Introduction
Thank you for signing up to be a Course Representative, this role is really valued in Colleges and Universities throughout Scotland so that they can continue to make improvements to each course year-on-year. This booklet is the first in a series of guides that you will receive over the course of the year. To give you a fuller understanding of your role we’ve developed a Course Representative training session that tells you everything you need to know.

This handbook and the Course Representative Training have been created by an agency called sparqs. sparqs (student participation in quality Scotland) was set up in 2003 and they have been delivering training for course representatives since then. Each year they meet hundreds of representatives from all over Scotland and have been collecting mounds of useful information that can be shared with you. Check us out at www.sparqs.ac.uk.

The term course representative has been used throughout this booklet to refer to all academic representatives. For instance some of you will be known as a Class Representative, Student Representative or SRC member.

Why Course Representatives are important
Higher Education Institutions are continually trying to improve themselves and the courses that they teach. As current students, yourself and the others on your course are the experts at being able to comment on the learning and teaching that you are receiving, and as the course representative, it’s you that puts that comment and opinion forward.

The Student Learning Experience
As a student you ultimately go into Higher Education to gain a degree or qualification and in order to achieve that many factors come into play; collectively this is known as your ‘student learning experience’ and it refers to all of the different elements that allow you to progress through your course of study. Some examples include: how do I learn and how am I taught? Does the equipment that I use in my course assist my learning? Do the assessments help me to learn and do I get good feedback after them? These areas of consideration all play an important part in your role as a representative. All of these issues will be covered at the course representative training.
The role of a Course Representative

As a course representative you play a crucial role in the way your course, department and institution is shaped.

• Attend Course representative training – this 2 - 2.5 hour session held at your institution gives you all the information you need to be a representative.
• Let the other students on your course know that you are their representative and will be representing their views and opinions to staff within your department.
• Think about and discuss with others what the positive and negative aspects of your course are and establish what you and those around you think about the course.
• Consider what works well on other courses, for example: innovative or interesting teaching methods, good use of PowerPoint in lectures, lecturers who distribute excellent notes. Such examples of what works well, will give staff an idea about other teaching methods.
• As a representative you get the opportunity to attend meetings with staff in your department. This forum allows you to speak directly to staff and take an active role in shaping the future of your course.
• It’s vital that you play your part in closing the feedback loop by sharing any course-related information that you may have received from staff with those on your course.

As a course representative your main aim is to raise any points regarding a specific course or department of study. If you have an issue regarding the wider experience of being at your university or institution, for example: lack of car-parking, lack of facilities across campus, complaints about the dining facilities or anything similar, then please raise these with your Students’ Association as they deal with the entire student experience, whereas the staff in your department will only be able to resolve departmental issues.

Communicating effectively

As the representative you will need to speak to the other students on your course to gain their opinions and comments. We appreciate, however, that this can be time consuming and challenging, particularly if your course has a lot of people on it, so we’ve put together some tips for you.

Communicating to large groups:

• Speak to your friends first if it would make you more comfortable, then approach the others on your course.
• Try and pick up on what people are saying about the course, if students like or dislike an aspect of the course then they are likely to vocalise it, particularly right after a class has ended or just before they go into it.
• Use informal settings to speak to people about the course, i.e., over a coffee or as you’re waiting to go into class.
• Generally labs and tutorials are split into smaller groups so you could ask your tutor if you could take a few minutes to speak to people in this setting.
• Address groups of people at the start or end of your class – this is a formal way of speaking to people, you might only want to do this if you feel confident addressing a whole room of people.
• It’s often easier to ask questions rather than asking for general feedback. For a list of questions that you can ask students to generate discussion about your course, see our website: www.sparqs.ac.uk
• Give out contact details (email address, comment box, noticeboards) and invite people to comment on the course. If you speak to your department they may be able to help you with this.
• If you have the technology you could use an existing virtual learning environment (VLE) to generate discussions. Again, your department will be able to help you with this.
• If your institution or Students’ Association has a separate website for student representatives then you can use this to communicate with people on your course. See your own institution for this information.

Communicating with everyone is not always easy. People will find it easier to talk about aspects of their course that they don’t like but may find it hard to say how the course could be improved. It is also important to remember that some people are more vocal than others, that some will have language difficulties, others will lack the time to give you feedback and some will simply be at a loss for what to say about the course. The course representative training will give you more information about successfully communicating with your class and examples of what’s worked at other institutions across Scotland.

It is a good idea to assure your coursemates that any comments or opinions that you put forward will remain anonymous and that you will not personally name anyone.

Attending Staff-Student meetings

Meetings between students and staff

As a course representative you will be required to attend at least two meetings within an academic year. These meetings will differ from institution-to-institution and between departments and courses. The aim of these meetings is to get course representatives and staff from each department discussing courses and making improvements to them.

