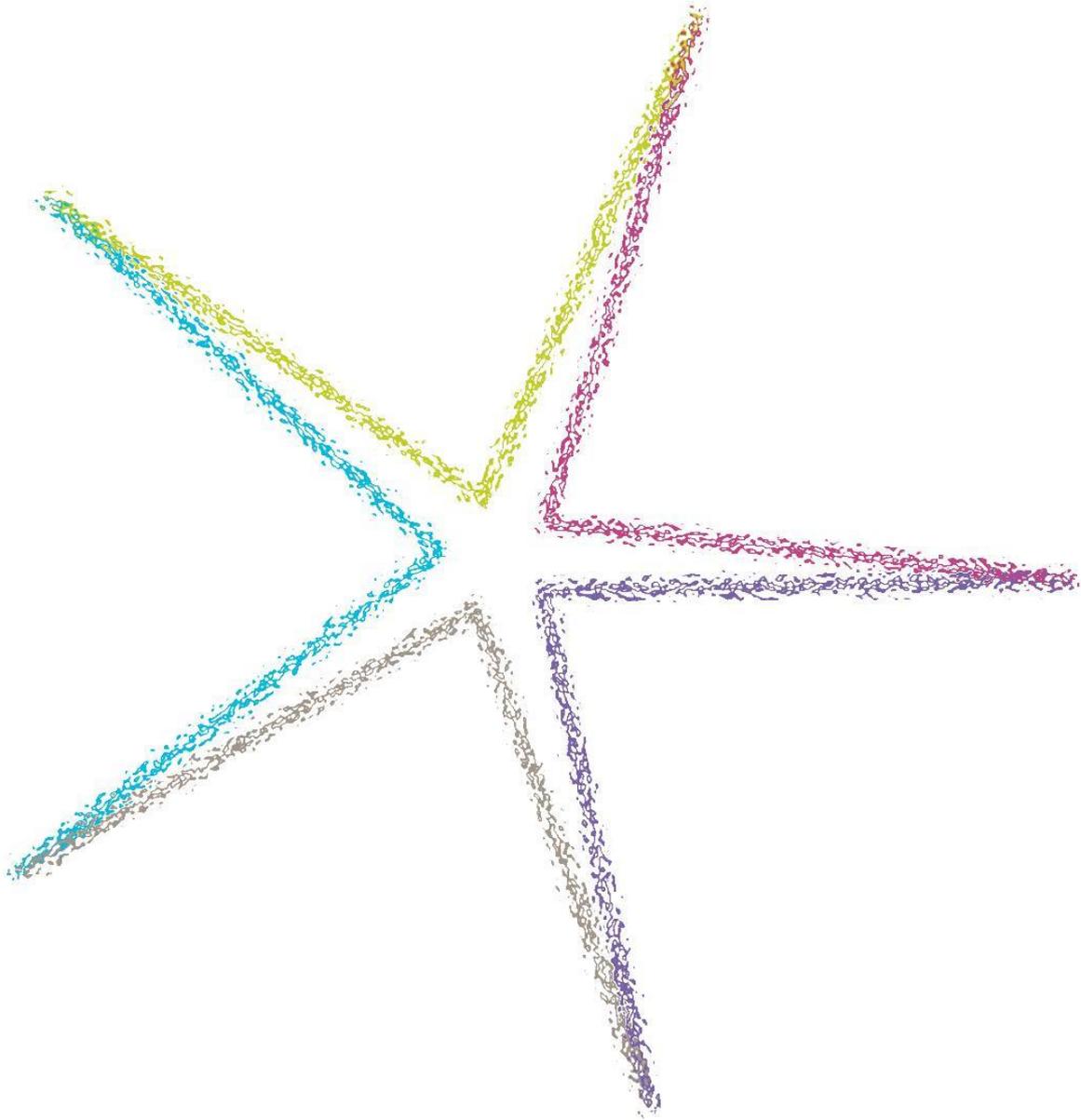


# Engaging Students in Online Distance Learning

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# CONTENTS

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 Overview	4
1.2 Background	4
1.3 Format	5
1.4 Definitions of ODL delivery	5
<b>2. Structures of engagement</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1 A strategic approach to hearing the ODL voice	7
2.2 Representative structures	10
2.3 Training of online course reps	12
2.4 Effective tools of communication	16
<b>3. Engagement in learning and teaching</b>	<b>19</b>
3.1 Strategic management of the ODL learning experience	19
3.2 Partnership and policy	22
3.3 Student data and learning analytics	28
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>References and further reading</b>	<b>30</b>

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Overview

This resource is a guide for institutions and students' associations on engaging online distance learning (ODL) students in shaping the quality of their learning experience. It provides tools, case studies and guidance and is based on work with a number of institutions.

It is aimed at those who have responsibility for engaging ODL students in quality, such as student officers and students' association staff, staff with quality, management or learning and teaching roles, and those directly involved in ODL delivery.

The objective of the resource is to enable those in related roles to reflect on and enhance their engagement of ODL students, with a view to those students better shaping their learning experience and feeling as full a part of the partnership approach to quality as any other students.

*The engagement of ODL students should see them being regarded fully and equally as students of the institution, just as on-campus students are.*

The engagement of ODL students should see them being regarded fully and equally as students of the institution, just as on-campus students are. It is important for them to be individually and collectively heard by institutions and students' associations in a way that is not a limited issue where solutions lie within one locus of responsibility. Rather, they should be engaged through the multiple dimensions of practice and levels of decision-making within the quality system, where ODL students and those who represent them should be fully involved at all levels.

It is therefore recommended that those working together to use this guidance include a range of institutional roles relating to quality, learning and teaching (especially of course in ODL provision) and student engagement, plus academic- and ODL-related officer and staff roles in students' associations.

### 1.2 Background

As with all of sparqs' work, sector input is a key ingredient of this resource. A number of universities have asked sparqs about the engagement of ODL students, and these universities have gone on to work with sparqs to develop their ODL engagement and contribute to sparqs' thinking, culminating in this resource.

Work has consisted of combined workshops, work within institutions and students' associations, and desk research; all of which has explored the nature of ODL delivery, the challenges and opportunities it presents for student engagement, examples of effective practice, and the aims and impact a resulting resource should have.

Joining the Scottish institutions in contributing to the project has been Hibernia College in Ireland, which joined the project as a result of its involvement in the National Student Learning Programme (NStEP)<sup>1</sup> in Ireland, to which sparqs has acted as a consulting agency between 2016 and 2019. Hibernia College is a private college, offering blended

learning accredited professional programmes. It is the leading provider of initial teacher education in Ireland. It has offices in Dublin and Westport, with students across Ireland.

Collectively, these participants represent diverse types of institutions, a range of experience and history in ODL delivery, and various models and practices of student engagement. They have therefore contributed tremendous expertise and valuable perspectives to this project and this guidance. A full list of contributors can be found at the end of this document.

*All students have an element of online delivery as part of their learning experience (it would be hard to envisage a single student in Scottish higher education who does not at least from time to time use a virtual learning environment (VLE) or other web-based resources).*

### 1.3 Format

This resource is split into two main chapters, which deal in turn with institutional and individual/course levels of decision-making.

The content of each section includes a range of toolkits, questions and case studies, drawing on practice from across the sector. The content is written to be predominantly relevant to universities, given the level of ODL practice within universities and the fact that demand for this resource has come from them.

Reference will also be made throughout this guidance to the *Student Engagement Framework for Scotland*<sup>2</sup>, which outlines a number of elements and features of student engagement activity and presents a basis for planning and benchmarking within institutions.

