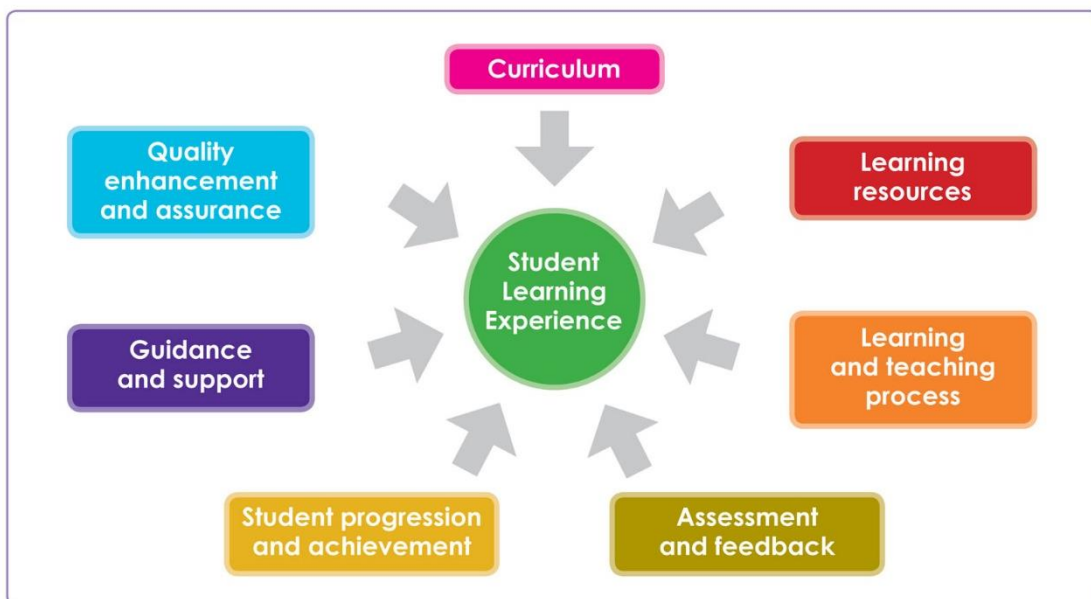


Suggested questions for course reps

COVID-19 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, allowing student input to be mapped across various headings to ensure it is broad-ranging.



This document outlines some suggested questions that course reps may want to ask the students they represent, organised under each of the SLE themes. This set of questions has been updated in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some questions in this document are entirely new and specific to the impact of the pandemic. Other questions remain the same as in, or similar to, previous years, but course reps are encouraged to consider all questions in the context of the commentary provided. This will help to ensure that, as significant changes continue to be made to learning and teaching in the 2020-21 academic year, student reps can capture as wide a picture as possible of the impact on the student learning experience.

Curriculum

Includes: course content; handbooks; study abroad opportunities; placements; optional and compulsory modules

The Impact of COVID-19

In courses which are typically delivered through more traditional formats such as lectures, moving to an online setting has not typically required considerable change to the content. In more practical subjects, this move has been more challenging, particularly where large parts of the course involve students interacting with specialist equipment or materials such as sculpture, culinary arts, and construction [see the 'Learning Resources' section for more on this topic].

Some practical subjects are now returning to campus, albeit with some restrictions, with some institutions choosing to prioritise the return to campus for students on courses with content that simply cannot be delivered online. However, there remains the risk of a second lockdown and, therefore, the need for continued conversations about how to ensure that students can still meet their learning outcomes in an online environment.

As institutions continue to make changes to the content of courses into the next semester, due care will have to be given to the learning outcomes of a programme. What have students been told that they will get from the programme in terms of skills, content and knowledge? Are these still being delivered, albeit in an alternative format? What about in cases where students cannot attend placements or undertake work-based learning? For disciplines which rely on accreditation by an external body, how will the requirements of these external regulators continue to be met?

When lockdown began, some students' work-based placements were immediately halted as businesses and organisations ceased on-site activity. In some cases, workplace experience continued, but students moved online to complete the placement. Students studying abroad were asked to return to the UK and finish the rest of their term online.

Decisions about placements, field trips and years abroad are still being made at the time of writing, but if these are not able to go ahead, then alternatives to this course content will have to be decided upon by institutions. In some professional courses, such as teaching, counselling and social care, students must log a particular amount of placement hours to be awarded the qualification. Many professional bodies have been flexible on this requirement so far (in some cases reducing the minimum level of hours required), but quality standards will need to be maintained and more inventive approaches to engaging with placements online may have to be considered.

Course Rep Questions

- Taking into account the changes made as a result of COVID-19, does the overall curriculum taught still match your expectations from the information provided about the course?
- Have you been unable to undertake a placement? What has been the alternative provided and how have you been supported through this change?
- Have you been unable to study abroad? What has been the alternative provided and how have you been supported through this change?
- Where significant changes have been made to the content of your curriculum due to the pandemic, have you been given the opportunity to help re-design courses alongside staff?
- 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 your curriculum include content from a range of different cultures, backgrounds and identities?

