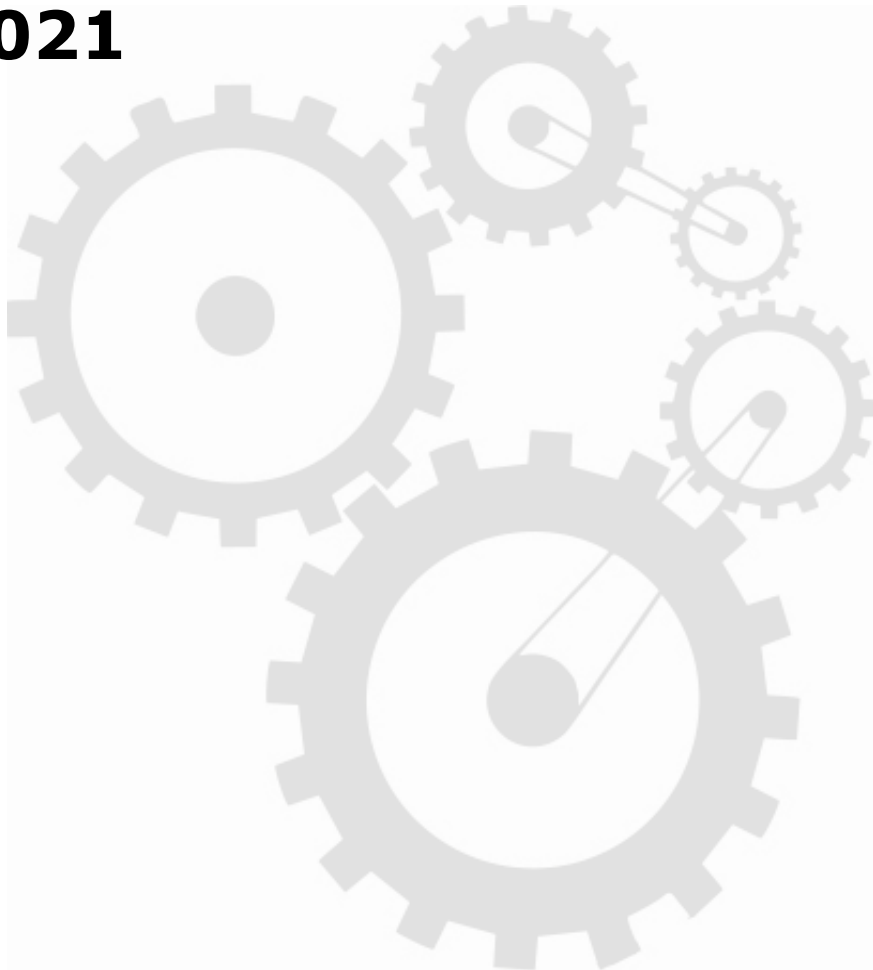


Celebrating successful partnerships in 2020-21

**A report accompanying the sparqs
Student Engagement Awards**

June 2021



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Introduction

We are delighted to launch this report, which celebrates just some of the incredible student engagement achievements of our sector in what has been an extraordinary year. The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic (and, yes, some opportunities) have shaped the 2020-21 year in ways that have revealed so much about the resilience and continuing importance of students and students' associations engaging as partners in quality.

At a time when the views of students on their learning have never been more important, and when students' associations have worked in many creative and energetic ways to continue to represent students, recognising the value of partnership in learning is crucial. So many questions have arisen this year about the nature of learning, how to give feedback, what our campuses should look like in the future, how to generate a sense of belonging for all students, and how to continually evaluate and enhance the quality of this transformed learning experience. The answers to these questions can be found, in no small part, in the tremendous work undertaken by our institutions, students' associations and agencies across our college and university sectors. They also lie in the powerful contributions made by students who this year have demonstrated their ability to constructively express their views about their changed learning, increasingly used engagement opportunities, and been an important part of pandemic response and ongoing quality enhancement activity.

sparqs' own approaches this year have aimed to support and enable this work, through our restructured and refocused events, publications and projects, including our [COVID-19 information hub](#) and its [resources page](#).

This report accompanies our [2021 Student Engagement Awards](#), which have been an opportunity to showcase just some of these great examples of practice from staff and students across our universities and colleges. It was launched on 22nd June 2021 at [an online ceremony](#) that also featured the announcement of the winners across our six Awards categories. The report draws on many of the submissions, including the shortlists and winners in each category, plus other case studies and publications from both sparqs' work and across our sector over this past academic year.

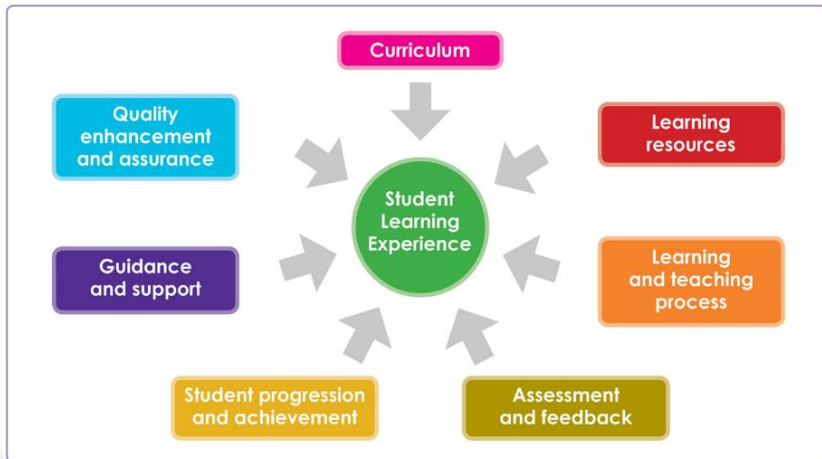
Our congratulations go to our Awards winners, and the shortlistees, who you can see on page 19. Moreover, our thanks go to all the incredible staff and students around the country who have worked in partnership this year, in often extraordinarily difficult circumstances, to rebuild and rethink learning and teaching for the future.



Feedback and the Student Learning Experience

At the heart of student engagement is the idea of student views contributing to the enhancement of their learning. Institutions and students' associations have done so much this year to adapt their tools of feedback in courses and departments following the rapid shift to digital learning.

A core tool for gathering and organising students' ideas at this level is [sparqs' Student Learning Experience \(SLE\) diagram](#), a resource with seven headings and accompanying questions to prompt discussion and research.



sparqs [updated these questions in 2020](#) to respond to the context of the pandemic, and they have been used across the sector to generate conversation and evidence about the learning experience. They have been combined with **Education Scotland's** [Our Best Future resources](#) to create [A Toolkit for Effective Learner Engagement](#).

This combined toolkit has been the basis of practice within institutions, especially colleges, to gather and build on feedback from students on their dramatically-changing learning experiences.