Elements of student engagement	Features of student engagement
1. Students feeling part of a supportive institution.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on enhancement and change.</li> </ul>
2. Students engaging in their own learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriate resources and support.</li> </ul>
<b>3. Students working with their institution in shaping the direction of learning.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responding to diversity.</li> <li>• Valuing the student contribution.</li> </ul>
<b>4. Formal mechanisms for quality and governance.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A culture of engagement.</li> </ul>
<b>5. Influencing the student experience at a national level</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students as partners.</li> </ul>

### 1.4 Definitions of ODL delivery

Defining online distance learning – and thus this resource’s scope – has been a crucial but complex task throughout the lifecycle of this project.

Clearly, all students have an element of online delivery as part of their learning experience (it would be hard to envisage a single student in Scottish higher education who does not at least from time to time use a virtual learning environment (VLE) or other web-based resources). So there is a continuum ranging from those who are purely distance learners, for instance those studying at home; through those who have

some form of face-to-face delivery, such as an on-campus induction or occasional tutorials; to those who have a large amount of face-to-face interaction but who still primarily study through online tools (such as students on blended learning courses).

However, the challenges identified when talking about ODL arise when students are not *usually* studying in a face-to-face environment at the same campus as their fellow students or their teaching staff – and so are studying both online *and* at a distance.

*Online distance learning is a course or programme where students study through online tools, significantly or entirely at a distance from their fellow students and teaching staff, or from their institution's campuses.*

**Thus, the definition this resource will take as its starting point is that online distance learning is a course or programme where students study through online tools, significantly or entirely at a distance from their fellow students and teaching staff, or from their institution's campuses.**

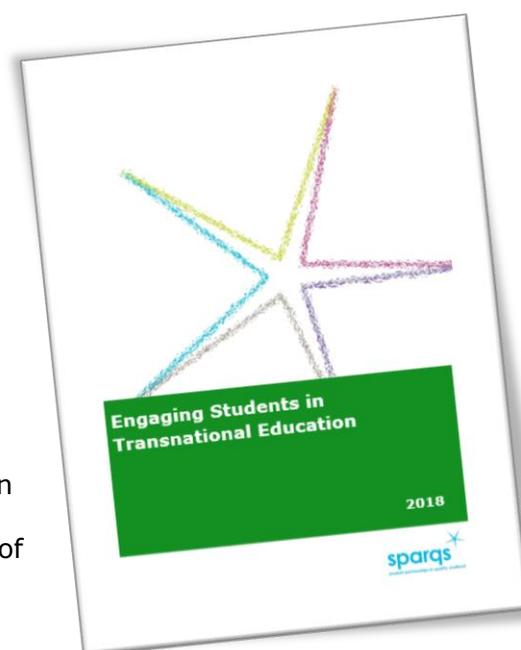
There are three clarifications required when considering this definition.

Some complications arise with blended learning, where students may experience a mix of face-to-face and online delivery and may be studying alongside some – but not all – of those learning and teaching on their course. There may also be programmes that contain elements of work placements. But in these cases, the dynamics of online learning – and the inherent challenges and opportunities for student engagement – still present themselves, albeit sometimes in different ways.

Secondly, many of the issues presented by participating institutions as affecting ODL students' learning experiences are not exclusively pertaining to their online and distance dimensions, but to other factors. For instance, ODL students are often also international, part-time, mature or postgraduate students. As such, ODL cohorts might rarely be described as homogenous or even primarily distinguished by the ODL aspect above others.

Finally, another consideration is that there will be many students in an online environment who are studying abroad, who might access facilities local to them but who will never visit their delivering campus, even for induction or graduation.

One aspect of such delivery is transnational education (TNE), a similarly complex method of learning and teaching which is growing steadily in Scotland. This is not included within the scope of this document and is the topic of a related set of guidance from sparqs – *Engaging Students in Transnational Education*<sup>3</sup>, which will be published in Autumn 2018.



## 2. Structures of engagement

This chapter looks at the strategic approaches to hearing the ODL voice, and how structures of quality enhancement and student representation can best collect, understand and advocate for ODL students' experiences of learning.

Much of the ODL experience, and the way students are engaged, is shaped by partnership activity where the university and students' association work together to agree strategic approaches.

Key questions here are around how ODL students are represented by themselves or the wider representative system and how they impact on the students' association's policy and activities, and how they can impact on institutional strategy and course level activity. Successful development here should result in an institution that has ODL students fully at the core of everything it does.

### 2.1 A strategic approach to hearing the ODL voice

A challenge often arises for ODL student engagement when it is not included as a core activity within the strategic direction of either the institution or students' association and is seen as an "afterthought" or extra piece of work for a non-traditional group.

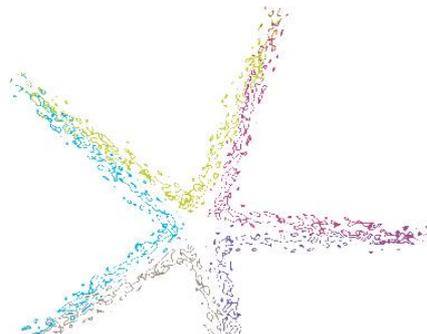
It is argued here that engagement at an institutional level will be more appropriately enabled by regarding ODL students fully and equally as a part of the institution alongside on-campus students.

Therefore, successful engagement can also require some deep reflection on, and enhancement of, activities that are aimed to put the ODL student voice at the heart of institutional thinking.

In representing ODL students' views, it is important to note that reps could be online themselves, for example course reps or more senior officers who are elected from, and by, online students; or alternatively ODL students may be represented by other student reps who may be on-campus but who are supported to engage those who they may not meet face-to-face.

Where a number of online-based reps exist, for instance in an entirely online or blended learning course, department or institution, it is worth institutional staff and reps themselves exploring more widely how that system of representation can be developed to work most effectively.

*A challenge often arises for ODL student engagement when it is not included as a core activity within the strategic direction of either the institution or students' association and is seen as an "afterthought" or extra piece of work for a non-traditional group.*



### Case study – Strategic developments at Hibernia College

Hibernia College offers Professional Masters in Education programmes (in primary and post-primary education). There are two cohorts per year (Spring and Autumn) for each of its programmes, and it elects one student representative from each programme cohort. They serve for the two years of their programme's lifecycle and represent all students in that cohort, and often co-reps are elected too.

In Summer 2017, sparqs undertook two days' consultancy at Hibernia College in Dublin to help staff and students to develop a strategy for representation for a student profile that is entirely blended learning and flexible with no central campus. The onsite elements take place in regional venues around Ireland.

The consultancy was a chance for staff in a variety of teaching, quality and support roles to get together with student reps from across the country.

Work included reflecting on the nature of the student rep role, mapping its activities over a programme lifecycle, and creating a draft job description.

There was also a workshop on creating a student rep forum for the college. This involved using a series of headings with opposing pairs of statements, and asking participants to create new statements under each heading to reflect how they felt the student rep forum should work. These opposing pairs of statements can be found in the *Tool for Developing a Forum for Students on Online Courses*<sup>4</sup> developed by sparqs and accessible in the sparqs Resource Library.

Outcomes and impacts of the work included improved communication between student reps, an agreed map of how students should engage with commenting on their course, and a commitment to providing customised online training to course reps. This training was delivered as part of the college's participation in Ireland's National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) (see case study on page 12).

It was agreed that the student representative forum should be entirely student led and flexible. The College agreed to provide resources to facilitate this and an online meeting room via Blackboard Collaborate was set up. The reps themselves set up a WhatsApp group.

The development of a noticeboard and area on the VLE for the Student Representative forum is in progress.

Another discussion point was the election and nomination process and promotion of the role. To give students a better understanding of the role in a blended learning, non-campus based environment, a student rep was invited to present at the onsite orientation a video was created with a student rep, which was made available to new students via the online orientation programme on their VLE.

*Outcomes and impacts of the work included improved communication between student reps, an agreed map of how students should engage with commenting on their course, and a commitment to providing customised online training to course reps.*

*In learning environments or institutions that also feature campus-based provision, reflection is required on how ODL students can be fully heard and considered in decision-making.*

In learning environments or institutions that also feature campus-based provision, reflection is required on how ODL students can be fully heard and considered in decision-making. This may arise from periodic review activity or other institutional planning, and can be informed by comprehensive research into the student view.

