



Supporting Student  
Engagement during the  
Covid-19 Crisis

# INSIGHT REPORT: Maintaining Class Rep Systems



**National Student  
Engagement Programme**

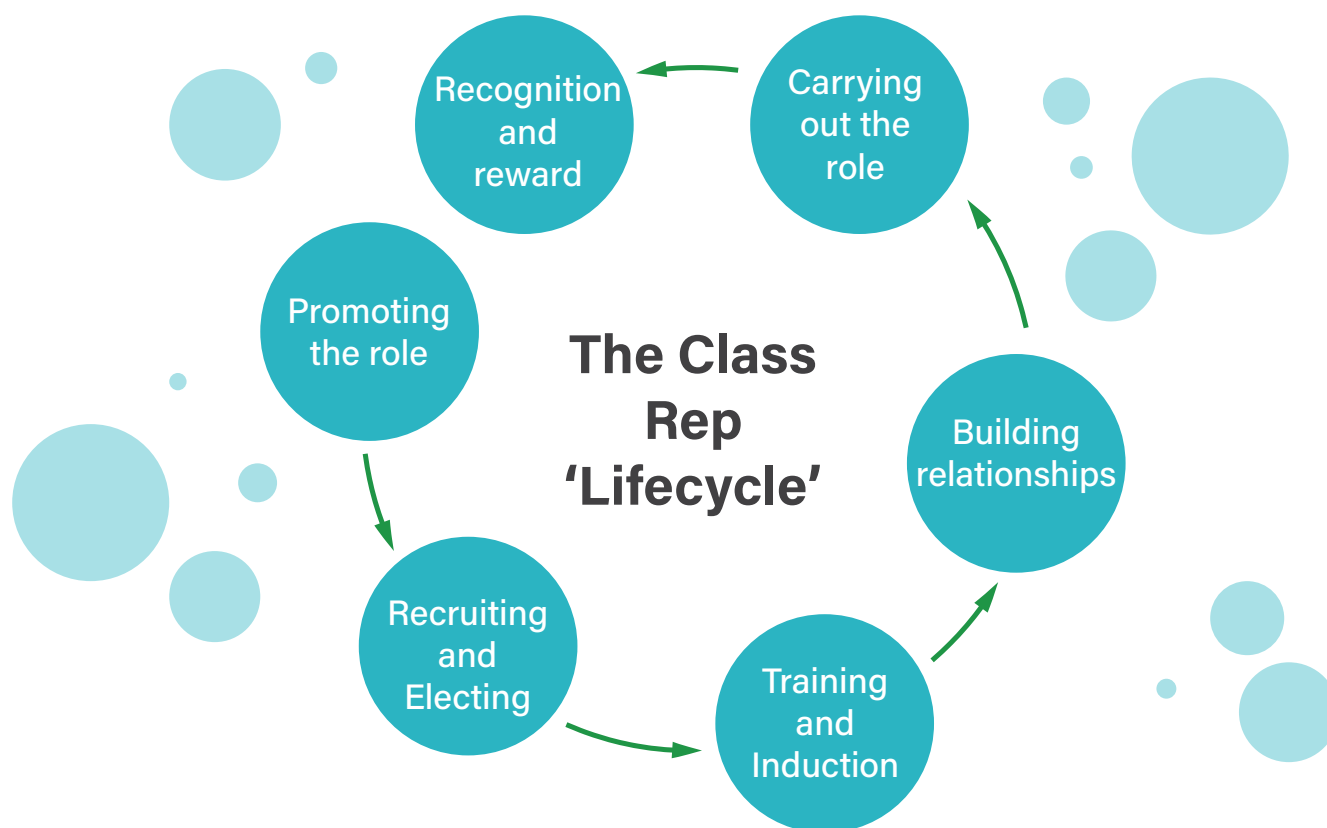
Clár Rannpháirtíochta Náisiúnta  
na Mac Léinn

Staff and students in Irish higher education have gone into social distancing mode as a result of the pandemic, and that means that the usual face-to-face and on-campus environments where issues can be raised and problems can be solved together has disappeared. A core determinant in the success of any institutional system of student engagement is the existence of academic representation most commonly realised through Class Representatives, acting as a collective voice for students within and across programmes. The existence of such representation, in order to be effective and to reach the greatest number of students possible, should be underpinned by processes operated in partnership so that the system is supported and resourced.