New College Lanarkshire's students' association worked with its learner engagement team and faculty managers to establish online forums for each faculty, using the combined toolkit. This created useful, direct conversations between faculty managers and course reps, leading to stronger relationships between the staff and students and, as the college puts it, "a greater sense of confidence that concerns are being addressed."

New College Lanarkshire and **Dumfries and Galloway College** presented on their use of the Toolkit for Effective Learner Engagement at a [College Development Network Virtual Bridge session in March 2021](#).

Using learner feedback in evaluation...

Phil Storrier- Director of Student Experience and Academic Performance.



The updated SLE questions have also been used extensively within universities. The Student School Officer for the School of Creative and Cultural Business at **Robert Gordon University** used the online collaboration tool Miro to provide a visually interesting way for course reps to share ideas and feedback on the learning experience, and developed an accompanying [technical walkthrough video](#) for reps to understand how to use it. There is more in [a case study in the spargs Resource Library](#) about this.



Elsewhere at **Robert Gordon University**, a student assessment forum was developed by the Student School Officer of the university's Aberdeen Business School, at which student reps shared their experiences of completing assessment, while tips from academic staff were presented. Topics at this entirely student-led event included managing deadlines and preparing for exams. Feedback was very positive, with over 90% finding it beneficial and leaving them better equipped for assessments, and the students' association is exploring the model with other schools at the university.

Meanwhile at **Heriot-Watt University**, the students' association undertook surveys of students, course reps and school officers to generate data about the changes in the learning experience as a result of the pandemic, particularly relating to assessments, asynchronous content and online learning skills building. This was reported to the university's learning and teaching COVID group and actions were developed in partnership with the university management and academic and support departments. The students' association states that the recommendations from the report have helped to inform "a baseline for effective online delivery, what the barriers and enablers are, and where potential pitfalls lie", and that the report will "inform and influence the future trajectory of learning and teaching at Heriot-Watt."

The students' association at **Heriot-Watt University** also organised a series of "Townhalls" across the university's five schools and three Scottish campuses as a result of the return to lockdown, informed by input from university senior management. The meetings, at which students could speak to school academic management with the facilitation of the students' association Vice-President (Education), explored a range of learning and teaching quality matters in a way that, as the students' association puts it, "not only boosted confidence in the partnership approach of Heriot-Watt, it made students feel valued."

Supporting and developing course reps

Course reps in 2020-21 have been of critical importance to communication and partnership on the learning experience. Ensuring that they are supported and trained in sustainable and appropriate ways has, therefore, been a big priority for the sector.

An initial challenge during the pandemic has been to recruit course reps in new ways. **Glasgow Caledonian University** Students' Association developed a workshop in September 2020 for Programme Leaders on recruiting and supporting course reps remotely, and supporting academic student societies. As a result, course reps recruited by the deadline had increased from 49% in the previous year to 91%, and 88% of course reps were trained as a result. The students' association also reports an increase in the number of students volunteering to be course reps, higher numbers of reps registered within schools, and the creation of four new academic student societies.

Once elected, the means of networking course reps was transformed, too. Online discussion spaces for reps to collaborate with each other and with the students' association have become important. The students' associations at **The University of Edinburgh** and **Dumfries and Galloway College** are among those who have used Microsoft Teams in this way, which allows reps to collaborate within subject areas as well as across the institution, and which also makes communication with the students' association easier.

The screenshot shows a slide from a Microsoft Teams meeting. The slide title is "How have we responded to COVID? Academic Representation Forum". On the left, there is a sidebar menu for the "Students' Association A..." with a "General" channel selected. The main content area lists three bullet points: "Forum brings together academic representatives - both Programme and School Representatives - from across the University.", "Space for Students' Association to share key information and opportunities, and for Reps to contact each other and discuss issues.", and "Microsoft Teams and Channels:" followed by a list of channels: "All Programme and School Representatives", "All School Representatives", "All UG Representatives", "All PG Representatives", and "The School and Programme Representatives in each School". The Edinburgh University Students' Association logo is in the bottom right corner.

The training of course reps has, of course, changed to fully online platforms. Highlands and Islands Students' Association (HISA) worked at the start of the academic year in partnership with the **University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI)** to move all its course rep training online. This shift also included the delivery of the university's training to course rep trainers, an in-house process developed over many years with the support of sparqs. This "train the trainer" content was updated to include the additional skills trainers would require to deliver course rep training online, such as digital presentation and the use of relevant software such as Mentimeter. HISA and UHI have also together developed a Class Rep Toolkit containing training materials, promotional materials and a spreadsheet for monitoring meeting attendance.

this was very helpful! it definitely helped me to realise my role as a class rep and what my duties were. I'm now going to organise a mid-term checkin with my classmates and make sure to report any feedback to my tutor, i wasn't previously aware of the level of involvement in the role but i'll make sure to be more proactive! i also found the breakout rooms useful to help other reps overcome their issues and learning on ways to constructively give feedback to my course reps really helped!

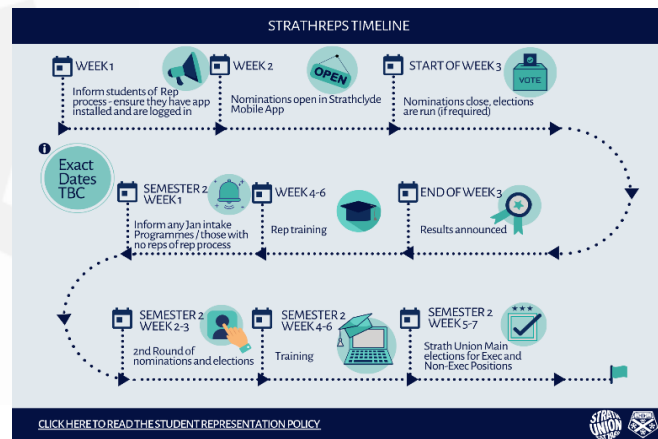
The Students' Representative Council (SRC) at the **University of Glasgow** also moved its course rep training online, in a way that was very positively evaluated by reps (see quote in the box), with an average satisfaction rating of 4.6 out of 5 and 98% stating they would recommend it to other reps. The new format for delivery complemented their existing web-based [class representative toolkit](#).

A partnership approach was also taken at **Edinburgh Napier University**, with strong collaboration between the university and students' association on revision of the materials to reflect recent changes in quality and the learning experience. Discussion boards and polls were used in the training to generate reflection and interaction. This collaboration has continued in improved guidance for teaching staff on electing and registering course reps. The university and

students' association report that 70% of reps who undertook the training felt 'prepared' or 'very prepared' for their role after completion, with 90% finding scenarios 'useful' or 'very useful'. One student commented: "...the training has prepared me well for what is to come. I think it is effective using real-life scenarios as it gives you an idea of what kinds of situations you might find yourself in."