### **Case study – Student representation for Online Learners at The University of Edinburgh**

A Student Representation for Distance Learners Task Group was created in 2014-15 by The University of Edinburgh's Senate Quality Assurance Committee. It aimed to look at whether, in the light of increasing online learner student numbers across the institution, existing policies and regulations were meeting the needs of distance learners, in line with the scope of the Quality Assurance Agency's Quality Code for Higher Education.

The Task Group included staff from across the university, student officers and online learning students. Video-conference was used for meetings to allow full participation by those not based on the university's campuses. It produced guidance on how representation of online learner students should work, including in internal periodic review, Student-Staff Liaison Committees, and how to engage students through technology.

One challenge the Task Group learned about was the difficulties Student Representatives had in contacting the online learning students they represented. As a result of this, one of the outcomes recommended that Schools facilitate communication between Student Representatives and the students they represent, either through the sharing of email addresses or using mailing lists. This recommendation not only benefited the online learner students but all students across the institution.

### **Case study - Surveying distance learning students at the University of Dundee**

Student representation was highlighted as an area for enhancement in a 2017 audit of distance learner experiences at the University of Dundee.

To respond to this, the university and Dundee University Students' Association (DUSA) formed a Distance Learning Working Group which, among other activities, commissioned a survey of distance learning students. The survey was carried out during December 2017 and January 2018, and explored ODL students' perceptions of feedback and representation opportunities.

The survey generated over 140 responses from across a range of ODL provision, with around a quarter of respondents residing outside the UK.

Useful data was generated about the various ways students give feedback on their learning experiences, how the loop is closed on this feedback, and their perceptions of the course rep system and DUSA.

From those respondents who stated they were course reps, a lot of valuable information was gained about their motivations for taking up the role, and how those reps engaged with their fellow students and with staff.

Although the survey highlighted many positive areas of practice, areas for further development, particularly around awareness and communication, were identified for the Distance Learning Working Group to take forward.

## 2.2 Representative structures

It is important for students to be successfully engaged by students' associations' representative structures in decisions about their learning experiences and the wider work of the association and university.

ODL students are, like campus students, members of their students' association, though traditionally have been less successfully engaged. This is despite the growth of ODL delivery, the importance of ODL students' views to the association, and the considerable capability they might have (they are also often mature and PGT) in generating and articulating clear views about the learning experience.

There is always scope for a group of students to have a representative elected from amongst their number to develop students' views on their learning and work with staff on the issues raised. However, ODL environments may present specific challenges, and alternative but equivalent models of representation may be required.

In some cases, blended courses can involve so many distributed students that it is hard for reps to engage with them all and to be sure that they have reached all of their fellow students. Conversely, some modules, especially at the postgraduate level, may contain such small numbers that electing a rep is not felt necessary. Indeed, one institution contributing to this guidance reports that its ODL student numbers range from 15 per course to 170.

This presents a major question about what the constituency of a course rep is – the programme, module, cohort, or something else. It could be that the answer to this varies between courses. But significant variation requires that representative structures are flexible enough to accommodate this, while being rigorous enough to allow a consistent quality of student input to reach higher representative levels.

Therefore, it is important to explore your institution's course rep job description and look at how each element does (or does not) apply effectively to an ODL course.

*ODL environments may present specific challenges, and alternative but equivalent modes of representation may be required.*

Questions to consider include:

- **The constituency of a course rep** – Should representatives be supported to represent all students on their course or module, regardless of where they are based? Or, for example in blended learning contexts, should there be one rep per site?
- **Job description** – Does the standard definition of the role highlight the existence of ODL students and emphasise the responsibility reps might have for engaging students who they might not see face to face?
- **Promoting the role of course rep** – Conventional benefits of the course rep role may not be relevant to distance learners. For instance, getting involved in shaping the campus experience and being part of a wider rep team may not be relevant to those studying at a distance, and the many part-time or postgraduate students among distance learners may not be interested in the CV enhancement the role might present. So what is in it for an ODL student to consider taking up the role?
- **Flexibility of system** – Should the course rep system work in a uniform and consistent manner across the institution? Or, given that in many institutions ODL delivery can be concentrated in certain subject areas, should there be variation according to department, or even programme, allowing appropriate systems to be introduced where there are high numbers of ODL students? Part of the answer may depend on the autonomy over shaping the ODL experience that schools or departments might have.
- **The international dimension** – Where an ODL cohort includes students in other countries, some of those students may have legal or cultural obstacles to undertaking or contributing to representative activity. How can institutions and SAs respond to this issue in a sensitive but principled manner?
- **School or department level** – Course reps are generally best supported by a system that includes a more senior level of rep at the school or department level. How should those roles be supported to ensure a strong link between the perspectives of ODL students and the executive level of decision-making in the students' association?

*Course reps do not only need to engage with their fellow students and teaching staff, but with more senior reps. It is important for students' associations generally to engage with their ODL students directly and to communicate matters which are specifically relevant to their experiences.*

It is important for those representing the views of ODL students to link firmly into wider students' association structures.

Besides communicating with students, the key aspect of the course rep role is engagement with staff, including in formal course committees. This might create barriers to full and effective engagement (except for students who happen to live close to the campus where meetings might take place). Therefore, online or video-conference meetings are the best way of ensuring course reps can properly engage.

Course reps do not only need to engage with their fellow students and teaching staff, but with more senior representatives. It is important for students' associations generally to engage with their ODL students directly and to communicate matters which are specifically relevant to their experiences. Also, School-level officers and executive-level sabbatical officers need to have ODL representation within their remit, or be trained to include and support the voices of ODL students.

### **Case study – School Vice-President at the University of Dundee**

A School President system exists at the University of Dundee, and in one school there are School Vice-Presidents for two principal campuses of delivery in that subject area. However, there are now plans to introduce a further School Vice-President specifically for distance learning students from September 2018. This means that the School President, who has a wide remit and a dispersed student community, can be assured that the needs of off-campus distance learners are being represented, and their views passed on to higher levels.

How reps can engage with distance learning students depends on the training provided to them, which is covered in the next section, and the tools available to them to communicate with students, which is the focus of section 2.4.

### **2.3 Training of online course reps**

For course reps to be effective, they require training. With around 4,000 course reps per year trained through sparqs' programmes, this is a major part of student engagement activity nationally. The need to train course reps on ODL courses is equally high. Indeed, given the challenges of ODL engagement, it may be argued as more important.

There are, essentially, two options here – face-to-face training and online training. The former offers a significant benefit in terms of interaction, but of course this will not always be feasible.

### **Case study - Hibernia College course rep training**

Ireland's National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) provides course rep training in face-to-face environments around the country. In spring 2018, NStEP worked with Hibernia College to develop training that was customised to its entirely blended learning, flexible and regionally-spread student population, who are studying Masters courses in primary and post-primary teaching that involve twenty-four weeks of professional placement. By producing content that took account of this environment, training was delivered through Blackboard Collaborate to reps who wouldn't otherwise have been able to access a face-to-face session.

The training was based on the materials NStEP uses in its campus-based delivery (which in turn was based on sparqs' course rep training). Two sessions, lasting an hour and a half, were delivered by NStEP and involved a mix of presentation, interactive discussion and breakout groups.

Feedback from the reps was very positive. The evaluation beforehand found that, on a scale of 1 to 5, participants' understanding of the rep role and the mechanisms for student engagement within the college were an average of 2, but this rose to 5 at the end of the session. One participant said: "I liked the interactive nature of the training and the opportunity to get together with the other class reps."

The college now intends to continue the training in subsequent years, and to record sessions to make them available to all reps. There are also plans to develop further online content to accompany the "live" sessions and to reflect on the measurement of success of the training in terms of wider student engagement.