*For more resources on class representative systems (CRS) you can view and download the Insight Report, workshop plans, and toolkits produced by the NStEP Project Team on the Role and Recruitment of Class Reps, co-led by the National College of Ireland (NCI) and NCI Students' Union (NCISU).*

**Visit:** [studentengagement.ie/resources](https://studentengagement.ie/resources)

This insight is part of the National Student Engagement Programme's efforts to support staff and students to communicate, collaborate, and maintain effective student engagement during the Covid-19 crisis. The paper details some key considerations on the class rep 'lifecycle' that institutions and students' unions may need to explore in order to ensure that the class rep system can be maintained and enhanced going into the 2020/21 academic year.



When preparing for the new academic year, it is vital that plans are put in place for the entire 'lifecycle' of the class representative across an academic year. There are a various ways that the 'lifecycle' can be broken down and understood. In this guide six lifecycle phases are set out, with the focus primarily on the second phase of recruitment and election. This focus is in recognition of the scale of the challenge that recruitment and election may pose in an online/remote environment when many institutions and students' unions have up until now been managing this on-campus and via paper-based procedures.

## The 'lifecycle' can be briefly understood as follows:

<b>(1) Promoting the Role</b>	<p>The process of <b>promotion of the class rep role</b> can start at the end of the academic year. It is also an important part of the recruitment phase at the start of a new academic year, but should be planned as a distinct phase of activity defined by the ways in which the role is positioned and communicated. Promotion requires a sense of shared understanding and commitment from both student and institutional leadership.</p> <p>For guidance on defining the role of the class rep, see the resources from the Role and Recruitment of Class Reps project.</p>
<b>(2) Recruiting and Electing</b>	<p><b>Recruitment</b> is defined by the ways in which the role is promoted (phase 1) and by the processes in place to allow students to put themselves forward for the role. Usually this will involve a nomination process that may lead to an election.</p> <p><b>Election</b> of class reps ensures that the process is underpinned by democratic values and protects the 'representativeness' of the student voice.</p>
<b>(3) Training and Induction</b>	<p><b>Inducting</b> class reps in to the structures in which they will operate is distinct from training. Informing class reps of institutional structures, students' union structures, committees and mechanisms for feedback provides an important knowledge base for the role.</p> <p><b>Training</b> should be considered concurrently to induction, with key skills development for navigating structures and representing peers defined. Training builds on induction, providing the tools to act on their knowledge of the institutional environment.</p>
<b>(4) Building relationships</b>	<p><b>Building relationships</b> is an ongoing process for a class rep. This will not just happen naturally once reps have been recruited and trained – it too requires structured and considered approaches. Working across a diversity of students, staff and structures is no easy task for a student who takes on a class rep role.</p>
<b>(5) Carrying out the role</b>	<p>This phase is most often defined by the ways in which institutions and students' unions are structured. For example, representing the class and liaising with staff will be core to <b>carrying out the role</b>, but committee structures, staff support and existing feedback mechanisms all play a part in how a rep can and will approach issues. This also requires ongoing support in order for them to be successful.</p>
<b>(6) Recognition and reward</b>	<p>It is important to recognise, both on an ongoing basis and at the end of the rep term, the work that has been carried out and the achievements that have been made. This includes recognised <b>awards, rewards, and incentives</b>.</p>

# PROMOTING THE ROLE

## /// PHASE 1

Promotion of the role requires a shared understanding across students and staff, so the role specification should be shaped through partnership and dialogue. This will ensure that a clear message is communicated across the institution during the recruitment phase and that when reps are carrying out their roles that they do not face barriers to participation.

Roles should be promoted in advance of recruitment and election if possible, utilising induction and orientation phases to actively communicate the importance and value of the role of the rep. A mark of a successful promotional period is ensuring that as many students as possible are aware of the role before they are asked to put themselves forward.

Review promotional material:

- *Is the purpose and value of the class rep role well defined?*
- *Are both students and staff agreed on the expectations of class reps?*
- *Are procedures to become class reps clear and concise?*

See NStEP guidance for hosting short workshops and benchmarking the class rep role at [studentengagement.ie/resources](https://studentengagement.ie/resources)

# RECRUITMENT AND ELECTIONS

## /// PHASE 2

### ACCESSIBLE RECRUITMENT

A fair and transparent class rep recruitment drive can be achieved through open and accessible nomination procedures.

