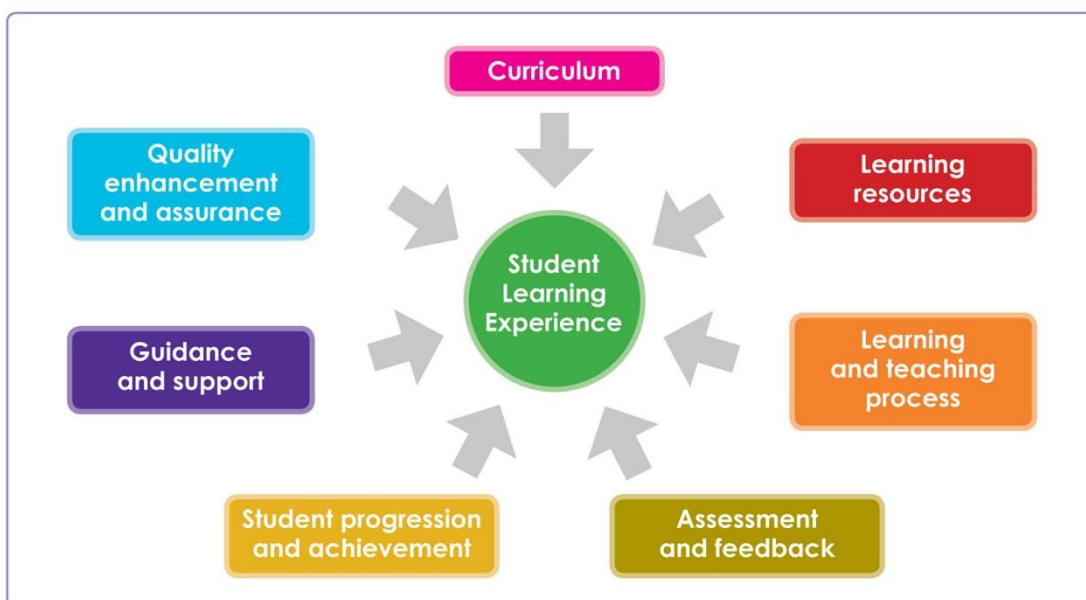


# Suggested questions for course reps (2023-24 edition)

The Student Learning Experience is a concept developed by sparqs to help course reps understand the different parts that make up the learning experience of the students they represent. The 'learning experience' is everything related to how students learn and the way they are taught.

The SLE diagram helps course reps break down the, often vague, idea of the learning experience into practical, bitesize chunks. It means that reps can ask their fellow students specific, meaningful questions around each of the areas of the learning experience, ensuring student feedback is broad ranging.



The second part of this document outlines some suggested questions that course reps may want to ask the students they represent, organised under each of these SLE themes.

First, we have provided brief notes on some key themes you'll likely encounter as a rep:

**Online / blended learning**

**Student Mental Health and Wellbeing**

**Anti-Racist Curriculum**

**Education for Sustainable Development**

The commentary on the next three pages delves into some of the opportunities you may have as a rep to engage in discussion on these topics and identifies ways that students can engage further in these important areas. You will also find that some of the questions in the second part of this document refer to these same topics.

## **Online/blended learning**

The aftermath of COVID means that learning and teaching looks quite different than pre-pandemic; hybrid, blended, digital and asynchronous learning are now all common words and phrases that surround the student learning experience. (You can find explanations and further discussion of these and similar terms in the [Student Rep Guide to Equity in Learning and Teaching](#) mentioned below).

We've seen significant changes to learning and teaching take place across Scotland's universities and colleges and we've seen both advantages and challenges arise as a result. For example, digital exclusion has been highlighted as a massive barrier for many students, whether that is lack of equipment or lack of digital literacy, and the challenges these present. We've also seen some instances where the move to digital has made elements of the student experience more inclusive, such as flexible assessment, and these are changes which institutions may wish to keep as we move forward.

Institutions are beginning to make longer-term decisions about their future delivery; what elements of pandemic learning and teaching do we want to nurture and grow, and what elements do we want to see return to previous formats. It is crucial that students are part of these discussions, and that institutions recognise the impact that decisions have on the equity of learning and teaching. To help aid these conversations, sparqs and QAA Scotland (as part of the [Enhancement Themes Student-led Project](#)) have produced a helpful [Student Rep Guide to Equity in Learning and Teaching](#) that will be useful for you to read.