Blackboard Collaborate – STUDENT REP MEETING ROOM

File Edit View Playback Tools Window Help

AUDIO & VIDEO

FT Page

Exercise 4 – using the SLE

## Exercise 4 – using the SLE

- ▶ ‘Stick’ the element of your course that you would like to improve on the Student Learning Experience Diagram on the heading that you think it best fits.
- ▶ Now add any additional items that you have thought about now that you have considered the SLE.

The screenshot shows a Blackboard Collaborate session. On the left, there are panels for PARTICIPANTS (listing Cat O'Driscoll and Frank (Technical Support) as moderators) and CHAT (showing a log of messages). The main area displays a slide titled 'Exercise 4 – using the SLE'. The slide features a central diagram of the Student Learning Experience (SLE) model, which consists of a central green circle labeled 'Student Learning Experience' with eight arrows pointing towards it from surrounding boxes: Curriculum (pink), Quality enhancement and assurance (blue), Learning resources (red), Learning and teaching process (orange), Assessment and feedback (yellow-green), Student progression and achievement (yellow), Guidance and support (purple), and Communication between students and staff (purple). To the left of the diagram is a toolbar with icons for Selection Tool, Pointer Tool, Pen Tool, Text Tool, Rectangle / Ellipse Tool, Line Tool, Screen Capture, and Clipart. A timeline at the bottom indicates the current time is 48:57.

FT Page

Slide 22

The screenshot shows the same Blackboard Collaborate session, but the slide has advanced to 'Slide 22'. The SLE diagram is now larger and more prominent. A text box has been added to the 'Communication between students and staff' element, containing the text: 'The timetable and layout of the course could be changed for those starting in September.' The timeline at the bottom indicates the current time is 50:35.

*In a number of universities in Scotland, course rep training has moved online, not only to benefit ODL course reps, but also to be a benefit to on-campus students.*

Elsewhere, even in institutions with face-to-face campus delivery, online course rep training is often employed, although it is important to consider the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach.

In a number of universities in Scotland, course rep training has moved online, not only to benefit ODL course reps, but also to be a benefit to on-campus students. Such reps are, it is found, able to do the training in their own time, and on-campus opportunities for those that can access them can then be more about development, ongoing support and troubleshooting. This is an example of the institutional approach being built around an ODL environment (rather than them being a "special case" outside the norm) but to the significant benefit of all others too.

sparqs is producing a resource on developing online Course Rep Training, which covers the various aspects of developing the content in partnership between staff and students.<sup>5</sup>

Still others have a blended model, where face-to-face training is provided, but online opportunities are also in place for those who cannot participate on-campus.



## Case study – University of the Highlands and Islands’ online class rep training

The University of the Highlands and Islands launched their new online Class Rep training resource in September 2017. Through the university’s Class Rep Group, which brings together staff from across the university partnership along with staff and student officers from the Highlands and Islands Students’ Association (HISA), a need for an additional method of delivering training to Class Reps was identified, which would be in addition to face-to-face Class Rep training, with the aim of ensuring that more students are trained to carry out their role.

The online resource is available to students who are studying at a distance, or wholly online, or students who have not been able to attend allocated face-to-face training sessions due to other commitments or circumstances. The online resource is also being used as a reference resource by Class Reps who received face-to-face training, providing them with access to the resource throughout the year to refer to and support them in their role.

Staff, too, have been engaging with the materials, so they can better understand what their class reps are being trained in and work with them accordingly.

The online resource was developed in partnership with the university’s Educational Development Unit, who led the technical design process. The Class Rep Group and particularly HISA played an important role as consultees throughout the development process. In addition, sparqs provided helpful feedback throughout to ensure that the resource achieved all the intended outcomes.

### HISA online Class Rep Training image

**Introduction** 🏠

What is student representation?

The class rep role

Why is representation important?

The student learning experience

The class rep cycle

Identifying the issue

Developing and implementing the solution

**Closing the loop**

Support available to you

Your future rep career

Jargon buster

Quiz and evaluation

### Closing the loop

It is important that class reps give **feedback** to their classmates about their work. Doing so maintains trust in the system by allowing students to see that their issues are being dealt with or to find out why they aren't.

Feedback methods are similar to how you go about gathering student opinion. [Click methods below for more information]

**Report back directly to the class –**

**Emails –**

**Face to face chats –**

**Arrange a meeting –**

**Online spaces –**

**'You Said, We Listened' –**

A common issue class reps face is students saying they have no idea what class reps do. This can be avoided by having a space to share information and feedback on achievements, actions taken or where setbacks have occurred. You could use methods such as a notice board in your classroom, a VLE discussion space, a Facebook group, etc.

**Feedback (to students)**

Identify the issue by gathering student opinion

Develop and implement the solution (or at least try to)

Feedback to students

The class rep cycle

**Feedback to students**

Feeding back to students is an important part of the cycle as this closes the loop so allowing the cycle to start again.

## 2.4 Effective tools of communication

This section looks at how ODL students are engaged as individuals in conversations about the quality of their learning experience, predominantly at a course level. This engagement can be undertaken both by staff and by course reps. Inherent in this are issues of identity and students' ability to create a meaningful learning community across a disparate group who engage with each other, wholly or predominantly, through online means, and their inclusion in quality monitoring and enhancement activities in ways that are equivalent to campus-based students.

*Inherent in this are issues of identity and students' ability to create a meaningful learning community across a disparate group who engage with each other, wholly or predominantly, through online means, and their inclusion in quality monitoring and enhancement activities in ways that are equivalent to campus-based students.*

To this end, this area of work relates most strongly to elements 1 and 3 of the *Student Engagement Framework for Scotland* and is an example of the link between the learning and wider student experiences.

For online courses, VLEs are a key tool for learning. However, they are also an important platform for commenting on and shaping learning, in that they can be used to generate and articulate students' views on learning.

However, in many instances, conversations with, and between, students about their views of their learning also take place outside the VLE and in other online tools such as social media platforms.

Institutions report that it is quite common for cohorts within a course or module to create private groups on sites like Facebook, or create group chats in mobile tools such as WhatsApp. These will sit aside from staff-led groups within VLEs.

**It is important to consider the relative merits of different tools of communication. How can students be encouraged to reflect on this and develop an appropriate balance of ways in which they talk to each other, to their reps and to teaching staff, about the quality of the learning experience?**



*The group has generated useful feedback on a variety of topics that would otherwise be unheard. For instance, the union learned much from students through a large discussion on coursework deadlines where the unique perspectives of ODL students were brought to the attention of officers.*

### Case study – VLE and social media spaces at RGU

RGU:Union runs a Facebook group specifically for its distance learning students. Students must individually choose to join it, so there is always a risk that students will not participate, but the advantage of this is that there is a certain vibrancy that comes from it being self-selecting.

