

## Background

Once Class Reps have been recruited and trained at the beginning of the academic year, we hold our first of four rounds of Campus-based Conferences across the College. Over the past couple of years, the focus for the first Conference has been on the induction experience and issues which may impact on retention.

Once we have held a Conference at each campus, we then assess all of the information gathered to create this report and identify any patterns or obvious areas for immediate action, etc. Over the past 2 years, we have also identified what we call our 'Big 5 Issues' for students (referred to in Q3.). Sometimes these issues can be prioritised different, but they still appear to be as relevant as ever for a third year in a row. The issues, in no particular order are as follows:

- Funding - this can include access to specific funding, timescales of processing, level of funding provided, etc.
- Transport - travel to and from college is a major part of students' lives - accessibility, cost, reliability
- Course organisation - access to information prior to starting and if it reflects the reality of the course
- Mental health - the impact of College on students as well as the knowledge of and access to relevant support
- Facilities - the environment where learning takes place, standard of & access to IT, specific equipment, etc.

## How the Conference works

Before each Conference, we ask the participants to complete a short online survey. For this first Conference, we also ask them to get their Class mates to complete the survey as well. The initial information we get from these surveys helps to shape the conversation at the event itself. We then run a workshop at the Conference looking to gather more qualitative feedback to add to the quantitative information we gather through the survey. This report uses information related to both of these data sets.

The workshop provides some initial background information to the Class Reps and then asks them a series of questions. The Class Reps then write down some responses as individuals and then discuss their responses in small groups, before reporting back to the whole group where common themes are identified. This gives us a large amount of data in a fairly short period of time.

At the next round of Conferences, we will report back to Class Reps on some of the issues raised and, in the past, this has involved members of the Senior Management Team attending meetings to speak directly to Class Reps and helping us close the feedback loop.

## Class Rep Conference 1 for 2018/19

We held the first round of Class Rep Conferences on the following dates and locations:

- Tuesday the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October - Milton Rd
- Thursday the 25<sup>th</sup> of October - Sighthill
- Wednesday the 31<sup>st</sup> of October - Midlothian
- Thursday the 1<sup>st</sup> of November - Granton

This report reflects the outcomes of all 4 Conferences in order to give a 'College-Wide' view of the experiences of students throughout their induction and their first few weeks of term.

## The Workshop

1. Think back to your experience during the first few weeks of term, what was it like for you enrolling at college? Was it a positive experience? What could be improved? Everything from accepting your course to getting 'settled into college life', how easy was that transition?

### Induction & Welcome

The vast majority of Class Reps felt that the enrolment & induction processes had been a positive experience and a "simple" process, with some going as far as to say that the transition had been "seamless". Induction events were seen as a really beneficial part of the process and gave students who attended a 'head start'. Many students made a point of explaining how welcome they had been made to feel and that staff had been very helpful throughout induction events and the first weeks of College. LDTs were specifically highlighted as being very helpful in the first few weeks of term, answering questions and showing students around campuses, generally making students feel more comfortable in their new environment. One issue which came out last year was that some students felt that they didn't get a chance to get to know their class well enough on the first few weeks. This feedback has clearly been taken on board as many spoke of their experience of 'ice breakers' in their first classes. Unfortunately for a small minority of students, this involved doing 'ice breaker' type activities in almost every class for the first 2 weeks, which students found boring or even embarrassing when they clearly had already had time to get to know each other and were asked to participate in 'getting to know you' activities - some balance & coordination between course staff would help solve this.

The one area which was raised as an issue across all campuses with regards to induction was the processing of Student Cards. Some students waited between 4 and 6 weeks before receiving their cards, despite going through enrolment at the beginning of their course. This can have a serious impact on students, not least for being able to purchase travel tickets at student rates. Students who receive a travel bursary do so on the basis of being funded for the cheapest mode of transport at the student rate. Without an ID card, students are paying higher rates for travel than they are being funded for, thus putting unnecessary financial strain on them within the first few weeks of term.

### The first few weeks of term

Again, most students had a positive reflection on their first few weeks of term and were generally enjoying their courses, with many complementing their teaching staff, LDTs, and course content. One area which came up as an area for development was the provision of campus maps to help students navigate their way around in the first few weeks. This appeared to be more of an issue at Granton than any other campus where students struggled to find specific rooms, leading to stress and, in some instances, missing classes.