Beyond training, there have been many undertakings across the sector to completely transform course rep systems to reflect the new context and to embed partnership. The move to online learning allowed **Glasgow Clyde College** Students' Association to introduce curriculum-based course rep meetings to replace the cross-subject campus-based meetings held pre-pandemic. This allowed Heads of Curriculum to attend specific discussions about their curriculum area's learning experiences. The students' association reports continuing high attendance from these meetings and reps commenting on their usefulness, while one Head of Curriculum, who participated, stated that "it was as if students had been waiting for a forum to air their concerns." A similar approach at **New College Lanarkshire** saw the creation of faculty forums for course reps, enabling relevant and constructive conversations between course reps and Heads of Faculty.

Meanwhile at the **University of Strathclyde**, the StrathReps project saw the university and students' association use the university's mobile app and virtual learning environment to transform the support and management of student academic reps. This included the delivery of accessible nomination, voting and feedback features for all students. This has led to faster election and registration of reps (95% by week 4) and 70% of reps being trained within four weeks of being registered in the role.



ZOOM STUDENT COUNCIL

- Increased attendance – Average 80 students per meeting and our first council ever with over 100 in attendance
- Staff Support
 - Chair Support
 - Minute Taking
 - Chat monitor
- Choice of engagement methods
 - Private Message
 - Emoticon Reacts
 - Chat Box
- Socialising afterwards

"It was super organised and I didn't expect it to work out as well as it did online"

"I loved the ability to listen to everyone and really get a full understanding of the issues the university currently faces as a whole"

"It felt very inclusive"

Similarly positive figures can be seen at the **University of the West of Scotland**, where the shift to digital tools saw an increase in the recruitment punctuality and training of course reps, higher engagement at the students' association's council meetings, and positive feedback from the reps themselves.

Finally, at the end of the year, exit surveys for course reps have been an important way of understanding and enhancing the experience of

being a course rep in such a challenging and uncertain period. At the **University of the Highlands and Islands**, a course rep exit survey piloted the previous year at **Inverness College UHI** has allowed for reflection on the support required in the role, as well as giving access to demographic data, how long students have served as reps, and what year of study they are in. This data is valuable in marketing of the role to sections of the student population where there are fewer reps elected. These surveys can demonstrate impact of existing practice. For instance, 100% of respondents to a survey conducted at the end of the academic year at **Edinburgh Napier University** said rep training had prepared them for the role.

sparqs has supported course reps in new ways over 2020-21, to reflect changes in both rep systems and the wider learning experience.

Course Rep Training 2020. Part 1 (self-directed study).

START COURSE

DETAILS

Our Course Rep Training moved online for those institutions who received training directly from us, and this manifested in the form of a new, two-part approach to the training: a self-directed study module for reps to read through, and an online workshop delivered through Zoom to provide a more discursive and interactive opportunity to learn about the role.

This training was delivered by our team of Associate Trainers, students working on a part-time basis for sparqs, and of course their own training for the role in August 2020 moved to an online platform.

Evaluation of the online workshop and feedback from Course Rep Training co-ordinators in institutions and students' associations matched and, in some points, exceeded our already high evaluations from 2019-20's in-person training.

Indeed, such was the success of the platform that two of our Associate Trainers [presented a skills showcase](#) at the **College Development Network's** Virtual College Expo in June 2021, highlighting the skills impact of our Course Rep Training, not only for course reps themselves, but for our trainers.

As a result of this format of training we were able to keep in touch with course reps directly, providing several briefings throughout the year to provide support and advice. These included key aspects of the learning experience impacted by the pandemic, such as assessment and transitions.

Course Rep Training Part 2 – Workshop

Trainers:



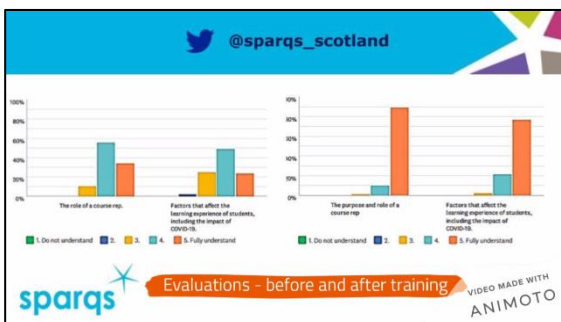
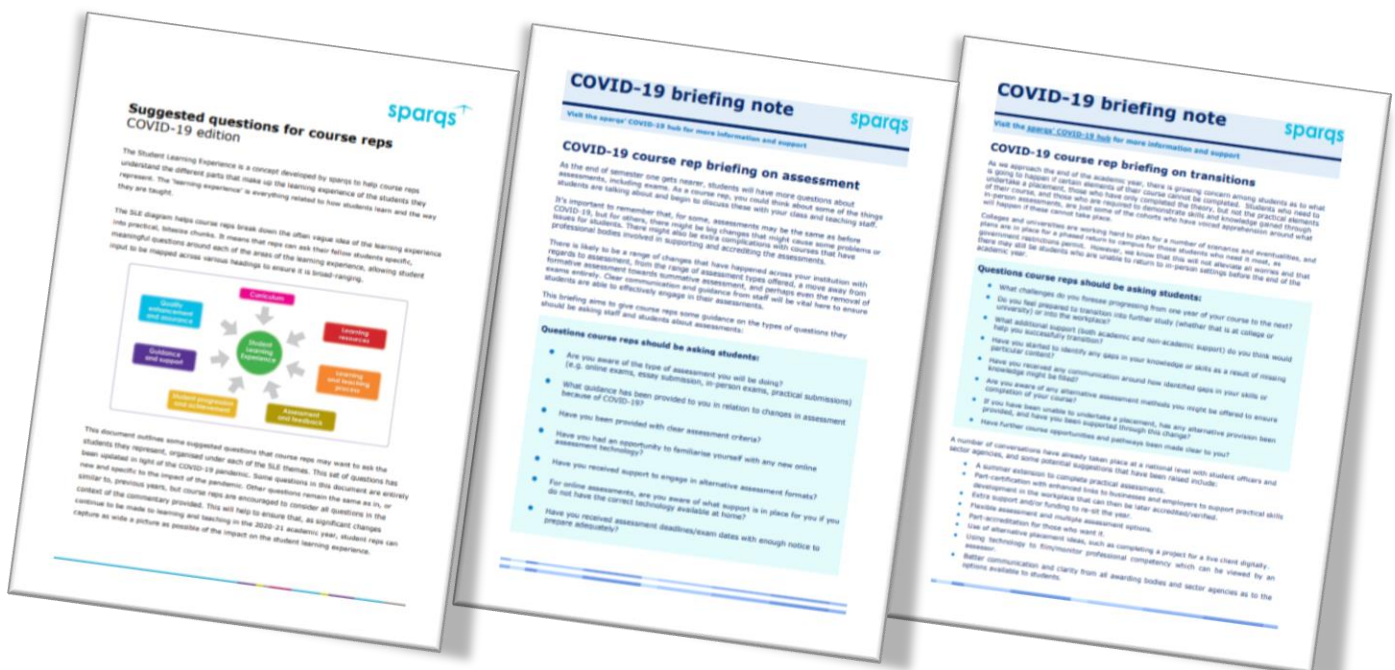
Trainer name

Reps:

Please adjust your display with name and course, plus preferred pronouns if you wish:

Ranjan, Catering

@sparqs_scotland

The image shows three overlapping documents. The first is 'Suggested questions for course reps COVID-19 edition' by sparqs, which includes a diagram of the Student Learning Experience and a list of suggested questions. The second is a 'COVID-19 briefing note' by sparqs, titled 'COVID-19 course rep briefing on assessment', which discusses assessment changes and provides questions for course reps. The third is another 'COVID-19 briefing note' by sparqs, titled 'COVID-19 course rep briefing on transitions', which discusses transition challenges and provides questions for course reps.