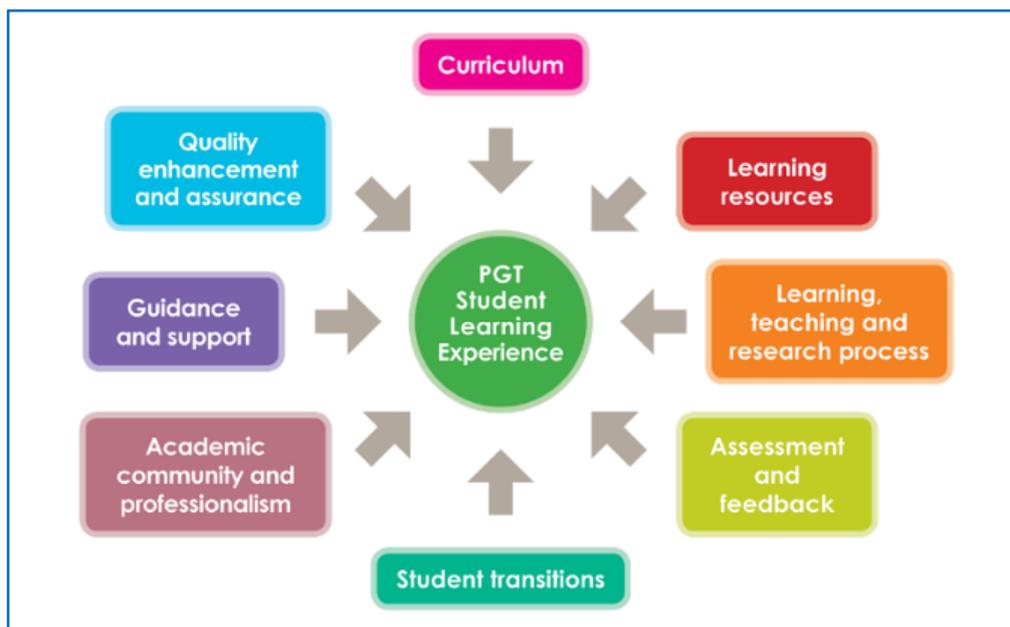
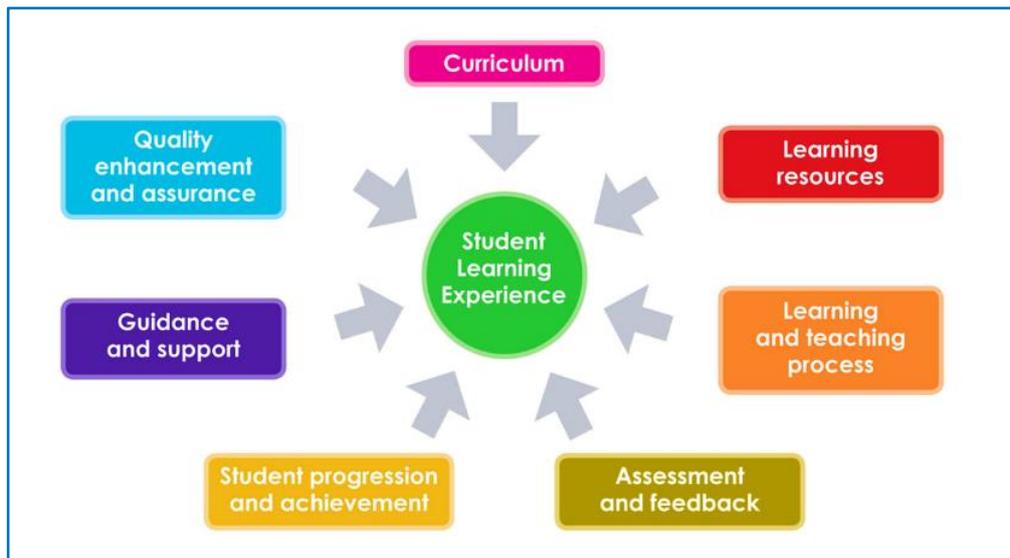
The group has generated useful feedback on a variety of topics that would otherwise be unheard. For instance, the union learned much from students through a large discussion on coursework deadlines where the unique perspectives of ODL students were brought to the attention of officers.

Meanwhile, RGU:Union and Robert Gordon University have also developed an open VLE area; 'Partnership at RGU'. The area highlights that all students, and staff, are active and valued participants in university life, and that the university aims to engender an ethos of partnership working at all levels of decision making. Particular care has been taken to ensure that both the tone and content is applicable to all students, including those studying at a distance. In addition, the ongoing evolution of the specific Student Representative VLE area ensures resources and support are inclusive to the range of modes of delivery offered by RGU, and specifically, forum areas stimulate collaboration amongst ODL representatives.

Areas that staff and students could consider when exploring the range of tools of communication at the course level might include:

- **Staff-led or student-led discussions** – Partnership should be the goal for all learning experiences, and staff and students should be able to develop a professional and respectful conversation about potential improvements in learning. Nonetheless, there is a case for using social media to develop conversations in student-only environments, in exactly the same way on-campus students will do so in social spaces. This is a key opportunity for a course rep to be an effective collator, analyst and presenter of student views.
- **Legal issues** – With ODL cohorts spread across multiple locations, some students may not, either through legal restrictions in some countries or technical limits in some workplaces, be able to access certain sites such as social media pages.
- **Synchronicity** – Is there a value to students having synchronous chats to explore particular aspects of the learning experience? Or is there a value in ODL being able to generate discussion over multiple days – for example through threaded discussions, or blogs by reps on which students can comment?

- **Diversity** – Is there merit in students communicating across a range of tools and platforms, to exploit the advantages of each, or instead should engagement happen in as few locations as possible to keep things simple and trackable?
- **Structured discussions** – How might online tools be used to enable conversations around different areas of the learning experience? sparqs' Student Learning Experience (SLE) diagram, which is at the heart of its course rep training, and its customised Postgraduate Student Learning Experience diagram, may be useful foundations for conversations led by staff or course reps.



### 3. Engagement in learning and teaching

The previous chapter looked at the structures of engagement at the institutional and course level, and how staff and students can shape those structures to work in partnership on the ODL experience. This chapter moves on to look at the nature of engagement for ODL students and how they can contribute to strategies that are relevant to their experience.

Particularly important here is how the students' association is able to represent ODL students and work with the institution to put them at the heart of all strategic activity relating to the learning experience.

#### 3.1 Strategic management of the ODL learning experience

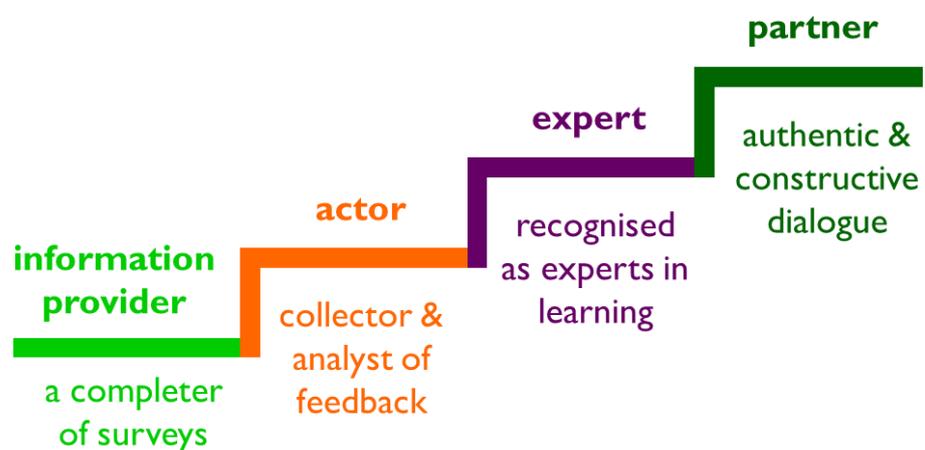
It is important that ODL students are engaged not as an afterthought, but as students alongside any other. On a basic level, this means ensuring a culture and approach that does not assume that experiences and access to services are done on-campus. But that in turn depends on ODL students being engaged directly by institutions and students' associations in strategic conversations about the learning experience.

This needn't be an insurmountable challenge. Participants in this project have suggested that often it is merely the language of learning and teaching strategy or policy that appears not to accommodate ODL students, but in fact practice can often be very strong. The difference sometimes lies simply in whether or not ODL-inclusive language is used to describe the learning experience.

Those involved in developing strategies for the learning experience should, when initially exploring the enhancement of ODL student engagement, reflect on this through:

- The areas of strategy that impact on ODL students (the what).
- The role that ODL students play (the how).