It is advisable to open nomination processes in advance of beginning to elect class reps, and if possible the recruitment period and the election period should be entirely separate, with clear start and end dates for each. This has a number of clear benefits:

- Recruitment through open nomination can provide an opportunity to align promotion of the role with the recruitment drive. A link to nomination forms can be advertised and circulated by staff and students involved in the promotional effort.
- A window for nomination allows for all students to actively consider putting themselves forward in an easy and accessible manner.
- A nomination period provides for more opportunity for inclusivity. The 'hands up' approach in a class setting may well discourage competition and have an impact on the diversity of candidates putting themselves forward.
- A nomination period allows people some time to reach out to classmates, introduce themselves, discuss the role and to gain support.
- An online nomination process allows for staff responsible for student engagement and students' union officers to actively monitor how well the message is spreading across the institution, and subsequently to take targeted action to increase nominations in a given department or programme.

## DO'S OF CLASS REP RECRUITMENT

- Do** open nominations well in advance of elections.
- Do** ask staff across all departments to circulate promotional material and links for nomination forms.
- Do** utilise the virtual learning environment (VLE) and discussion forums to post details of the role and nomination process.
- Do** ensure that nomination processes are GDPR compliant.

## DON'TS OF CLASS REP RECRUITMENT

- Don't** rely on asking students to volunteer in class (the 'hands up' approach) when they haven't had time to think about putting themselves forward.
- Don't** ask too many questions on a nomination form – only ask for what is absolutely required

## Holding Fair Elections

One of the principles of student engagement is democracy. Successful class rep systems are one the key elements that strengthens higher education institutions as sites of democratic citizenship. So, how can democratic participation and electoral representation be maintained during the move to remote education?

Can the VLE be utilised to support class representative elections in a remote learning environment? Crucially, do students' unions and institutions view the lack of on-campus recruitment and paper ballot elections as an opportunity to utilise technology to reach more students? If so, what are the benefits and the challenges?

Below three options for class rep elections are explored. These are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather they are indicative of what is possible given the circumstances.

### In-Class Approach (led by teaching and lecturing staff)

This approach is defined by:

- A clearly defined process for nomination and election that is communicated and delegated to departmental leadership, programme leaders, and relevant staff who teach.
- Class time is utilised by teaching staff to elect class representatives. These staff will oversee and verify the process.
- Results are then communicated back centrally to the SU and/or relevant staff members within the institution.

To be successful:

- A clear guide should be provided to staff, with relevant tools and resources to ensure that they can carry out the election smoothly.
- Nominations could be organised centrally and communicated back to departments. Alternatively staff could email in advance and seek nominations via an agreed format.
- Election periods could be timetabled to set weeks to avoid the process taking longer than usual.
- Elections should be run in a manner that protects the secrecy of an individual student's vote.
- Results should be communicated through an agreed process to ensure that reps can be contacted in time for training.

### In-Class Approach (led or supported by students' union officers or student engagement staff)

This approach is defined by:

- A clearly defined process for nomination and election that is communicated in advance to departmental leadership, programme leaders, and relevant staff who teach.
- Class time is utilised to elect class representatives. A students' union

To be successful:

- The process should remain standardised across all programmes if it is centrally organised.
- Nominations can be organised centrally and the nominee details can be provided to the individual overseeing each election.

officer or a staff member with responsibility for student engagement will attend at an agreed time to oversee the election.

- Results are compiled centrally by the SU or a relevant central service.

Note: This approach will be more practically possible in a small institution. It would be much more difficult to manage in an institution with a significant number of reps.

• Election times will have to be agreed with each department and programme.

• The SU and/or professional service managing the process communicates clearly across departments and programmes.

• Elections should be run in a manner that protects the secrecy of an individual student's vote.

### Online Institution-Wide Approach

This approach is defined by:

- A clearly defined centralised online process for nomination and election that is communicated in advance to departmental leadership, programme leaders, and relevant staff who teach.
- Clear dates are set for nominations and elections.
- A central nomination system is managed by either the SU or staff with responsibility for student engagement. These nominations are then used to inform the scale of election that is required.
- Elections are run on online platforms that are accessible to all students.
- Results are compiled centrally by the SU or a relevant central service, and communicated back to students and staff.

To be successful:

- Platforms for both nomination, and especially, election processes are explored as early as possible and agreed with all stakeholders.
- Communication is prioritised across the institution once decisions have been made, in order to avoid departments planning their own process.
- Processes are easily understood for the benefit of all students and staff.
- Elections should be run on a trustworthy platform, in a manner that protects the secrecy of an individual student's vote.

## The Electoral Platform

Core to the process of election is trust, transparency and fairness. There are a number of options to explore when making a decision about election processes. It is important to explore these as early as possible, well in advance of the electoral period, allowing for all parties to discuss pros and cons, and to put in place any necessary supports and resources.