A member of staff within your department will be able to give you the specific information and dates for the meetings that you are attending.

General points:

• Meetings generally last around an hour.

• Course representatives and key staff will be present at the meeting.

• Each meeting will have a Chair and Secretary present. If possible you should find out who that person is before you attend a meeting. At some institutions the Chair may be one of the course representatives so it’s important that you find out beforehand (ask someone in your department prior to your first meeting).

• You will be asked to comment on your course and may be asked to comment on the overall department as well as your general learning experience.

• Each meeting should have an agenda (a list of topics that will be covered at your meeting) and a copy of the previous minutes (a document containing information about what points were covered at the last meeting).

• You should speak to the other students on your course before you attend the meeting and represent their views once you are there.

• You should aim to raise both positive and negative issues about your course.

• You should aim to present information in a constructive way even if it is negative, for example, you may want to think about solutions to problems that have been raised.

• If you need to raise an issue about a single staff member (or any other type of potentially sensitive topic) then please do not raise this at a meeting as it is considered bad practice. Please speak to the Chair of the meeting or your Head of Department for more advice.

• Never be afraid to ask questions in meetings. If there’s something you don’t understand, the chances are there’s someone else in the room that doesn’t understand either.
Working with the staff at your Institution

University Staff

Love them or loathe them, these people get you through your degree. When dealing with staff members there are some key points to be aware of, particularly if you are raising a problem or issue about them:

• Be clear and concise in what you want to say.
• Think about what you are hoping to achieve from raising a particular issue.
• Most staff will be happy to listen to you but be conscious of their time. They are busy people too
• Be diplomatic.
• If you are raising a concern about an individual member of staff make sure you speak on behalf of everyone in your class and be reasonable about how you convey a problem.

As well as attending meetings you have a range of other ways that you and your fellow student can have a say about your education. For example:

• End of Course feedback forms
• During class discussions about the course
• You may be invited to attend a focus group about your University or Department
• During course development and course review
• Through Annual Institution wide surveys
• Surveys and questionnaires produced by the Student Association

If you are unsure how feedback is used to make improvements to your course then please ask your lecturers who will be able to tell you how student feedback and opinion has been used over the past year.

Working alongside your Student Association

Your Students’ Association (SA) or Student Union is made up of staff and students that are there to represent you, the student. Associations typically offer a broad range of services from welfare advice and information to clubs and societies, bars, shops, catering services and much more. The core aim of an association is to facilitate the representation of students’ views within their institution. Association officers sit on many important boards throughout a university and represent the entire student-body opinion at these meetings.

Issues you may wish to take to the student association:

• The SA deals with the entire student experience, this includes: the social aspects of uni life, academic life, facilities or lack of, transport to-from-between university, fees and other financial aspects and disciplinary action.
• If you have any queries or issues relating to the above topics please contact or visit the student association and speak to a staff member or student officer.
• Any general issues that you have about your institution should be taken to the Students’ Association as these issues are not directly related to your course but to the whole institution and should be dealt with on an institution wide basis and not within individual departments.

In many cases it is the Students’ Association that administers and organises the course representative system, so please look out for emails and information from them. Over time they may also be in contact to get your input or opinion about a range of topics, please take the time to reply so that your SA can truly represent you.
Benefits of being a Course Representative

The lists below are not exhaustive. The benefits that you gain will depend on how you’ve undertaken your role as a course representative. However, the lists will give you some guidance as to the types of skills that you may want to refer to when discussing your role.

Altruistic benefits:
• Chance to improve your course
• Make changes that will hopefully better the course over the coming years
• Represent other peoples opinions
• The opportunity to make a difference

Chance to develop transferable skills that you can use in your studies and within your career:
• Representation – chance to represent a wide range of people in a number of areas
• Time-management – juggle your course work alongside volunteering as a representative
• Organisation – planning and attending meetings alongside deadlines and coursework
• Presentation skills – presenting a range of issues at meetings and speaking to your class
• Meeting skills – putting your point across clearly and concisely at meetings
• Issue resolution – raising sensitive issues diplomatically and devising useful solutions to problems that may arise

General benefits:
• Improve the relationship that you have with staff in your department
• As a representative you will gain useful experience that you can add to your CV
• Being a representative shows that you are willing to get involved and do more with your time at university other than just being a student
• Meet new people, particularly within your department

Thank you

We look forward to meeting you at the Course Representative training where we will cover all of the things that just did not fit into this booklet…! In the meantime, if you would like further information then please visit our website or speak to a staff member within your department or Students’ Association for more advice and information. www.sparqs.ac.uk

If you have a facebook account you can also search for us under sparqs Scotland.

We hope you have a good year as a representative and that you are able to make improvements to your course as well as improving your own skills and gaining new experience.