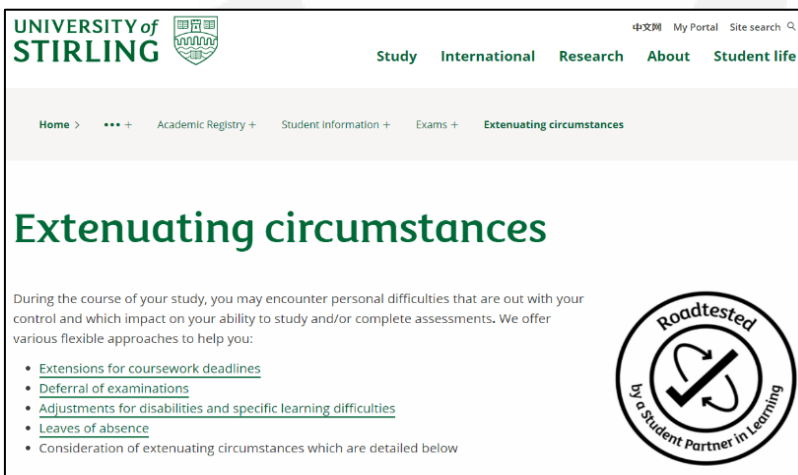
Co-creating learning spaces

The pandemic and lockdowns have had an obvious profound impact on the design and use of learning spaces in colleges and universities. A major opportunity for partnership in this area has been the work of students and students' associations in shaping virtual learning environments (VLEs), to ensure that student views are driving the way that digital learning and teaching is delivered.

At **Perth College UHI**, the students' association's Vice-President (Education and Engagement) gathered feedback through a survey from students and course representatives on their experience of their VLE, Brightspace, to improve its usefulness, accessibility and consistency. This informed discussions at various college committees and with key academic managers, from which a cross-college action plan was developed.

Summer 2020 saw the creation of a Students as Partners in Learning (SPL) initiative at the **University of Stirling**, aiming to include student voices and perspectives on the move to online and blended learning. A team of twenty student undergraduate and postgraduate volunteers was recruited from across the university's five faculties with support of the students' union.

The team was initially involved in "road-testing" modules created by staff for the new digital learning environment, sense-checking materials and reading them from a student perspective. Road-testing would involve students from different subject areas, meaning the focus was on coherence and accessibility rather than academic content. Twenty-three new modules were tested in this way within the first month, and given a digital badge to recognise the student partnership. Staff and students have spoken very positively about their experiences of working together in this way to shape learning.



UNIVERSITY of STIRLING


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Extenuating circumstances

During the course of your study, you may encounter personal difficulties that are out with your control and which impact on your ability to study and/or complete assessments. We offer various flexible approaches to help you:

- [Extensions for coursework deadlines](#)
- [Deferral of examinations](#)
- [Adjustments for disabilities and specific learning difficulties](#)
- [Leaves of absence](#)
- Consideration of extenuating circumstances which are detailed below



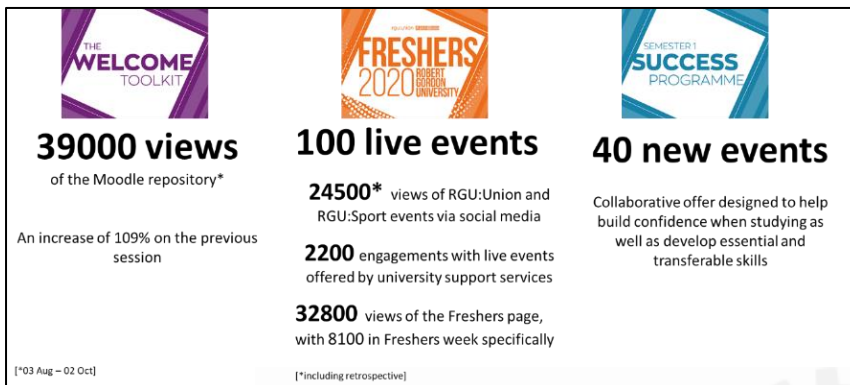
The approach then grew to include student perspectives on university policies and webpages, co-creation of learning materials for staff, and contributions to webinars for staff.

This has led to the creation of two year-long part-time student roles working in the university's Academic Development team to embed this partnership further. The university has presented at national conferences about the SPL scheme's success.

It is not only digital learning spaces that have been shaped by students. **Fife College** and its students' association have worked with **The University of Edinburgh** to develop student engagement in the design of the forthcoming Dunfermline Learning Campus, which Fife College will share with two high schools. Students were recruited from across the college to form two design agencies, which then undertook research into what students wanted from the new campus, and how the new campus could incorporate inclusivity and accessibility to make the campus a place of more equitable learning.

Partnership approaches to induction, community and diversity

One major impact of the pandemic has been on the different ways that students are engaged in forming communities and shaping their learning. Staff and students have responded in so many creative ways to promote wellbeing, belonging and community, even when online, whether through researching and supporting diverse student experiences, or creating student academic societies.



Of course, the start of the academic year is a crucial time to begin creating that community, and there are many examples of students' associations working with their institutions to co-create induction. At **Robert Gordon University** a virtual Student Welcome was developed in partnership with a leadership group comprised of student

representatives, alongside academic and support staff, building on the university's "welcome" principles to create a digital platform for induction. Elements included academic information, a virtual freshers' week from the students' association, a wide variety of events, and a "success programme" focused on skills and confidence. Feedback is being used to further inform approaches for 2021-22.

Meanwhile at **Borders College**, the students' association led the college's induction programme. This included an online induction module and over 60 online events for 650 students. 95% of recent survey respondents reported that they felt welcomed to the college.

The **Open University in Scotland** has undertaken many engagement and community-building projects in the past year. Its Care-Experienced Student Reference Group is a forum for driving the university's corporate parenting activity in conjunction with its students' association. It meets regularly, shares through an online discussion space, and contributes to university strategy on care-experienced students. This year it has helped to design the application process for their Digital Inclusion Fund in 2020-21, ensuring inclusive and supportive language; and it worked with the university to create a targeted career mentoring programme for care-experienced students and other target groups.