A significant portion of Class Reps from all Campuses raised similar experiences which caused a negative impact on their first few weeks of term. Although many students received their timetables before starting their courses, many others did not. Furthermore, a majority of all participants had experienced changes to their timetables within the first few weeks. There were lots of different issues raised in this regard, including:

- Timetables not being available on Moodle (online virtual learning environment) for first day of classes
- Rooms being changed and not amended on Moodle, leading to confusion or missing classes, which can impact on funding
- Classes being cancelled or postponed in the first few weeks with little to no warning given to students travelling into campus for those classes
- Classes being assigned rooms which were either too small for the number of students, or did not have the equipment needed for the class, resulting in several room changes and lost teaching time
- Classes being cancelled due to no lecturer being available for that course - long-term staff sicknesses, vacancies in key areas, etc.

Although some of these issues were rectified within the first couple of weeks, many rumbled on throughout September & even October. When asked, the vast majority of Class Reps said that at least one of their classes had been cancelled in the first month of term. This was especially frustrating for students who had caring responsibilities, or long and/or expensive journeys to travel into College, only to be informed that their class was cancelled when they got to campus.

2. Have you or any of your classmates had an issue at College that has made you/them consider dropping out? If so, what was the issue? If not, what do you think is the biggest reason for students struggling to stay on their course?

There were a range of answers to this question by individuals across all 4 campuses, however, some themes emerged when discussed with larger groups. Almost all Class Reps had reported students dropping out from their classes over the first month of term. For many, they were unaware of the reasons why students had left, but some gave insight into issues which had contributed to their decision to leave, or made them consider dropping out.

### **Bursary Funding**

The ever-present struggle of inadequate funding still appears to be the main reason for students considering or actually dropping out. Funding, particularly for FE level courses, is an area of concern for ECSA and it has been accepted as an area that requires support based on the outcomes of the Student Funding Review last year. The report accepted that additional funding for students was required and has proposed the introduction of loans for FE students. Although ECSA would welcome more money in students' pockets, we are whole-heartedly against the idea that this gap should be filled by debt. There is an ongoing national discussion taking place regarding the implementation of the proposals from the Student Support Review and we will be working with our colleagues in the National Union of Students on shaping that discussion.

### **The Cost of Being a Student**

Funding for travel and childcare costs is also an area of growing concern. Students who are entitled to childcare funding are likely to already be receiving some form of State Benefits. This can be a confusing and, often, difficult transition, with any issues leading to gaps in funding and uncertainty for student parents, making them more likely to consider dropping out of College.

There is a strong feeling that students are working for large parts of their weeks on top of their full-time courses. For many, this is a struggle in itself, trying to balance the workload of a full-time job and full-time study over a 7 day week, and not just a 5 day working week. For others, this can lead to further stress and students underperforming in their study, ultimately leaving their course.

Although not as wide-spread, there were a significant number of Class Reps who were concerned about additional costs that they were not aware of before they signed up. For example field trips, clothing, etc. These additional costs can be unmanageable for some students and can cause additional stress for others.

### **Travel**

Getting to and from campus can be a major part of a student's life when at College. There are several issues within this which can lead to students considering leaving their course. The cost of travel, either by public transport, or by car, can turn out to be much more than students anticipate when they enrol. For students entitled to Travel Bursaries, they are provided on the basis of the cheapest form of travel, which is usually the bus. If a student can't make buses work for them because the timetable doesn't fit their schedule (childcare, caring responsibilities, job, etc.), or services don't run to and from their area, any additional cost must be met by them. For example, Midlothian Campus has a train station at the bottom of the car park, but students are only funded for the cost of the bus. This can be challenging, costly, and put additional stress on students.

Furthermore, many students discussed the length of time it takes to travel to and from campus or the lack of access to public transport in their area as being a factor when considering dropping out of college. This was highlighted strongly at the Midlothian campus in particular as there are no buses which stop at or near the campus.

### **Course-related stress & anxiety**

Mental health of students came out as a major theme once more across the campuses. Many Class Reps gave examples of students whose mental health had suffered due to stress and anxiety relating to their courses. In some instances,

this was due to students not seeking help or not knowing where to get help from early enough and the course just got on top of them. For others, it was more to do with the workloads expected of them being much more than anticipated. In some examples, it was clear that this related to class tests and assignments being set very early in semester, when students did not feel prepared for them, in others it was ‘assessment bunching’ - where several modules required assignments or assessments in the same week or even day as each other. Many students were unaware of assessment plans for their courses, meaning it wasn’t clear when assessments were going to be due, leading to additional stress.

### Transition and Support for Learning

This was an area highlighted by various Class Reps across the campuses. Many students had not adapted well to the way in which they were learning on their courses, which had led to them dropping out or falling behind. The concept of ‘Learning how to learn’ was discussed in several groups, specifically looking at, for example, adult returners who had never written essays before, or school leavers who were struggling with self-directed learning for the first time. Many students did not feel supported enough in this area, meaning they felt that they were, as one Class Rep put it “surviving rather than learning”.