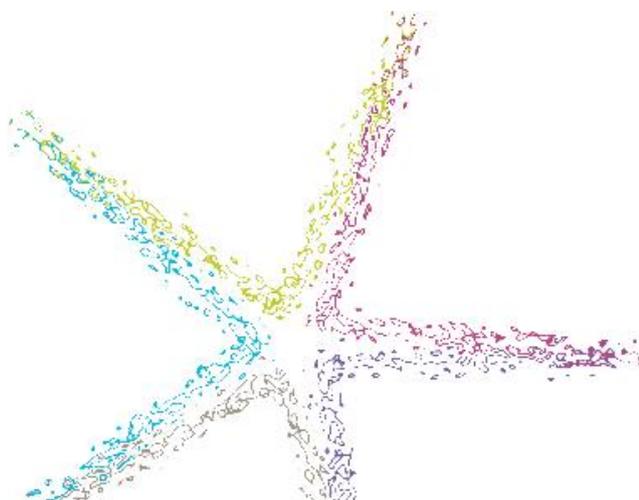
How ODL students shape a strategy might be in one of four roles, each of which will have its own specific requirements in terms of training and support.



*It is merely the language of learning and teaching strategy or policy that appears not to accommodate ODL students, but in fact practice can often be very strong.*

Examples of tasks undertaken by ODL students in each role might be:

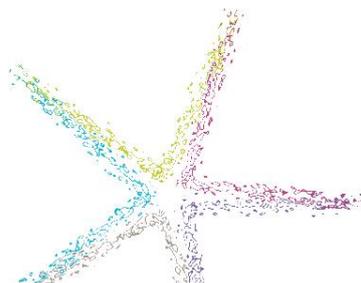
<p><b>Information provider</b> – a completer of surveys</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completing module evaluation surveys.</li> <li>• Completing institution-wide surveys.</li> <li>• Completing the National Student Survey.</li> <li>• Giving feedback in focus groups.</li> <li>• Answering questions posed in VLE discussions.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Actor</b> – collector and analyst of feedback</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shaping the content and tools of feedback.</li> <li>• Responding to and adding to others’ comments.</li> <li>• Identifying common themes in feedback.</li> <li>• Identifying priorities for decision-making.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Expert</b> – recognised as experts in learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing detailed case studies and anecdotal evidence about their learning experiences.</li> <li>• Expressing perspectives that can demonstrate the experiences of a particular type of student, such as an under-represented group.</li> <li>• Meeting with internal or external review teams.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Partner</b> – authentic and constructive dialogue</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being full members of committees, working groups or review bodies.</li> <li>• Being representatives who are a full part of students’ association structures.</li> <li>• Proposing ideas, rather than simply commenting on those of others.</li> <li>• Learning together with management.</li> <li>• Sometimes leading on areas of work, in agreement with staff, such as communicating with and engaging other students, or chairing meetings.</li> </ul>



Using these four roles, what evidence is there for how ODL students shape key strategies within the institution and students' association? The strategies listed below are purely suggestions and should be expanded upon.

	<b>The how</b>				
	No real role	Information provider	Actor	Expert	Partner
<b>The what</b> University strategic plan					
University learning & teaching strategy					
University strategy on assessment and feedback					
University strategy on support services					
Quality enhancement plan					
University strategy on online distance delivery					
University student engagement strategy					
Student Partnership Agreement					
Students' association strategic plan					
Course rep strategy					

By identifying areas in the above table where there could be enhancement, institutions and students' associations can begin to agree the sorts of activities that could strengthen ODL students' engagement in strategy.



*SPAs present challenges for how ODL students are engaged in developing the tools and projects of engagement outlined in the SPA and whether they reflect the experiences and needs of ODL students. Indeed, enhancing the ODL experience may even be a project undertaken as part of an SPA.*

### 3.2 Partnership and policy

There are many ways in which students generally should be influencing the policies that shape their learning experiences, and these tools should be equally accessible for ODL students. This section looks at examples of those tools, including institutional activities such as Student Partnership Agreements (SPAs) or review activity, and elements of the course lifecycle, including induction and the use of learning analytics.

The table on the previous page mentions SPAs as one possible strategic document. SPAs are a key process for developing partnership at an institutional level. They are short agreements between institutions and students' associations that allow for the shared ownership of the tools of student engagement and a small number of major projects that can be undertaken together. Guidance from sparqs on developing SPAs is available on the sparqs website.<sup>6</sup>

SPAs present challenges for how ODL students are engaged in developing the tools and projects of engagement outlined in the SPA and whether they reflect the experiences and needs of ODL students. Indeed, enhancing the ODL experience may even be a project undertaken as part of an SPA.

#### Case study – University of the Highlands and Islands SPA

The University of the Highlands and Islands' Student Partnership Agreement, developed in conjunction with the Highlands and Islands Students' Association (HISA), included learning resources as one of its 2017-18 projects.

Part of this has been a review of the virtual learning environment (VLE), drawing on students' experiences of the current VLE, including those students studying online and at a distance, for whom the VLE is of critical importance.

The previous year's SPA included video-conferencing as one of its project focuses, identifying ways in which the use of video-conferencing, critical to students studying online or through blended means, could be enhanced. Open and distance learning students were consulted on this and demonstrations of the various alternative software options were provided. The results are currently being used to inform decision making on a replacement VLE for the university. The involvement of ODL students in this is of particular importance as it is their primary method of teaching.

A further way in which ODL students can be at the heart of shaping institutional practice is through regular, informal interaction with staff about the nature and experiences of online distance learning. Of course these conversations can, and should, happen at the course level, but by happening at the institutional level they allow for a bigger picture to emerge of the strengths and opportunities for student engagement in ODL activity.

## Case study – University of Dundee Distance Learning Forum

The University of Dundee has a Distance Learning Forum, which enables staff and students, in partnership, to learn and share experiences, developments and good practice in distance learning across the university. A long-standing forum for the distance learning community at the university, there are eight meetings annually: four face-to-face and four online using Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, which enables distance learning students and staff working remotely to take part in discussions.

Students have been among the presenters, covering topics such as experiences of online learning, and the forum is an excellent way for academics, professional services staff and students to share experiences and best practice. The forum has been successful in raising awareness of aspects of distance learning that can often be overlooked, such as disability services, chaplaincy services and equality and diversity.

The forum developed a manifesto for distance learning in 2016 as a way of affirming support for distance learning and advocating for distance learners. The forum has increasingly been involved in influencing decision-making related to distance learning in the University, such as contributing to the institutional review of the VLE and having representation on the University's Distance Learning Business Development Group. Senior leaders in the University often attend and present to the forum meetings, as a way of ensuring that the distance learning voice is heard across senior levels in the institution.

### A manifesto for distance learning at University of Dundee

University of Dundee's Distance Learning Forum is comprised of a wide mix of academics, administrative and executive staff and students who are committed to promoting the interests of the 'invisible' distance learning student body



We recognise that distance learners have all the same needs as face-to-face learners (as well as some specific to their distance context) and we aim to:

**foster a strong sense of belonging** within this vital community, beyond the university's physical environment

**grow a scholarly environment**, establishing and maintaining an inter-professional community of practice and enquiry

**showcase, share and develop good DL practice** via a grassroots approach

**develop self-directed and self-regulated, independent learners**, who have a high quality, individualised student experience, which takes account of cultural and other differences amongst learners

**ensure DL programme have quality enhancement at their core** and that materials are appropriate to the DL context

**act as change agents** – to foreground the needs of distance learners throughout the institution

**value innovation**, including new and alternative approaches to learning, teaching and assessment

**appreciate the many and varied transitions and learning journeys** which bring students to distance learning programmes

Sometimes the gathering of staff and students in partnership to explore the ODL experience can be for a particular purpose of reflecting on and reforming ODL engagement.

Activities that shape the learning experience can also be undertaken through periodic quality processes such as Enhancement-led Institutional Review or Institution-led Review, or more specific reviews that examine aspects of online and distance learning engagement.