The university has also been involved in the co-creation of a new online course for staff on being "carer aware". Originally developed by the **College Development Network (CDN)**, the **Open University in Scotland** helped to develop, and indeed host, a university version of the course, funded by the **Scottish Funding Council (SFC)**. The course was developed with student carers and teaching practitioners from the **University of Stirling**, **Heriot-Watt University** and **Glasgow Caledonian University**, CDN, and Carers Trust Scotland. Student carers have contributed content from their experiences to help staff learn more about their student journeys and caring roles and reflect on practice for supporting such students.

Another initiative from the **Open University in Scotland** and its students' association was The Big Blether, a series of informal, online events bringing students together with an expert speaker with a focus on mental health, wellbeing, community and belonging. Evaluations have been positive, and feedback will shape the format and content of future events.

Fife College Students' Association led a group of six other student bodies in the creation of Winter Wonderland 2020, a series of online events and competitions at Christmas time. These included baking, creative writing and computer games competitions, and engaged many students, such as those studying part-time or in the evenings, who would not normally attend on-campus events. The Wonderland provided an outlet for practical course-based skills, built community during the winter lockdown, developed extra-curricular activities, and raised the profile of the participating students' associations.

West Lothian College created a DIVE group (Diversity, Inclusion, Values and Equalities) which drew together staff and students on Microsoft Teams to explore equality, diversity and inclusion at strategic and operational levels, impacting on college policy relating to education and access.

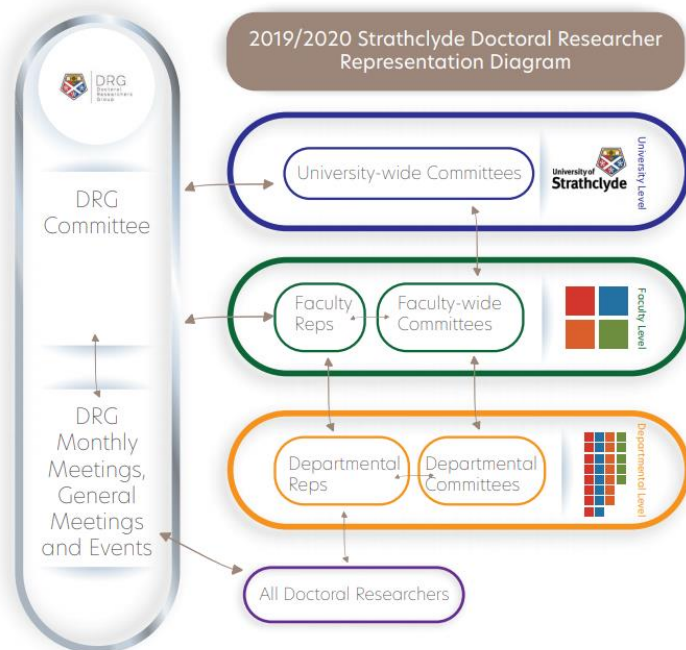
Much work has been undertaken in the past year at the **University of Strathclyde** to support its postgraduate research (PGR) students to shape their learning and research experience. In response to the pandemic, the university's Doctoral Researchers' Group established a peer support programme linking first year PGRs with more experienced PGR volunteers across subjects and nationalities. They have met and chatted online on a regular basis to exchange ideas and provide mutual support, especially to those unable to travel to Scotland. The scheme won Strathclyde Students' Union's "Community project of the year" at its Student Achievement and Recognition awards.

The Doctoral Research Group has also trained PGR faculty reps, organised a (now online) annual conference to share research to non-specialist audiences, and contributed a case study on PGR engagement for [a report on postgraduate student engagement](#) published by Ireland's National Student Engagement Programme.

At **Heriot-Watt University** the students' association sought to gather evidence of support provision and pandemic impact for ethnic minority, LGBT+ and disabled students, and women studying in STEM subjects.

Researchers were appointed from among student representatives who identified with each group, who led focus groups to inform reports that the students' association discussed with the university. Two notable outcomes were to cyclically review support for disabled students, and to establish a protected characteristics working group to link relevant student societies with university decision-making.

At **Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)**, students on equine courses have formed a society called Muckers Nation, created to provide a sense of community for equine studies students during lockdown, but open to all students interested in horses. It has hosted online events and chat sessions, made videos, and generated discussion on course content and study tips. As on-campus learning returns, the group aims to support transition for new students. By working with both the SRUC students' association and college staff, Muckers Nation have been able to not only generate community among students, but also impact on the quality of the learning experience through the sharing of students' experiences, and is providing a model for other student interest groups.



Shaping employability

With the challenges of the pandemic manifested not just in education, but in the wider economy, students' minds have naturally turned to employment prospects in an uncertain jobs market. This has created opportunities for students and staff to work together on the topic of employability in the curriculum.

In the **University of Dundee's** School of Life Sciences, the School President (a student rep position) and the Associate Dean for Learning and Teaching, created initiatives to explore and promote employability at the start of the pandemic. A School Vice-President post dedicated to employability was created, while focus groups and the school's social media channels were used to generate conversation about employability and promote the work of the school representatives. Reps and staff also collaborated to run an online careers fair, "Welfare Wednesday" social media posts, a monthly newsletter, and introductory lectures about the campaign for new students. This promotional work led to a huge increase in social media followers on the account and four times the number of applications for student representative roles in the school, compared to past years. There are now plans to increase the scope of the events calendar and even set up a mentoring scheme with alumni.



At the **University of St Andrews**, staff and students from the Centre for Educational Enhancement and Development (CEED), the Careers Centre, the Student's Association, and a student society, the Playfair Consultancy group, co-created the Summer Team Enterprise Programme (STEP) in summer 2020. The programme, open to undergraduate students, aimed to enable the development of skills, such as teamwork, organisation, and digital literacy, and offer students the opportunity to gain professional experience that can be put on CVs and discussed at interviews. Content included workshops and coaching, reflective logs, and the chance to work remotely in groups on a real project for a university service unit.

