still need to consider the impact of learning and teaching changes on these groups of students and potentially consider the creation of Students' Association guidance and support documents for these students.

5) Student Engagement in Quality Processes

Whilst the QAA has postponed upcoming Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) visits, institutions may choose to continue with internal reviews and annual programme monitoring.

Alongside institutional colleagues, the Academic Co-ordinator should continue to support student engagement in these processes, which may include innovating current practices to allow students to engage in an online capacity. Considerations should include student recruitment, training, and the practicalities of how students will take an active role in the reviews themselves.

The Students' Association may also need to complete its own end-of-semester reporting, which often takes place over the summer. The Academic Co-ordinator's role may include gathering together relevant data from the academic year; evaluating reps' experiences of, and impact on, the previous academic year's activity; and reporting on this activity internally and to the institution where this is usual practice.