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Preparing your course rep system and recruiting your reps during COVID-19

As significant changes to learning and teaching processes and structures continue to be implemented for the 2020-21 academic year, course rep systems will need to reflect this learning experience in both structure and focus.

In a time of such extensive transformation, the course rep role has never been more important - it is therefore imperative that student representation systems adapt to the new environment, and that these systems are supported to work effectively and coherently.

Some operational aspects of existing systems may already have been affected due to the significant challenges institutions and their students' associations have faced, e.g. returning reps or senior reps may not have been elected/selected during the last semester. It is vital steps are taken now to ensure the rep system is operational from the beginning of the new academic year.

Most institutions are likely to begin the next academic year with some level of increased online teaching provision – either for entire cohorts and courses or as part of a hybrid teaching model. Your institution may find that whilst once their online learners were the exception to the rule, they now make up most of the student body. The pivot to online learning and teaching is an important part of this new context with clear knock-on effects for student representation systems.

This briefing note is the first in a series designed to support students' associations and institutions in devising and executing rep systems that can operate in this changing environment, including how they can operate online. This first briefing note is focused on the initial planning stages of developing this new system and the subsequent recruitment of new course reps.

Updating your strategy

Bringing together the right people

Institutions and students' associations should work in partnership to consider the course rep system and agree upon its new strategic direction in light of the impact of COVID-19. A group of relevant stakeholders should convene to identify adaptations that have already been made that have been effective, recognise gaps and things that have not gone well, and make key decisions about the rep system for the next academic year. This may include decisions about its size and shape; any significant changes that need to be made to representation-related processes; and who will be responsible for implementing these changes.

Members of the group should include senior staff members with a responsibility for learning and teaching and quality; members of the institution's quality team; relevant students' association staff and officers with a responsibility for student representation; and current student representatives who can convey their experiences at the local level.

This group may already exist in the form of a relevant student representation working group or a subgroup of the institution's learning and teaching committee, or a new group may need to be formulated for this purpose.



What needs to be decided?

All aspects of the rep journey will need to be evaluated for their ability to interact with decision-making in a COVID environment and their effectiveness in monitoring significant changes to the student learning experience. The effectiveness of online adaptations will be a vital element of this. Everything, from training and running meetings to gathering feedback and evaluation will need to be considered and many decisions should be made before the semester begins. The effectiveness of the rep system in the time of COVID should be specifically considered in relation to different demographics of students and levels of study.

The group will need to answer some key logistical questions about the rep system. Will any changes need to be made to the structure of the course rep system for the start of the next term? For example, if the institution plans to run a course which will be offered to both in-person and online cohorts, should two reps be recruited to represent each cohort respectively? Or will it be recommended that these courses select only one representative but ensure that reps have additional training and tools to effectively represent blended cohorts? As the next academic year is likely to continue to present unexpected challenges, the rep system will need to be flexible enough to cope with sudden changes, e.g. a student rep may be required to self-isolate without notice.

Diverse voices

Institutions shouldn't be afraid to think differently about student engagement and may want to consider adding temporary supplementary measures to the rep system where needed. For instance, at a time of such significant upheaval, institutions may want to complement their rep system with the creation of more open chances for student feedback, such as the introduction of forums accessible to any student. These forums could focus on specific topics, such as assessment and feedback or students' experience of online teaching, or could be left more open-ended and flexible. Institutions should also actively consider which voices are being heard and which voices are not – institutions may want to identify groups of students affected in specific ways by COVID, such as placement students or student parents, and ensure that there are clear opportunities for them to feed back and contribute to decision making.

Staff roles

Alongside considering the changes to student reps' roles and responsibilities, the group should also reflect on staff roles. Will the students' association need additional resource to develop the course rep system and are there ways in which the institution can support the association, such as utilising the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to host training? The group should also consider how teaching staff can most effectively support student reps in an online environment. For example, can course directors set up discussion boards on their own VLE pages for students to raise issues with the course rep?