### **Case study – engaging ODL students in periodic review at The University of Edinburgh**

During a pilot review of Online Distance Learning of Postgraduate Taught Programmes in the College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine in 2014-15, a set of questionnaires was developed for online learning students participating in the review. Although guidance was produced on engaging online learner students in review meetings by using online tools, this may not always be possible where, for instance, students were also studying or working part-time. As a result, questionnaires would be used to generate anonymised data that could then inform student feedback. Again, this ended up benefitting a wider part of the student population – for example, for those internal periodic reviews where students are studying abroad temporarily, the questionnaire can be used to engage these students in the review process.

*Therefore, it is worth reflecting on how ODL students can be engaged in shaping the different aspects of their learning experience, much or all of which will happen entirely online, from induction through to completion.*

The lifecycle of a course, and how students can shape it, is a crucial question in student engagement. For ODL courses, this can be especially important and challenging because of the high prevalence of part-time study. This means that students may only do one module at a time, or at all, potentially compressing into just a few weeks, not only students' induction into their module of study and their entire learning experience, but their introduction to the entire university structure and culture too.

Therefore, it is worth reflecting on how ODL students can be engaged in shaping the different aspects of their learning experience, much or all of which will happen entirely online, from induction through to completion.



## Case study – Shaping orientation at Hibernia College

Students shape orientation (induction) at Hibernia College by surveys both before and at the end of the orientation programme. These feed forward into the subsequent orientation. Current and past students are also involved in the orientation programme.

The orientation at Hibernia College is a combination of a two-week online programme and one day onsite (at a central venue organised by the College as Hibernia College does not have a campus).

The online orientation is delivered through the VLE using interactive content, quizzes, videos and webinars. Learning outcomes for week one and week two are included below. Students are awarded two digital badges once they have completed the orientation programme and the associated tasks – the Technical Badge and the Social and Well-Being badge. The College noted an increased engagement on the orientation programme after the introduction of the badges.

Students are surveyed before they start the orientation programme to establish a baseline measure of how students feel at the start, allowing the College to learn about students' perceptions (for instance of blended learning). A survey afterwards generates feedback on what could be improved in the orientation as well as giving a chance to measure students' development since the pre-orientation survey.

In the lead up to every new orientation, a small team of staff from Student Support and Learning Design meet to discuss and act upon outcomes from the student feedback and ongoing quality assurance, to continually improve and enhance the programme.

Future plans for the programme, influenced by student feedback, include more creative games and quizzes using a Moodle gaming plugin; a reflective task at the end to be followed up with other reflective tasks at interval throughout the two-year programme; and a follow-on programme at the start of year two. There has also been discussion about including student representation on the orientation working group.

The screenshot shows a Moodle course interface. On the left is a navigation menu with 'Study Tools', 'Current course' (expanded to show 'Orientation', 'Participants', and 'Badges'), and 'My Courses'. Below this is a 'Progress Bar' showing completion of 'Introduction to MyVLE (3 minutes)'. The main content area is titled 'PME Primary Apr18 Orientation' and includes buttons for 'Course Home', 'Discussion tasks', and 'Course Blog'. It displays 'Week 1' and 'Week 1 Introduction'. Under 'Before you start...', there is a link to 'A short, anonymous survey (3 minutes)'. The 'Learning outcomes' section lists eight goals for the end of Week 1, such as uploading a photo and understanding the programme structure. A final link is provided for 'How to track your progress through the orientation course (2 minutes)'.

## Week 2

### Week 2 Introduction

#### 🕒 Learning outcomes

At the end of Week 2 of your orientation course, you should:

- Have discovered some useful time management techniques
- Know how you will organise your notes and files
- Know how to upload an assignment
- Understand the rules and regulations surrounding exams and assessments
- Have developed strategies for staying well throughout the programme
- Know the dos and don'ts of applying for a school experience placement
- Have a plan for finding your first placement
- Have started building a digital portfolio

#### Step 15

##### Week 2 Summary

###### Week 2 checklist (2 minutes)

We hope you found your online orientation useful. In order to help us ensure that it is as relevant and helpful as possible, we'd love to get your feedback. Please take a minute to complete the brief, anonymous survey below.

If you previously completed the pre-orientation survey, you will notice that some of the questions are repeated here. This is intentional, as it enables us to do a 'before and after' comparison of the survey data. If you would like to get further information about the survey, please contact Dara Cassidy (dcassidy@hiberniacollege.net).

###### Post-orientation survey (3 minutes)

Thank you very much for your participation!

Congratulations! You have reached the end of your orientation course. We wish you every success in your studies.

If you have completed all the tasks under the blue headings, you will receive the MyHELMs Technical Badge.



If you have completed all the tasks under the green headings, you will receive the Social and Well-Being Badge.



An important aspect of induction in all courses is explaining and promoting the role of the course rep. This is particularly important in ODL courses where it may not be immediately clear as to the relevance of the course rep role in an off-campus learning experience, or how to engage with and inform one's course rep.

To that end, it is recommended that the course rep role features heavily in induction, and indeed that there should be considerable synergy between induction and course rep training, so that all students are aware of the reasons for, and nature of, effective student engagement and partnership in quality.

## Case study – Shaping the ODL lifecycle at the University of Aberdeen

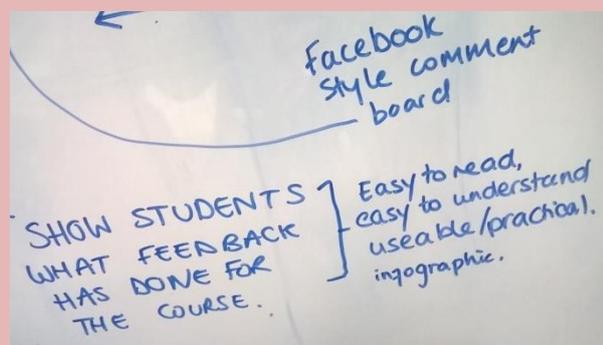
In a workshop in March 2018, the University of Aberdeen explored how students were involved in shaping the lifecycle of distance learning modules (or courses, as the university calls them). Participants in the workshop included staff and students from four subject areas, students' association staff and officers, and staff from the university's student engagement and distance learning development offices.

In subject groups, maps were created of certain courses, to identify the different stages of the course lifecycle, the actual and potential opportunities for students to engage, and the skills required for students to do so in an ODL environment.

The activity features discussion around induction, representation and student feedback. Actions were identified relating to the university's overall strategy for distance learning course design, influencing and complementing university-wide student feedback mechanisms, mutually agreed staff and student expectations for the online learning experience, and impacts on the university's Student Partnership Agreement.

As a result of the workshop, the university has been exploring two third-party solutions to provide immediate anonymised student feedback through the VLE. The online education team at the university has been looking at these solutions to address the class representation issue in the online environment in particular.

In addition, the online education team is employing a summer intern to deliver a discreet project around a three-tiered onboarding and induction pathway for online students. The hope is that this project will deliver a tailored induction plan that will impact the September 2018 intake of online students. The university will continue to have monthly forums for staff engaged with online education delivery, and induction needs are often discussed in these interactive sessions.



*In courses with short lifecycles, such as standalone modules or one-year postgraduate courses, the turnaround of feedback is a particular challenge in an online environment.*

In courses with short lifecycles, such as standalone modules or one-year postgraduate courses, the turnaround of feedback is a particular challenge in an online environment.

Key to this will be:

- Clear expectations, shared by staff and students, about what can and can't be changed or resolved within the lifecycle of the course.
- The role of the course rep in expediting communication in a constructive and meaningful way.
- The ability to use additional survey tools beyond standard university processes, if timescales do not enable early identification of issues.
- The ability for feedback on assessment to enable learning and development before the end of the module. There is scope for students to give their views on the range of synchronous and asynchronous tools of assessment feedback and to work with staff to identify the most effective mechanisms.