Learning Resources

Includes: library; IT; VLE; estates; classroom resources

The Impact of COVID-19

As Scotland entered lockdown, in-person access to university and college campuses ceased. Libraries moved to digital access only whilst study spaces and computer labs were closed and students directed to study at home.

Almost immediately, institutions identified that some students did not have access to the equipment and resources needed to study at home. This included access to laptops, an effective internet connection, and suitable space to study.

Many institutions were able to provide this equipment to students by donating laptops or providing dongles that improve the quality of internet connectivity. Nevertheless, parity of experience for students studying at home remains an ongoing challenge. Alongside the unequal access to equipment, students also have different levels of digital literacy. Particularly as institutions introduce new technology, students have needed additional support to use this confidently. Many students never expected to be online learners, so skill sets are unsurprisingly varied and institutions need to ensure that they are providing, not just the new equipment and software required to study online, but also the support and training to engage with this successfully.

Alongside the loss of more centralised spaces, many students have also lost access to more specialist spaces, including labs, art studios, and theatres. Many subject areas that rely on these discipline-specific spaces also rely on the use of particular materials and equipment that cannot be accessed at home. Some institutions have been able to send specialist equipment to students at home so that they can continue to engage practically in the course, but this is not always possible.

Course Rep Questions

- In courses for which you are not able to access the library on campus, do you have access to equivalent learning materials online?
- Have you been provided with adequate equipment to complete your studies online?
- Have you been supported in the move from on-campus to online teaching, e.g. how to use new software and online tools, etc.?
- Have you been supported to access subject-specific facilities (e.g. labs, studios, theatres, computing rooms, etc.) in a safe way, or been given alternative options where this has not been possible?
- If you are studying a practical course, do you have access to the resources/tools/materials you need? Once in-person delivery ceased, did you continue to have access to these resources or appropriate alternatives?
- Are you supported to use learning technology, including any new technologies you may have started using due to studying online?
- How much guidance and support do you get with use of VLE for learning and teaching?
- Are the lectures and other class learning materials easily accessible?

Learning and teaching process

Includes: contact time; independent and group work; class sizes; teaching styles; staff development

The Impact of COVID-19

In this 'emergency response' phase, in which institutions had to move to an online delivery of learning and teaching almost overnight, many decisions about learning and teaching process were taken largely out of institutions' hands. No delivery could take place in-person and the speed of the change to online teaching meant that, for many, implementing more innovative approaches to online delivery had to wait.

As institutions move out of this emergency phase and into a more considered approach for the academic year 2020-21, they will have had to make many decisions about how teaching will be delivered. A key decision will be around the balance of online versus in-person teaching in the autumn term. An institution may have decided to continue to deliver all of its teaching online, to deliver teaching entirely in-person (with social distancing in place), or to go forward with a blended approach which combines elements of both.

Institutions may also have set up 'hybrid' teaching spaces which can allow teaching delivery to some students in-person whilst others join remotely. Whichever mode of delivery an institution chooses, systems will have to be flexible – students studying on-campus may suddenly need to self-isolate and require an online alternative to continue to access teaching. There may also be a need to move teaching entirely back online if there is a further lockdown, either locally or nationally.

Institutions will also have considered the balance of synchronous versus asynchronous teaching (i.e. how much of the teaching will be done 'live' and how much can be undertaken by the student in their own time). A way of delivering teaching that previously worked in-person, such as a two-hour lecture, may not translate as well to an online space. In some cases, international students may still be studying from their home country, where time differences may make studying synchronously challenging. Choice of delivery will have to include consideration of these students and ensure that their learning experience is equitable to students studying in the UK.

Institutions may have introduced more innovative online methods of learning and teaching, such as using discussion boards, online simulations of practical skills, and interactive platforms where students can engage more actively with content.

There may still be challenges around delivery of the more practical elements of courses. There have been some incredibly creative alternatives to the traditional delivery of more practical courses, but some institutions may still decide to delay some of the more practical elements of their courses until after the winter break and focus more on theoretical parts of the course in the autumn.