Some considerations for planning class rep elections:

- The virtual learning environment may already have the ability to host the elections, and if they do not, there should be some form of modular plug-in that can be added. However, whether or not your VLE currently has that capacity it will require planning and discussion about how best to map the class rep system on to electoral constituencies – this process may not be clear cut. Discuss VLE capabilities, whether the institution can support changes to the VLE to run an election, and how best to map the current class rep system to a VLE plug-in.
  - Explore external options. There are a number of companies that support students' union electoral processes. This will require a budget and you will have to explore data sharing and protection arrangements as part of this process.
  - Online institution-wide options that can be opened and closed during defined periods are more accessible, allowing all students to vote at a time and place of their convenience. The move to online and remote teaching during the pandemic may be an opportunity to put more accessible and inclusive electoral processes in place.
  - In-class elections would usually involve physical ballot papers, which can be cumbersome and time consuming. If you are exploring the in-class election as the best option, ensuring that this process is run efficiently is vital. Paper ballots can be replaced by anonymous polling (e.g. Zoom polls) that opens and closes during the class – students in attendance versus votes cast is the simplest way to verify a fair election.
- Avoid using any online tools that allows for the individual student's vote to be identified.

# TRAINING AND INDUCTION

## /// PHASE 3

Running training and induction online may provide an opportunity to reach more class reps than previously, allowing for shorter sessions, more video content, and more targeted communications. However, developing engaging content and allowing space for reps to build a sense of collective community will be particular challenges.

Training and induction should be considered two different aspects of this phase. Induction introduces reps to the structures of the institution and their role, while training builds their skills and capacity to carry out their role and navigate issues.

<b>Induction to the Class Rep role</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Introduce the role, introduce the SU and introduce the institution.</li><li>• What are the ways in which they can represent? For example, programme committees, SU council, StudentSurvey.ie responses, module feedback.</li><li>• Introduce the people and services who can support them.</li></ul>
<b>Training: Representing their Class</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Exploring effective peer representation and engagement.</li><li>• Understanding how to represent their class, provide feedback, and develop solutions in partnership with staff.</li><li>• NStEP Introductory Class Rep training provides these core skills.</li></ul>
<b>Training: Specialist skills and Activism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Exploring student voice through advocacy, activism and organisation. For example, introducing policy issues.</li><li>• This will be particularly important to SUs seeking to build an active community of representation.</li><li>• This is a chance to introduce external speakers, for example, negotiation training, CV building, public speaking etc.</li></ul>

# BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND CARRYING OUT THE ROLE

## /// PHASES 4 & 5

The 'retention' of class representatives after the electoral and training period is vital to ensuring that there is effective and active rep systems in place across the institution. It is important to recognise that unless reps are able to take up opportunities and participate as valued members of the institutional community then it will be difficult to incentivise. A sense of partnership is an incentive in itself.

Seeking ways to enhance the remit of reps beyond raising issues and gathering feedback should include structured opportunities for representative on committees and forums, to create solutions with staff, to achieve

results for their classmates, and to recognise the value of their work in programmatic, departmental and institutional actions. Students' union will want to ensure that their own meetings, such as student council meetings are participatory in nature, rather than informational. For staff, committees and forums should also be participatory, and rather than 'inviting' class reps consider how they can feel 'involved', providing them with a seat at the table from which they can create a sense of shared ownership.

NStEP resources to support class rep retention strategies:

- [Insight Report: Institutional Approaches to Student Engagement during Covid-19](#)
- [Quick Guide for Effective Staff-Student Committees](#)
- [Insight Report: The Role and Recruitment of Class Representatives](#)
- [Student Engagement Report: Student Feedback Opportunities, Data and Follow-Up](#)

## RECOGNITION AND REWARD

### PHASE 6

Recognition and reward strategies are crucial to ensuring that class representatives are incentivised to carry out the role, that their work is valued and acknowledged, and that they can promote their work during and after they have completed their roles. This is also crucial during promotion and recruitment of new class reps, demonstrating that when students put themselves forward for class rep that they will be able to access opportunities for personal development.

International resources:

- [Recognition and accreditation of academic reps: Practices and challenges across Scotland's colleges and universities \(2015\) sparqs - Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland, accessible at: <https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/ch/Accreditation%20and%20Recognition%20Guidance.pdf>](https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/ch/Accreditation%20and%20Recognition%20Guidance.pdf)