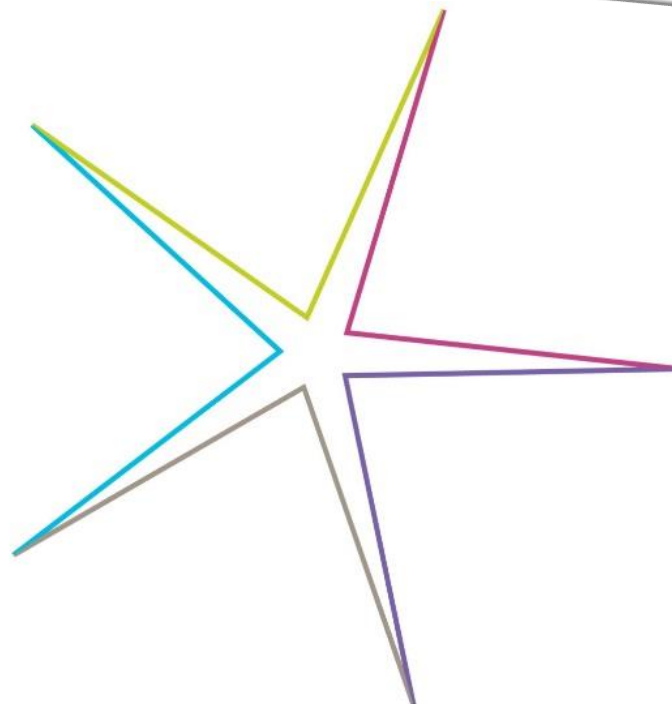
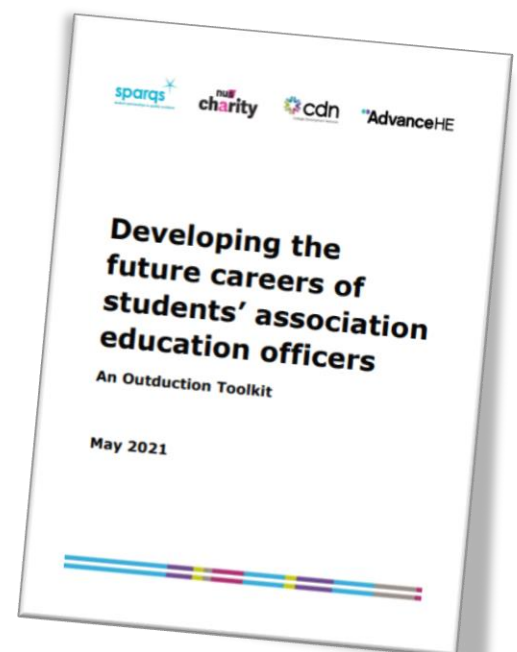
Outcomes included increased understanding of the impact of the pandemic on students' experiences, development of all 20 of the university's stated Graduate Attributes among participants, and gains through the projects for the university. STEP is returning for 2021 and has over 250 applications, and the programme has featured in a **Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) [blogpost](#)**.

The Careers and Employability Centre and students' association at the **University of the Highlands and Islands** responded to student feedback suggesting that developing employability skills was a priority for action, and created an online Employability Pathway, a series of predetermined workflows which guide students through a framework of employability-related activities and tasks. This has been deployed for students' association officers, to help them articulate the skills and knowledge they have gained in this unusual year, as well as be better equipped to promote the university's employability support to students.

Indeed, students' associations themselves can be held up as models of employability, due to the activities they run and the tremendous experience gained by those undertaking representative roles, especially in the challenging circumstances of the pandemic. Senior officers in education roles have played particularly crucial roles in leading their students' associations' responses and shaping institutions' strategies over the year. Their experiences of digital engagement, public sector governance, emergency planning, and major organisational change in 2020-21 emphasises the incredible personal development value of student officer roles and students' associations in general.

Robert Gordon University have shared a powerful testimony from a former students' association officer, now university staff member, about the value of representative roles and involvement in students' associations for career development. The case study is shared in the sparqs' Resource Library – [Full circle feedback on the student representative experience: from student representative to university staff](#).

To recognise and support this impact, sparqs has worked with **Advance HE**, the **College Development Network** and **NUS Charity** to produce an "[outduction](#)" toolkit for [education officers](#). This toolkit will help staff who support students' association officers with education remits to enable reflection on skills and knowledge gained, and encourage exploration of opportunities for careers and voluntary governance opportunities, both in the education sector and beyond.



Celebrating and supporting staff

Staff in Scotland's colleges and universities have performed heroics throughout the pandemic, rapidly converting to digital delivery of learning experiences and support services, and continuing to develop and enhance provision throughout 2020-21.

Student-Led Teaching Awards remain an important and increasingly-used tool for celebrating the work of staff, as well as providing valuable evidence of what makes good teaching. Such awards have been widely adapted to reflect the current context of digital delivery. For example, **The University of Edinburgh**'s awards, traditionally run by the students' association, were in 2020-21 developed in partnership with the university's Institute of Academic Development. The nomination period was extended to allow more students to participate, categories were amended to reflect the impact of the pandemic, and there was [digital recognition of all nominees](#) rather than just those shortlisted, for instance through blogposts and podcasts.

The awards generated over 2,800 nominations of 1,300 staff, the highest number of nominations for nearly a decade of the students' association's delivery of the awards, and work is underway to review and implement the practice highlighted by the nominations. The ceremony, which received over 20,000 impressions, can be [viewed online](#).



In October 2020, **Fife College** Students' Association launched Thank You forms, in response to students asking for the ability to give positive feedback to teaching staff, given the lack of in-person opportunities to talk about learning. The forms, which have the option of anonymity, are received by the students' association and shared with the recipient and their manager. Over 270 thank yous have been sent in this way, with notable spikes in form submissions each time the students' association promoted the opportunity. According to the students' association, recipients "replied very positively to receiving the feedback, expressing how the forms gave them a boost in motivation and were extremely helpful in a time when many lecturers had never met the students in person." Research is now being undertaken to further evaluate the impact of the forms and to shape further practice.

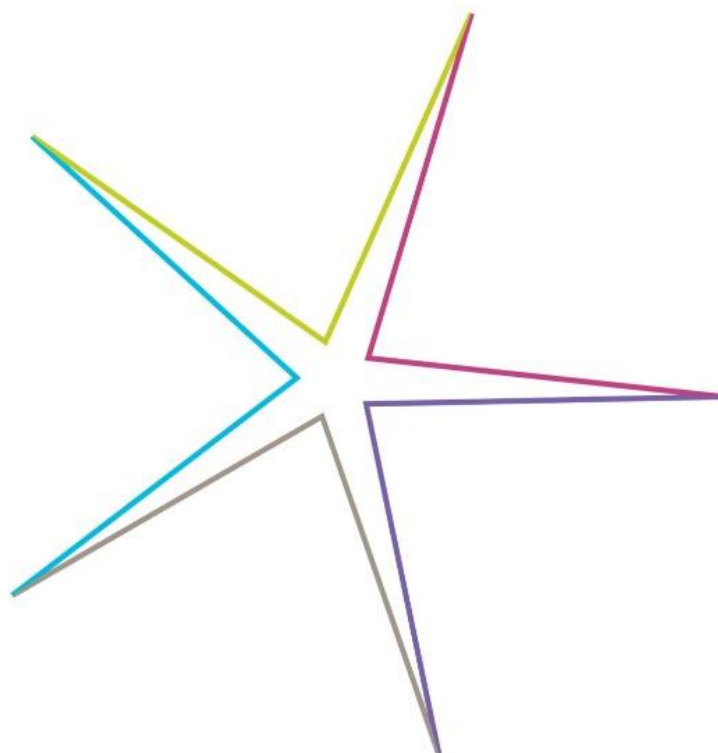
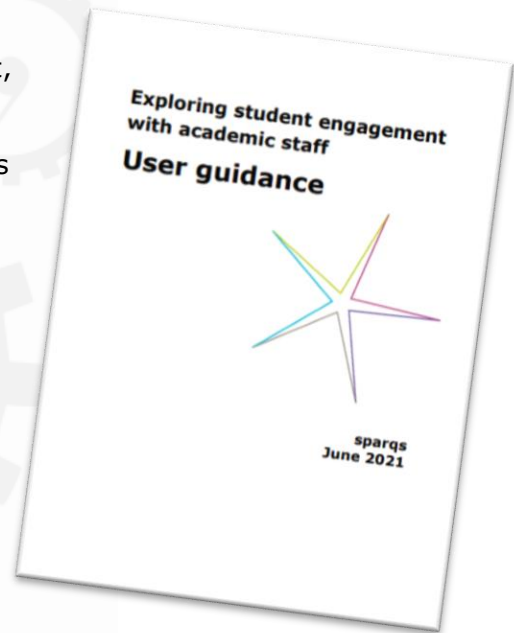