### 3.3 Student data and learning analytics

*The concept of learning analytics... is arguably even more relevant to ODL environments where there are not face-to-face interactions with staff that can highlight potential problems.*

The importance of understanding how students engage with their learning (element 2 of the *Student Engagement Framework for Scotland*) has been a growing area of conversation and research in higher education. The concept of learning analytics – how digital evidence of students' activities illustrates their successful learning or otherwise – is central to this, and is arguably even more relevant to ODL environments where there are not face-to-face interactions with staff that can highlight potential problems.

However, at the heart of learning analytics, are questions of what data should be gathered, for what benefit and with what required consent. Institutions and students' associations should therefore work together to explore and agree the indicators that should be tracked, what counts as reasonable triggers for support intervention, and the value that the resultant data might have, not only for universities, but students' associations too. By allowing student reps at a course level to have a stake in their data, they will be equipped to play a proactive role in commenting on, and shaping, the learning experience, from a position of detailed knowledge.



## Case study – Shaping learning analytics at the Open University

The need to consider the ethical implications of the increased use of student data for learning analytics purposes has resulted in the University creating a Policy on the Ethical use of Data for learning analytics. The policy is the first of its kind in higher education worldwide and is available for use/adaption under a Creative Commons Licence.<sup>7</sup>

### Ethical use of Student Data for Learning Analytics Policy

**Also listed as:**

Ethical use of Student Data for Learning Analytics Policy

This policy aims to set out how the University will use student data in an ethical way in order to shape the student support provided. The policy is based around eight key principles, each of which is linked to particular aspects of learning analytics.

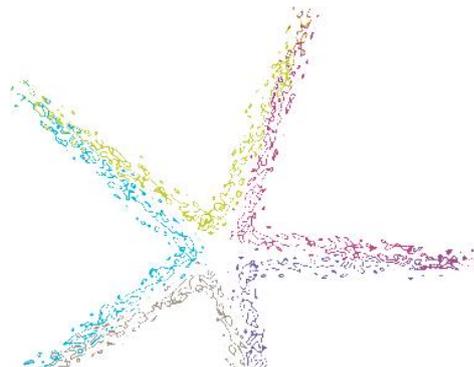
-  Policy on Ethical use of Student Data for Learning Analytics (162KB)
-  Ethical use of Student Data for Learning Analytics Policy FAQs (221KB)
-  Using information to support student learning (492KB)

For more information, see [How the OU uses student data](#).

**Charter Principle:**

We treat each other with dignity and respect

The policy was developed by a working group that included student representatives and experts across the university. Development of the policy involved reviewing research on learning analytics and consulting with students through a student forum. The policy itself is primarily aimed at staff, but there's also an associated set of FAQs written from a student perspective.



## Acknowledgements

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They include:

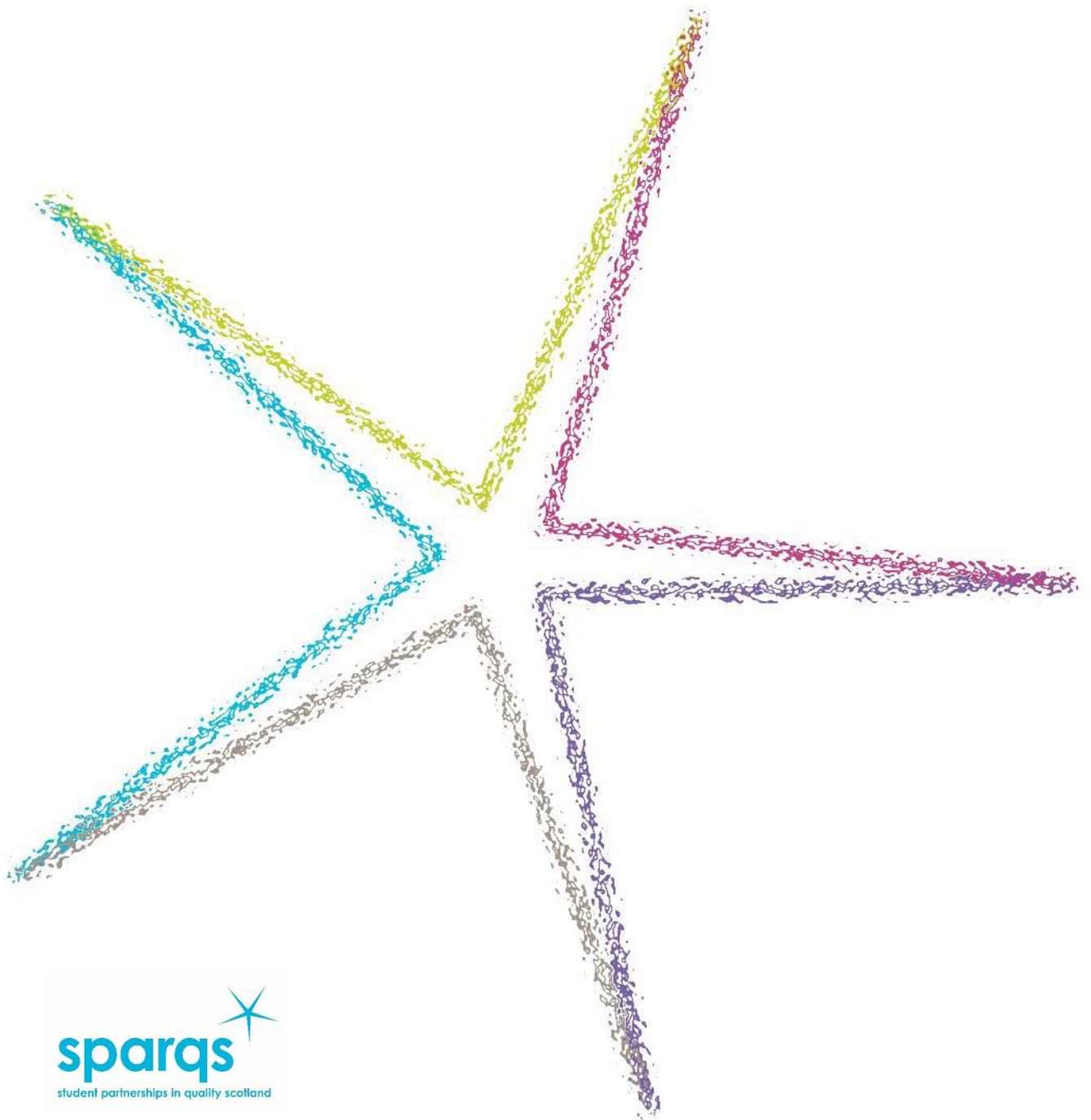
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- Brenda Dunn, Senior Lecturer and Programme Director, School of Education and Social Work, University of Dundee
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- Gillian Mackintosh, Director of Online Education and Academic Development, University of Aberdeen
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- Kerry Harrison, President (Education and Welfare), RGU:Union
- Kirsty Campbell, Learning Analytics & Partnership Lead, Robert Gordon University
- Lesley Robertson, Distance Learning Co-ordinator, The Scott Sutherland School of Architecture and Built Environment, Robert Gordon University

## References and further reading

- 1 See more about NStEP's work at <http://studentengagement.ie/>
- 2 *A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland* (sparqs, Education Scotland, The Higher Education Academy Scotland, NUS Scotland, Quality Assurance Agency Scotland, Scotland's Colleges, Scottish Funding Council, Universities Scotland, December 2012). [www.sparqs.ac.uk/SEFScotland](http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/SEFScotland)
- 3 *Engaging Students in Transnational Education* (sparqs, forthcoming September 2018)
- 4 *Tool for Developing a Forum for Students on Online Courses* (sparqs, 2017)  
<https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/resource-item.php?item=249>
- 5 sparqs is developing an online Course Rep Training resource (forthcoming 2018)
- 6 sparqs guidance documents on developing a Student Partnership Agreement:  
<https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/institute.php?page=128>
- 7 < <http://www.open.ac.uk/students/charter/essential-documents/ethical-use-student-data-learning-analytics-policy> >



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