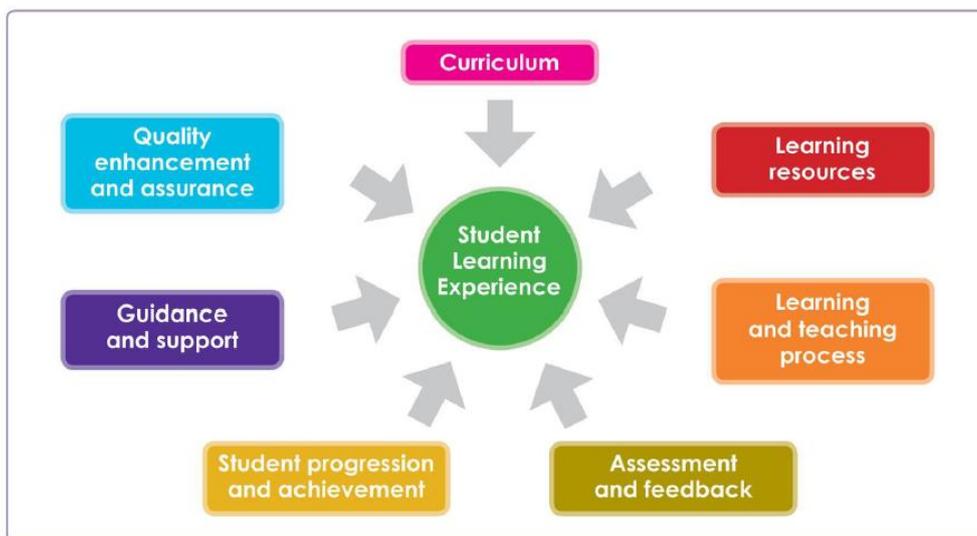
For any changes to the rep system to work effectively, the institution and the students' association should consider how they will share data with one another efficiently. The learning and teaching decisions made to courses by the institution will have a direct impact on the rep system and so it is imperative that the institution keeps the students' association informed of these changes. Equally, the students' association needs to ensure that teaching staff are aware of key changes to the rep structure before the term begins, to ensure that staff have time to understand the rep role and can answer basic questions from students about the position.



Redefining the rep role

What are the main changes to the learning experience?

To consider the additional topics you want reps to focus on in 2020-21, start by identifying the key changes to your students' learning experience that course reps will be focusing on. These may include the transition back to campus (including the impact on the classroom learning experience); the experience of online learning; the introduction of alternative assessments, particularly for more practical courses; and discussions around the pandemic's impact on student mental health. Reps may also need to identify and focus on particular groups of the student cohort who are being affected in specific ways by the changes to learning and teaching as a result of the pandemic, e.g. student parents, disabled students, and international students. Student reps should be briefed on the key changes to learning and teaching and supported to engage with their student cohorts on these new issues.



sparqs' Student Learning Experience diagram is a useful way to categorise the different elements of students' academic experience – you may want to use this diagram to map out changes to each of these areas.

Development of the course rep role description

Institutions and students' associations should consider if their current course rep role description is still fit for purpose post-COVID. Most course rep role descriptions contain:

- Examples of the tasks that reps will undertake.
- The skills that the role may require.
- The benefits of taking on the role.

What additional tasks and skills will you want to include to reflect the updated role? Additions may include confidence in using online tools and social media, as reps may need to rely more on online forms of communication with the students they represent. The tasks that reps will need to complete in the role may also need to be updated to reflect the new online context, such as updating the language around attending training and student-staff committees.



Communications to students and staff

To reinforce the ongoing relevance of the rep role, students and staff need to hear the message that student representation continues to be valued and is more important than ever. Any changes to the rep role should be communicated to the whole student body and to staff in relevant roles, to provide a rationale for any differences and re-emphasise the role that student reps have to play in supporting and enhancing learning and teaching at a time of significant change.

Course rep recruitment

Advertising the role

Many of the conventional ways of advertising the course rep role will not reach students studying online, such as posters and flyers. Consider other ways to get the message out that don't exclude online students – this could include announcements in online lectures (perhaps by including a slide at the beginning of the session summarising the role and how to stand - [see our example template](#)) and using social media. Some students do not use social media, but all will have access to an institutional email address, so ensure that you are not only promoting the role to a limited part of the cohort. All eligible students should know about the role and have a chance to stand.

Electing your course reps

If the role is contested, the course director should facilitate an online election (this may be informal or formal). This could involve asking candidates to write a short paragraph explaining why they would like to undertake the role and why they would be an effective course rep, or asking the candidates to prepare a short 2-3 minute speech to deliver at the beginning of an online lecture or seminar. Students can then vote for their preferred candidate through an online survey tool such as Survey Monkey, or through a poll option in an online space.

In institutions where the students' association already runs online elections for its own reps (such as sabbatical officers), institutions and associations may consider utilising these systems to recruit course reps. This may be more challenging for institutions with a larger rep cohort, who may need to run hundreds of elections simultaneously, so each institution will need to carefully consider which process will work best for their own individual context.

The students' association and institution should work in partnership to consider the most effective platform for selecting course reps and to support staff members in facilitating this process.

Next steps

Upcoming briefing notes in this series will include a focus on online course rep training, and running effective online student-staff committees.

If you have a request for specific topics in this series, please contact Megan Brown, Development Consultant – megan.brown@sparqs.ac.uk