## **Student Mental Health and Wellbeing**

Student mental health and wellbeing has been at the forefront of activities and campaigns of student representatives for a while and the pandemic only exacerbated the need for deliverables and action. There may be instances where issues around student mental health and wellbeing arise and it is important for you to know what is, and what isn't your role to deal with. Understanding where to signpost, such as to student support services, counselling services or the students' association is important.

In your role though you can work with staff, your fellow reps, and students to think about how student mental health and wellbeing can be discussed as part of the learning experience and what changes can be made in and around the curriculum to support students. Consider the student learning experience and how student mental health and wellbeing intersects with the different headings; what helps and what hinders at different points of the learning experience? This could mean exploring staff training to support the embedding of initiatives into curriculum

design, more flexible approaches to assessments, or how the quality arrangements can be designed to ask institutions how they are evidencing their response to this topic.

This is a national priority and the Scottish Government have set up a [working group](#) with staff, students, institutions, and agencies across the sector to develop a Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan by spring 2023 that will support the implementation of Government commitments to additional counsellors and the development of an integrated approach to student wellbeing in colleges and universities. One focus of this plan is around learning and teaching, and sparqs will continue to explore what this looks like over the coming year.

## **Anti-Racist Curriculum**

The work to develop an anti-racist curriculum (ARC) is about encouraging and embracing a plurality of voices and narratives and a broadening of our curriculum. A national project has emerged to support institutions to systematically embed race equality in curricula throughout Scottish FE and HE, which is led by the sector and supported by Advance HE and QAA Scotland. Embedding consideration of race equality in university and college curricula is a core part of a 'whole institution' approach to race equality and getting started on this vital work might include considerations of language, curriculum development, approaches to teaching, student engagement, allyship and more. There are existing pockets of good ARC practice across Scotland and beyond but there are also many staff who are keen but unsure where or how to begin.

As a rep, you will have the opportunity to drive forward this initiative, to make sure the student voice is heard when institutions are developing an anti-racist curriculum and ensure that Black, Asian and minority ethnic students and staff are valued, supported, and enabled to succeed in Scottish institutions. There is not an expectation that you are or will become an expert in this specific topic, rather that you use the role of the student rep and your skills and training to support staff and student dialogue around this area of work. There are a variety of supporting [resources and guides](#) that the sector has produced as part of the national project, which might be useful to explore.

## **Education for Sustainable Development**

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) refers to areas of study that prepare students to contribute to shaping a sustainable and just world. The intention is that students gain knowledge of sustainability themes and develop corresponding skills and competencies. Those promoting ESD would like all students to become prepared to take actions and make decisions that support sustainable development: socially, economically, and environmentally. Therefore, ESD goes wider and deeper than simply adding sustainability topics to an existing course. Sustainability themes are summarised by the United Nations 17 [sustainable development goals](#) (SDGs).

The relevant skills are often called green skills which support transition to a low-carbon, resource efficient economy such as technical skills, science skills, operation management skills, and monitoring skills. UNESCO's key competencies for sustainability are systems thinking, future thinking, critical thinking, ability to be strategic, collaborate and use integrated problem-solving and to have self-awareness and the ability to reflect on norms and values.

ESD is considered important for all students – not just those studying science and geography. In the 2021 NUS sustainability skills survey, 84% of students stated that they wanted sustainable development to be actively incorporated across all courses. All students are likely to need the knowledge and skills that can equip them to help tackle the developing climate crisis, both globally and locally.

So how can institutions prepare students to shape a better world through ESD? Guidance recommends that ESD is most impactful when embedded in an institution's strategic priorities, with all stakeholders given their part to play. This requires senior management support for ESD initiatives, and teaching staff to be allocated time to understand how ESD is relevant to their subject and to develop content linking to sustainability. Where these do not occur, progress can be slow. Dialogue between students and staff can help overcome these obstacles, and course reps can play a key role in initiating or contributing to these conversations on behalf of their classmates.

With thanks to EAUC and SOS for contributing to this section.

- [SOS-UK](#) (Students Organising for Sustainability) has a number of initiatives to involve students in ESD.
- The [EAUC](#) (Alliance for sustainability leadership in education) support the progress of ESD in Further and Higher Education.
- In addition, [Learning for Sustainability Scotland](#) is the country's centre for expertise on ESD and have regular events and resources to support ESD.