Similarly, **Glasgow Clyde College** Students' Association recently introduced their "Lockdown Legends Awards 2021", which were based on the college's values of being "People-centred, Pioneering, Principled and Passionate", and which aimed to celebrate achievements in supporting learning at a challenging time.

Unlike traditional Student-Led Teaching Awards, this programme was open for both staff and students to nominate or be nominated, and alongside the staff "lockdown legends" are students' association officers who were commended by many staff members for their work this year.

Staff and students will undoubtedly continue to mutually learn from, and support, each other as we emerge from the pandemic, and sparqs has done much with institutions and agencies to develop support for this process. It has worked with many colleges and universities to explore how staff can continue to build on, and learn from, effective student engagement.

In June 2021 we launched a new toolkit, [Exploring student engagement with academic staff](#). Consisting of various adaptable templates, the toolkit provides educational development and CPD teams with materials that can be customised to institutional contexts for staff development programmes, workshops and reflective conversations involving staff and students. It covers topics such as the student learning experience, data and surveys, assessment, and the role of the course representative.



Shaping institutional strategy

As institutions and students' associations responded to the challenges of the pandemic, big questions required some fundamental new thinking.

At an institutional level, students have been engaged in strategic decisions in new and innovative ways. At the **University of the Highlands and Islands**, a Student Panel has provided immediate feedback on major decisions on the pandemic response; and an SPA Loop Conference allowed students to meet digitally to shape the priorities for the university's Student Partnership Agreement.

Edinburgh Napier University and its students' association have created USAF – the University and Students' Association Forum – as a home for partnership at the university, through which key university and students' association personnel work together on shared responsibilities in the student experience and shape the university's strategic approach to partnership, including the development of its Student Partnership Agreement and the return to campus.

Specific COVID-19 planning forums have also been a locus of firm partnership practice.

Queen Margaret University's Business Continuity Group was established in March 2020 to manage the pandemic response. The students' association is among the membership, and has contributed to planning on a range of work related to supporting the learning experience.

CASE STUDY: BUSINESS CONTINUITY GROUP

- Set up in March 2020
- Invitation from the Principal. Members: SLT, SU, TUs, support services staff, academics
- Work streams:
 - Student experience
 - Student recruitment
 - Campus adaptations
- Discussions on arrangements over winter break, graduation, planning for learning & teaching, Q&As



At **Dundee and Angus College**, a Service Design approach was used in two ways: to revise the students' association's work and to create new ideas on partnership between the college's board, senior management team and students' association leadership.



The first of those uses allowed the students' association to rethink its priorities, service and events programmes for a pandemic student experience; while the latter application has focused on the idea of the college of the future, echoing broader sectoral conversations about how colleges can respond to the challenges of the changes in learning experiences and wider society.

Approaches have also developed specific university policies, such as at **Heriot-Watt University**, where student views gathered through focus groups have been used to create partnership approaches to Mitigating Circumstances policies and the development of policy around responsive blended learning.

Shaping national policy

The pandemic has raised many questions that have required national conversations and actions. The **Scottish Funding Council (SFC)**'s [Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability](#) has shaped much of the sector's thinking over the past year, sparking important reflection on the future shape of learning, quality and much more.

Meanwhile the [Independent Commission on the College of the Future](#) has explored similar questions at a UK level for further education.



Students at the heart of things

- Need for excellent online and blended learning
- Greater consistency in the quality of the offer
- A strong response to digital inclusion and literacy
- Support and advice to make informed choices and transitions
- Need for supportive pastoral care, and mental health and wellbeing approaches and services
- A continued focus on diversity and inclusion
- Improved student-institution partnerships to strengthen communication and participation in decision-making forums



Students and students' associations have been at the heart of these conversations, and sparqs has been instrumental in facilitating that participation. Two important avenues for this have been sparqs' National Education Officers' Network (NEON) and Student Engagement Staff Network (SESN). These networks have brought officers and staff together frequently for online meetings that have been valuable opportunities to share practice, update on key developments, and create connections with national policymakers.

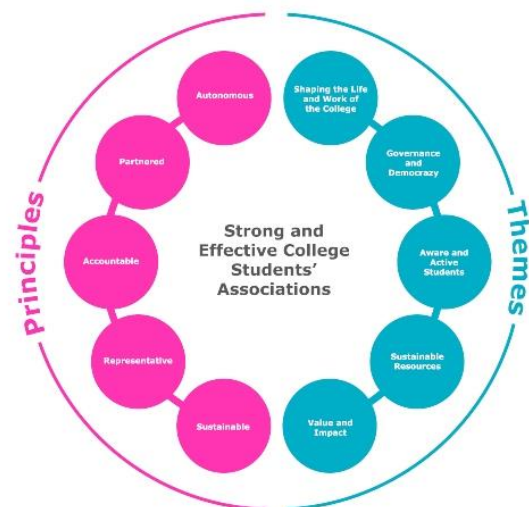


Many sector publications and events have been shaped by student engagement practice, and **Education Scotland**'s June 2021 report, [Remote learning in Scotland's Colleges](#), collates useful examples from across the sector of student engagement in quality alongside many other themes.

In universities, Scotland's current **QAA** Enhancement Theme, Resilient Learning Communities, has provided an ideal basis for conversations about learning and teaching through the pandemic. Student engagement has strengthened in the Theme, not least through the

Student-led Project, [Higher Education: more than a degree](#), where staff and student officers from students' associations led work to explore representative, extra-curricular and academic communities. The [project's event on 25th May 2021](#) contains more details about some of the case studies highlighted elsewhere in this report.