Course Rep Questions

- How have you found the transition to online teaching? Is there anything that staff have done to make this transition easier, or anything you would have liked done differently?
- Have you had the opportunity to take part in group work?
- If you have been learning in an online environment, have you been given tasks that involve learning off-screen?
- Does your timetable give you the chance to take regular/appropriate breaks?
- Have you had a chance to use an online discussion board? Has this worked well?
- Has your lecturer used any innovative methods for engaging with the more practical elements of your course at home?
- Are there any parts of your course that you feel have not been substituted by the move to online teaching and are missing?
- Are you consistently/sufficiently guided to practice your skills throughout your course?
- 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

Includes: marking criteria; consistency of marking; number and type of assessments; choice of assessment; quality and promptness of feedback

The Impact of COVID-19

As lockdown arrived and campuses closed, institutions had to quickly develop online alternatives to in-person assessments and communicate these changes to students. Whilst some exams were able to move to an online format with relative ease, many more practical assessments posed additional challenges. Despite this, there have been many impressive examples of innovative alternatives to practical assessments. Many art schools have moved final-year degree shows online; film students have been asked to submit scripts, storyboards and commentaries where filming cannot take place; and electrical engineers have been undertaking programming tasks that can be completed online, rather than in a lab.

For institutions which choose to continue with online assessments into the next semester, challenges remain over ensuring an equitable student experience. In an in-person exam hall, the conditions can be kept relatively controlled and the exam conditions are therefore likely to be fairly similar for each student. This is not the case when students are taking exams from home – some will not have access to a quiet, private space to take the exam; some will have parental responsibilities that may involve disruptions to a timed assessment; and others will have an unstable internet connection. Institutions continue to consider ways to mitigate these challenges and design assessments which can alleviate these disparities as much as possible.

As campuses closed, many institutions introduced blanket no-detriment policies that ensured that students' overall grades could not go down during the lockdown. These policies were intended to recognise that all students would be likely to be affected in one way or another by the pandemic and that no student's grades should be adversely affected due to the impact of the pandemic outside of their control. Once the next semester begins, students may have to suddenly self-isolate or become unwell. If the no-detriment policy is no longer in place, then institutions may therefore see an increase in requests for special circumstances and extensions to assessment deadlines.

Although students may not be able to arrange in-person meetings for further feedback on assignments, the online space has additional features which may allow for new effective ways of giving feedback. These include the ability to screen-share and talk through a student's essay 'live' with the student present and the use of tracked changes to annotate a student's work.

Course Rep Questions

- Has your course been assessed in a new or different way as a result of the pandemic, e.g. removal of practical assessments? Have alternative assessments been adequate at measuring your knowledge and skills?
- Did you receive clear guidance from your department relating to how assessments would be run during COVID-19 and, especially, to any changes in assessments?
- Have you experienced any barriers to engaging in any of your assessments?
- Did your institution introduce a 'no-detriment' policy? If so, was this communicated to you and do you feel it has been effective?
- If you have been writing your dissertation during lockdown, have you been given effective online and alternative support by your supervisor?
- 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?
- 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

Includes: induction; the learner journey; links between courses; personal development and progression

The Impact of COVID-19

For prospective students joining college or university this autumn, the move from school or college will not be a conventional one. Many will have had a particularly large gap away from academic study and, in some cases, will not have had the opportunity to complete the final exams that usually mark the end of one stage of their academic journey. Some may feel that this prolonged gap has left them feeling 'out of practice' when it comes to studying or feel concerned that they have not learnt the skills or content that they need for their next stage of study. These students will also have had to make decisions about their next academic

destination in very uncertain times. When they accepted their offers, they will not have known exactly what their student experience would look like in August or September. Many students will not have been able to attend an in-person open day at their institution, and some may not even have visited the new city they are studying in, before arriving for the start of term.

An effective induction will therefore be more important than ever, to ensure that students feel comfortable in their new environment (whether this is online or in-person). Whereas in the past, induction activities will have been predominantly focused on first year students, this year returning students may also need an induction to the 'new normal' and what they can expect for the coming year, given how different this is likely to be to their previous experience. If the virus reoccurs throughout the academic year, institutions may find that they need to run multiple inductions and briefings for students, to keep them aware of changes to learning and teaching and to what their student experience may look like.

Current students may feel concerned that disruption to the end of the 2019-20 academic year may have left them with gaps in their skills or knowledge that make progression to the next year challenging, such as not getting the chance to develop some practical skills in-person. Institutions may consider offering additional skills sessions once students are able to learn these in-person. Some institutions have considered reordering modules so that theory-based content takes place in the first term and more practical parts of the programme take place later in the academic year, with the hope that more students will be able to return to campus in the second term.

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 as a result of missing particular content due to the impact of COVID-19?
- 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 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

Includes: careers advice; personal support; counselling; academic support

The Impact of COVID-19

As learning and teaching moved online, so too did institutions' associated guidance and support. Students who may know where to go on campus for academic or pastoral support, may not be so familiar with how to access support online. More organic opportunities to bump into colleagues and friends in department corridors and around campus no longer exist, and so students are relying more than ever on more formal opportunities for support and guidance.

As students have made the move to online learning, for many this has required the development of new skills including increased digital literacy and greater proficiency in online programmes and communication tools. Some students (and staff!) may be more confident than others in interacting in online spaces and many institutions have therefore needed to introduce training or briefings on the move to online learning.