### Other reasons

There were other issues highlighted as contributing to students considering dropping out of their courses, but slightly less prevalent than the above, widely discussed issues.

- **Not having a lecturer in place** - one Class did not get a lecturer for one of their courses until the last week of October
- **Disruptive students** - several Class Reps talked about students who had dropped out or had considered leaving due to some students in their courses repeatedly disrupting class time with bad behaviour and causing issues between students
- **Ongoing Mental Health Conditions** - Students who had started a course and disclosed an ongoing mental health condition, but did not feel that they were adequately supported in the class room

3. Last year the 5 issues were identified by Class Reps (see the PowerPoint slide) as the biggest issues facing students. Are these issues still a problem? Have you or your classmates experienced any of them? Are there any issues missing from the list?

### The 'Big 5 Issues' from last year's Class Reps were:

- Funding - this can include access to specific funding, timescales of processing, level of funding provided, etc.
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- Course organisation - access to information prior to starting and if it reflects the reality of the course
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- Facilities - the environment where learning takes place, standard of & access to IT, specific equipment, etc.

The discussion with Class Reps across the campuses saw broad agreement that these are still the largest issues facing students, however, there are some changes in the specifics involved.

#### Funding

Last year, the largest issue to come out from Class Reps were the number of students who had not yet received their funding for the year and were now considering leaving because of it. This year, this has not been the case. We have seen a massive improvement in this area, with very few students concerned about delays in getting their funding at this point in the year compared to last year. The focus in this area appears to have shifted towards the funding not being enough to cover the cost of attending College. More and more students are working full-time or almost full-time hours over the course of the week to cover their costs, whilst still studying full-time at College. This, in turn, can impact on students' mental health, physical health, and ability to perform in their course.

#### Transport

As previously highlighted in this report, transport continues to form a major concern and stress for many students. ECSA is currently working on a 2 year project in partnership with the College Development Trust and the Sustainability Team to support students to access cost effective and environmentally friendly transport to and from College. However, the major sticking point will always be cost and this is definitely still a major barrier for students getting around and across the region. Again, bus transport for students studying at the Midlothian Campus is a particular concern, as is students traveling from the Midlothian area to other campuses.

#### Mental Health

All of the evidence would suggest that mental health still poses a significant issue to students across the College sector, with young people in areas of multiple deprivation facing tremendous challenges. Knowing what support is available and accessing that early enough in the year was discussed by most groups across the campuses as well as teaching staff being trained and supported to help students with their mental health and how it can impact their learning.

#### Facilities

Many students (especially on the Granton Campus) felt that it was confusing to find class rooms, especially in the first few weeks of term and when rooms were changed at short notice. Classrooms are the biggest area of discussion in this area, especially classes that are too large to fit into the rooms provided. Access to adequate IT resources for classes was also voiced as an issue on all campuses. Outside of the classroom, the vast majority of Class Reps discussed the lack of social spaces on campuses to relax or study between classes. Others discussed how libraries had become social spaces on most campuses due to the lack of alternatives, impacting on those who wanted to use the library for study or as a quiet space.

#### Course Organisation

The biggest concerns have been mostly surrounding course organisation - timetabling, room changes, cancelled classes, communication about lecturers being absent, etc. there was a feeling from many Class Reps that this had tarnished the experience of the first few weeks (or months) of term. Whilst students felt welcomed and staff were helpful, there was a frustration that many 'basic' expectations were not being met, slowing down the momentum of entering into a new learning environment.

4. Do you think the College and/or ECSA can be doing to remove challenges, support more students to stay on at College and be successful

Some of the suggested solutions or areas for development included:

- **Better planning for the first month of courses** - making sure timetables are correct and rooms are adequate as well as courses being suitably staffed to cover all modules
- **Course planning assignments together** - avoiding 'assessment bunching' by making sure assessments are due around the same week or on the same day as other modules
- **Student ID Cards printed earlier** - perhaps this could be done at induction/Welcome events
- **Maps for students** - helping students find their way around campuses in the first few weeks of term. This could be a physical printout or on an app/mobile friendly website
- **Focus on Mental Health Support from Day 1** - Talking about mental health in the class room should be encouraged from the very beginning of a course, and not as a reaction. This could cover previous students' experiences as well as support available
- **Peer Support Groups** - Reps were keen to hear that ECSA were running Peer Support Groups, but felt that these should be in place much earlier in the year

## The Student Learning Experience

Developed by sparqs - <https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/resource-item.php?item=205>

The Student Learning Experience is used in our Class Rep training to help 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.