## Curriculum

The curriculum is *what* you are taught, so this includes the course content, placements, study abroad and the different modules available for you to study. It also includes things like handbooks, the aims, and objectives of a course of study, and how it is put together, which might include how students are involved in that process. The curriculum is what provides the knowledge, skills and learning to enable proficiency to obtain professional qualifications.

### Course Rep Questions

- Does the overall curriculum taught match your expectations from the information provided about the course?
- Do you undertake a placement or study abroad year? If so, do you feel you have the relevant information and support to do so effectively?
- Are you given the opportunity to help co-create or design courses/content alongside staff?
- Has your curriculum been adapted or modified in any way to include online learning?
- Is your timetable clear and easy to understand?
- Is there a curriculum outline provided?
- Do your classes help you to learn and develop your understanding and skills?
- Were your learning expectations clearly outlined?
- Do the learning outcomes correspond to what you are learning?
- Are you satisfied by the module choices that were offered?
- How are the modules structured?
- Do you find the course engaging and challenging?
- Does the way your curriculum is put together take account of student mental health and wellbeing?
- Does your curriculum include content from a range of different cultures, backgrounds, and identities?

## Learning Resources

Learning resources are the resources available to students that support and enable your learning. This includes physical spaces, such as the library, study spaces, flexible learning spaces and laboratories, as well as digital resources including the VLE, IT support and learning technology resources and equipment. Also included here are other classroom resources such as apparatus and equipment needed for the course or reading lists.

### Course Rep Questions

- Have you been provided with adequate equipment to complete your studies?
- Do you have access to, and have you been supported to use appropriate learning technologies, including new software and online tools?
- Have you been supported to access subject-specific facilities (e.g., labs, studios, theatres, computing rooms, etc.) or alternatives in an online environment?
- Have you had the opportunity to discuss your preparedness for learning in a digital environment and access appropriate support and upskilling if required?
- If you are studying a practical course, do you have access to the resources/tools/materials you need?
- Are there adequate library facilities and study spaces? Are they well maintained and fit for purpose?
- Are you supported by your institution to reduce your carbon footprint while learning? (e.g., through online learning and paperless submission to reduce commuting and printing)
- In courses for which you are not able to access the library on campus, do you have access to equivalent learning materials online?
- How much guidance and support do you get with use of VLE for learning and teaching?
- Are you able to access core course materials (lecture slides, reading lists, notes etc.) on the VLE?
- Are the lectures and other class learning materials easily accessible?
- Is there adequate provision of materials and equipment for the number of students who require it?
- Do reading lists contain a wide range of content from a range of different cultures, backgrounds, and voices?

## Learning and teaching process

If the curriculum is *what* you are taught, then the learning and teaching process is *how* you are taught. This includes the contact time you have with teaching staff in seminars and lectures, independent and group work, the size of classes, the different teaching styles that staff use and how staff continue to develop professional to ensure they have the most up to date skills and knowledge to support your learning.

### Course Rep Questions

- Have you had the opportunity to take part in group work?
- If you have any learning in an online environment, have you been given tasks that involve learning off-screen and the chance to take regular/appropriate breaks?
- Does your timetable work for you?
- Does your lecturer use any innovative methods for engaging with the more practical elements of your course?
- Do staff engage in continued professional development (CPD) around key learnings on topics such as student mental health, equality, and sustainability?
- Are you consistently/sufficiently guided to practice your skills throughout your course?
- Are there opportunities for experiential learning in your course? (e.g., field trips, placements, or outdoor classes)
- If your course uses an online/blended approach, do you feel all learning is appropriately covered and you are supported to engage in an online environment?
- Are there opportunities for asynchronous learning using video lectures and online materials which you can access whenever you like?
- Are you able to learn in a way that suits you?
- Are your classes stimulating/engaging and informative?
- Do you find the lectures a satisfactory method of imparting information?
- Are class sizes appropriate?
- Is teaching material up to date?
- Do you find your tutorials promote your understanding of the subject and further learning?
- Do you have enough contact time with your lecturers/tutors?
- Are there opportunities for peer-to-peer learning?
- Do your classes motivate you to learn independently?
- Are you given support to develop your independent learning skills?