As identified in the Assessment and Feedback section, as the no-detriment policy is lifted across many institutions, this may lead to increased requests for extensions and special circumstances. Institutions and students' associations usually offer additional support to students to help them navigate these processes; to take account of the likely increase in requests, some of this support may involve increased proactive rather than reactive approaches, such as reaching out to all students at the beginning of term to remind them of the process of applying.

Pastoral support has also moved to an online format. The pandemic has brought with it, feelings of uncertainty, isolation and anxiety for many students, and the support of peers and staff has therefore been more important than ever. Many students may have additional worries external to their studies, such as concerns about the health of themselves and their families.

International students may be additionally concerned about their visa status, attendance monitoring, and being able to travel to or from their home country for study. Institutions have set up online alternatives to personal tutors' in-person office hours, as well as to counselling appointments, but the next term is likely to remain challenging for many students.

As decisions have been made about the next term, consideration has also had to be given to the ongoing impact of these decisions on students' mental health and wellbeing. In particular, some students from minority groups may regard the institution's campus as a safe space where they can develop and express their identity. The campus can also be an important space to develop a community with those who have a shared identity.

This important part of college and university life may be missed without dedicated interventions to encourage students to continue these networks online, and even then, some students may not feel that their home is a safe space to engage with these communities, even if online alternatives are developed. Can institutions prioritise allowing particular groups to still meet on campus as long as they remain socially distanced?

We are beginning to see the impact of the pandemic on the job market and on future career opportunities for graduates. Careers services are offering online appointments and tailoring their advice to the coronavirus context. Some institutions have provided online careers resources and are running online training events and workshops. Recent graduates are nevertheless entering the job market at a challenging time and institutions' communication to students and the support they offer as they graduate will, in many cases, need to be adjusted to reflect this.

Course Rep Questions

- Have you been given any careers support specific to the context of COVID-19 and subsequent changes in the job market?
- Have you been given the option to access academic, personal, and careers support, previously accessed on-campus, in an online format?
- Have you been given clear guidance on who you should contact if you need to discuss extensions of apply for special circumstances due to COVID-19-related 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 whilst students cannot be physically on campus?
- 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

Includes: institution-wide conversations about enhancement; external review; institution-led review; staff observation; survey development; interpretation of student feedback

Impact of COVID-19

The initial response to the pandemic involved the need for institutions to make sizeable decisions very quickly and without the usual checks and balances required when largescale changes are made. Nevertheless, institutions have had to continue to maintain quality standards and to ensure that they continue to review their provision during COVID-19.

Good communication with students will be more important than ever over the summer and into the first semester. Returning students will need to know what changes have been made to their courses and what they can expect their next term to look like (as much as this is possible to know). Institutions may want to explain the rationale behind particular decisions, and also be transparent about what they do not yet know the answers to and what elements of a course may change again if circumstances around the pandemic change.

Despite the risk of the student voice getting lost in the speed of change, institutions and students' associations have demonstrated innovative ways of engaging with students during lockdown. In some cases, institutions have increased their collection of student feedback; for example, by running all-student surveys on the impact of COVID-19 every three weeks, or by holding regular 'meet the Principal' style events, where students have a chance to directly ask senior leadership questions or highlight any concerns.

There have also been examples of creative adjustments to the course rep system. Some institutions have moved student-staff meetings online to ensure this dialogue is not disrupted by the closure of physical spaces. This may include offering training for student chairs on how to effectively facilitate online meetings. Some institutions have organised more frequent meetings and check-ins with course reps during COVID-19, to keep up-to-date on current issues – these can be easier to organise when meetings are not reliant on physical spaces and so room availability is no longer a restriction.

What the pandemic has brought into sharp focus is that there is not one single student experience – students experience university and college differently from one another, and this extends to experiencing the impact of the pandemic in diverse and varied ways. Without due care, some voices can be unintentionally overlooked, or lost, in a time of such unprecedented change.

As the impact of the pandemic continues, institutions will need to continue to find ways to ensure that they are hearing from a diverse set of voices and identifying where changes to the student experience will adversely affect a specific cohort or demographic. As part of this, institutions will need to be mindful that some student demographic data may now be out-of-date due to COVID-19. For example, a student may now have become a carer, who was not previously, or have previously not identified a disability which now affects them in an online setting.

Course Rep Questions

- Have you had a chance to provide feedback on the changes made to your course directly as a result of COVID-19?
- Has your institution made any changes to the course rep system so that it can continue to work effectively during COVID-19, e.g. moving student-staff committees online? Have these changes worked well?
- Have you been given additional opportunities to feed back to senior staff members at your institution on COVID-related issues you are facing, e.g. through the opportunity to attend online 'town-hall' style meetings where students can raise issues directly with senior leaders?
- 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?