The **National Union of Students (NUS)** has been instrumental in national decision-making. NUS Scotland has successfully campaigned for additional discretionary funding, improved mental health support and additional resources for students' associations; helped to embed students' interests in national Covid-19 guidelines; won the right for students to terminate accommodation contracts early, and much more. NUS Charity also jointly manages the SFC-funded Developing College Students' Associations project with sparqs, whose website, the home for the [Framework for Strong and Effective College Students' Associations](#), has recently been relaunched.



Conclusions

Throughout a difficult year, partnership has been proven to be effective in bringing new ideas and analysis to decisions, and creating enhancements in which both staff and students are invested. Students, student reps and groups, and of course students' associations have risen to the challenges of shaping the learning experience through their co-operation with staff, their development of effective representation and feedback systems, and their ability to think strategically, but quickly, about the direction of their institution and the future of further and higher education.

There have been many examples, too, of institutional staff and leadership responding to the challenges of the year by involving students deeply and meaningfully in honest conversations and decision making, without impacting on the necessary swiftness of emergency responses and crisis management. sparqs too, has played its part in supporting and developing student engagement, working with individual students, our fellow sector agencies, and all decision-makers in between. We have also continued to share Scotland's practice on partnership through our many international links. This report gives just a brief highlight of some of the ways in which this successful partnership has delivered, at course, department, institutional and national level.

Many challenges and difficulties lie ahead for our sector in the coming academic year and beyond – both in the continuing pandemic recovery and in the many other social, political and economic factors that will influence the learning experience. But if we continue to strive for partnership that is creative, robust and impactful, students will be key players at the heart of recovery activity in our colleges and universities, and will ensure that education works for all.

sparqs' Student Engagement Awards 2021: The shortlists

Award 1: A student-led initiative in a college

Thank you forms: bringing Fife College students and academic staff closer

~ **Fife College Students' Association**

Muckers Nation – The Students' Online Equine Community at SRUC

~ **Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)**

Award 2: A student-led initiative in a university

Learner Support for Protected Characteristics Focus Groups

~ **Heriot Watt University**

School of Life Sciences Academic Events and Social Media

~ **University of Dundee**

Award 3: A students' association-led initiative in a college

Discovering DASA

~ **Dundee and Angus College Students' Association**

Winter Wonderland 2020

~ **Fife College Students' Association**

Class Representative Meetings – Restructure

~ **Glasgow Clyde College Students' Association**

Award 4: A students' association-led initiative in a university

Collaborative development of ENSA online Programme Rep training

~ **Edinburgh Napier Students' Association**

Recruiting & Supporting Class Reps in a Remote Working Environment workshop

~ **Glasgow Caledonian University Students' Association**

Award 5: A partnership initiative in a college

Designing with, not for

~ **Dundee and Angus College**

Closing the Gap with 360 approach to feedback

~ **New College Lanarkshire and NCL Students' Association**

Dive in to an impactful way to embed, diversity, inclusion, values and equality

~ **West Lothian College Students' Association and West Lothian College**

Award 6: A partnership initiative in a university

RGU Welcome: New online support of student orientation, integration, and wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic

~ **Robert Gordon University and RGU:Union**

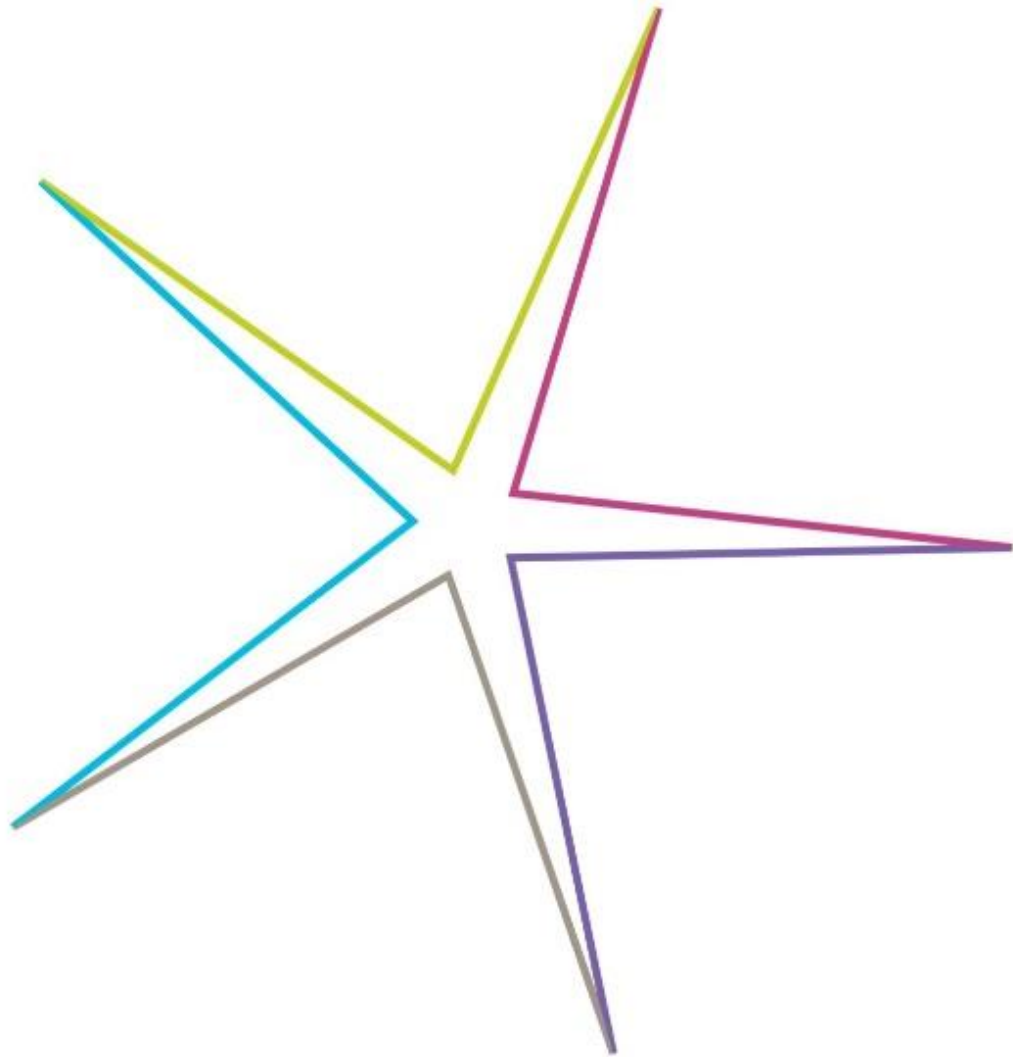
StrathReps: A Student Rep Success Story

~ **Strathclyde Students' Union and the University of Strathclyde**

The Summer Team Enterprise Programme (STEP)

~ **University of St Andrews, University of St Andrews Students' Association, and the Playfair Consultancy student society**

[See the winners on our website!](#)



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