## Assessment and feedback

Assessment and feedback means all aspects of the assessment you undertake as a student. This includes the type of assessment (exams, essays, presentations etc.), the choice and variety of assessment (including flexible or personalised assessment) as well as how much and how they are structured and scheduled. It also includes the marking criteria, consistency of marking and the quality and promptness of feedback.

### Course Rep Questions

- Are there opportunities for flexible or personalised assessment, or alternative assessment options, including the opportunity for online assessments?
- Is it made clear to you on how you will be assessed and what assessments will look like?
- Have you experienced any barriers to engaging in any of your assessments?
- If you are writing your dissertation, are you provided with effective support and guidance?
- Do assessments adequately and fairly represent the content of the course?
- Was the course fairly marked?
- Do you receive adequate feedback from your assessments?
- Does the feedback you receive following assessments help you understand what you did well and what you need to do to improve?
- Are your assessment deadlines close together or are they scheduled to ensure that you do not have multiple assessments due on the same day?
- Are the assessment criteria clear to you?
- Is consideration given around assessments to support students who may be struggling, including extensions, extenuating circumstances, and additional assistance?
- Are you given enough time to prepare for assessments?
- Are there opportunities to discuss your progress with staff on a regular basis?
- Have you had the opportunity to complete formative assessments (assessments where the mark does not count towards your final grade)?



## Student progression and achievement

This is about the whole learner journey. From what entry into the institution was like, such as induction support, to the links between academic years and courses, how you transition between and in and out of study (e.g., for work placements) and your continued personal development and progression to achieve your qualification.

### Course Rep Questions

- Have you experienced any challenges progressing from one year of your course to the next?
- Have you identified any gaps in your knowledge or skills, including digital skills, due to how or where you transitioned from and into the institution?
- Do you feel you have been provided with the opportunity to develop your knowledge-base and skills, including digital skills, to prepare you for future education, training or employment?
- 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?
- 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 induction events?
- Are you able to progress easily from one module to the next?
- Are you able to evaluate and report on your own personal progress through your course?
- Are further course opportunities and pathways made clear to you?

## Guidance and support

Guidance and support includes support within and around learning and teaching. This includes careers advice and employability guidance, personal support (such as counselling) and academic support, from a personal tutor or your lecturers and teaching staff. This also includes peer and community support and how students are encouraged to foster a supportive community.

### Course Rep Questions

- Have you been given the option to access academic, personal, and careers support either in-person, online or both?
- Are you clear where you can seek support from if you need to discuss extensions or apply for special circumstances?
- Have you been made aware of hardship funding available through your institution?
- Have you experienced any innovative ways of developing and maintaining a sense of community on your course?
- Has your institution or department offered a way for you to engage with students and staff more informally?
- Have you been made aware of how to contact and access support services, including mental health services, either in-person or online?
- How much support are you getting with your academic work?
- Is there a place/person you can get help from if you're struggling with your work?
- Are staff and students aware of the channels for dealing with issues?
- Is your personal tutor or advisor of studies helpful?
- Are you provided with sufficient employability guidance and advice?
- How has your course made you more employable?
- How informative and helpful is the careers centre?

## Quality enhancement and assurance

Quality relates to everything an institution does to ensure they are meeting the minimum expectations required of them in the delivery of their qualifications. In Scotland, we have an enhancement-led approach to quality which means going above and beyond the minimum requirements and ensuring that students are getting the best learning experience they can. This includes institution-wide conversations about enhancement, the use of external review mechanisms and institution-led review processes. This also explores survey development (and how students are engaged in shaping/using survey data) and the interpretation of student feedback. Course reps and student representative systems are a core component of the quality system as a vital source of how institutions gather and understand the student voice.

### Course Rep Questions

- Are you given opportunities to feed back to senior staff members at your institution on issues you are facing, e.g., through the opportunity to attend online or in-person 'town-hall' style meetings where students can raise issues directly with senior leaders?
- Do you feel that the staff and department is receptive to student concerns and suggestions?
- Do you feel that you and your classmates' opinions are listened to and taken seriously?
- What improvements have been made to your course during your time of study?
- Do you consider that there is a strong student voice culture embedded in your course?
- Are there opportunities for you to understand and engage in wider quality processes at your institutions?
- Does your institution gather student ideas for initiatives relating to topics such as sustainability, equality, and mental health, and if so, how do they do this?
- Do you have the chance to work with staff in developing and delivering student feedback gathering tools, and are you able to access and use relevant data?

