

University Committee for Learning and Teaching

ELIR4: Institutional Approach to the Representation of Independent Distance Learning/PGT Online and Approved Learning Partner Students (PGT)

Heriot-Watt University has taken various actions in response to its ELIR3 recommendation regarding student representation of ALP and IDL students, but this remains a challenging area in terms of the traditional, on-campus model of student representation. HWU has not as yet specified an unambiguous institutional position on the most effective ways of seeking views from ALP and IDL students.

This paper brings together actions taken since ELIR3 and proposes an institutional approach and institutional position for consideration by the University Committee for Learning and Teaching at its meeting on 3 April 2019.

The outcomes of the UCLT's discussion will be presented in the ELIR4 Reflective Analysis as the institutional approach and position.

Outcome: the University Committee for Learning and Teaching endorsed, as the institutional approach and position, the representation of IDL/PGT Online and ALP (PGT) students provided below.

1. Background

Heriot-Watt University's ELIR3 Outcome Report (March 2015) recommended five areas of development, a response to each of which was provided in the ELIR3 Follow-Up Report, June 2016. ELIR4 requires that an update on action taken in response to ELIR3 should be provided in the ELIR4 Reflective Analysis.

The University's position on the other four areas (learning resources, support and environment; postgraduate research student induction and training; sharing practice in distance learning; student transcripts) is clear and will be articulated in the Reflective Analysis. While action has been taken regarding the recommendation related to student representation for IDL and ALP students, there has been no agreed institutional position on the HWU approach in this particular case¹.

A proposed institutional approach to the representation of independent distance learning/PGT Online and Approved Learning Partner students (PGT) is provided below.

2. ELIR3 Recommendation, and HWU Immediate Action, on ALP/IDL Student Representation

The recommendation related to ALP and IDL student representation made by the ELIR3 Review Team in its Outcome Report, March 2015, was as follows:

Student representation – *progress plans to create representative structures for students studying with an Approved Learning Partner or through independent distance learning, building on positive representation systems evident in the Edinburgh and Dubai campuses, and emerging in Malaysia.*

In its ELIR3 Reflective Analysis, the University highlighted its own challenges in putting in place effective representative structures for ALP and IDL students, as traditional models of campus-based representation have not proven to be sustainable or successful. The Follow-Up Report provided an overview of institutional consideration of ALP and IDL representation in November 2015 and March 2016, including a working group of the Student Learning Experience Committee in 2016/17 (*see Appendix to this paper for full details of action outlined in ELIR3 Follow Up Report, June 2016*).

3. Action on ALP/IDL Student Representation since June 2016

Since June 2016, when the then Learning and Teaching Board and its Student Learning Experience Committee, had approved the establishment of a Working Group to progress ALP/IDL student

¹ The extract from the ELIR3 Follow-Up Report, June 2016, on representation of IDL and ALP students is provided in an Appendix to this paper.

representation. Two of the members of the Working Group had moved on to other roles, and so the action was progressed by the then Student President, the previous L+T Quality Enhancement Officer and the Student Engagement Manager, Student Union.

After a period of extensive research of both internal and external sector practices, a position paper was drafted by the three remaining members of the working group, outlining six recommendations for ALP/IDL student representation, and was presented to the Student Learning Experience Committee for consideration at its meeting on 11 January 2017. SLEC agreed that the three members of the working group should meet with the Academic Registrar to discuss the recommendations in detail and “provide information on how these could be achieved” (SLEC Minute 63.3, 11 Jan 2017).

At the next SLEC meeting on 4 April 2017, it was noted that discussions would be held with the Academic Quality team to establish whether student feedback routes could be strengthened via AMR and visit reporting processes². It was also noted that IDL student engagement with the Portal would be evaluated. Both actions were deferred until the meeting on 6 September 2017: these were not picked up at 6 September 2017, but ALP/IDL representation was added to the SLEC 2017/18 Plan; however, no action was taken during 2017/18; this has not been included in the 2018/19 SLEC Plan (although a broader item on student representation has been).

In part, this non-continuation reflects the ongoing challenges of trying to put in place a workable representative structure for such student groups³, and a recognition that a prescriptive approach would not be successful, as is reflected in this principle on Student Representation and Feedback in HWU’s Multi Code:

Principle 1.25: Representation: Students on Partnership or IDL Programmes

The University and Schools must put in place mechanisms to facilitate the representation of the collective student view on partnership and IDL programmes, tailoring these as appropriate to the mode of delivery.

However, there has been a very positive development emerging from the ALP/IDL student representation discussions: through a UKCISA funded project in 2016/17, the University and the Student Union collaborated to create an online training tool for class reps to use across all modes and locations. Heriot-Watt University was one of the few institutions to be invited to present at the UKCISA Annual Conference on [Developing an Online Representation Training Tool for Global Students](#). The online training, which is hosted on the VLE, is constructed around the core four sparqs training modules (your rep role; why is representation important?; the Class Rep Cycle; attending meetings) and associated tests. In addition, for the first time in 2019, the Student Union at the Scottish Campuses has introduced an Online Learning Award for the *Best Online Lecturer*, recognising an individual provides a creative and engaging learning experience, and appreciates the challenges of studying online.

4. Proposed Institutional Approach and Position: Approved Learning Partner (PGT)

One of the key trends in changing student population since ELIR3, which the University has to comment on in the introductory contextual section of the Reflective Analysis, has been the reduction in number of ALP students. The University will also highlight in RA Section 5: Collaborative Provision the decline in the number of ALP partnerships and trend towards this partnership model becoming exclusively the preserve of the Edinburgh Business School (EBS). Both trends reflect the planned, strategic decision by the University to move away from ALP type of partnerships to more Joint Collaborative Partnerships and major Articulation Partnerships, such as those with institutions in China.

Since students on both Joint Collaborative Partnerships and Articulation Partnerships are campus-based during their period of study with Heriot-Watt University, the on-campus model of representation applies (eg Class Reps, Schools Officers). In addition, for Graduate Apprenticeships (another type of partnership activity), a class representative system is currently in place, with plans to link to existing School Officers.

² An early suggestion that formal student representative structures should be a mandatory requirement of new and renewed partnership contracts was not progressed.

³ Sector-wide developments resonate with these challenges: representative structures can be put in place, but often their lack of success is due to a lack of individuals willing to take on the role; as a consequence, communities of peers, engaging through a range of e-mechanisms, seems to be a more effective approach for HEI’s in similar positions to HWU.

As a consequence of a strategic shift from the ALP model in all Schools except EBS, the issue of ALP representation has changed from being a multi-School and UG/PGT matter at the time of ELIR 3 in 2015/16; in 2019, ALP representation now concerns PGT students only and only EBS.

Action

In view of the above, the UCLT is invited to consider, with a view to endorsing, the following approach:

In terms of an institutional approach and position to ALP student representation, it is proposed that this is specified in the ELIR4 Reflective Analysis as the model which EBS has put in place⁴ and that it is made clear in the RA that the process put in place by EBS to gain the views of ALP students meets the University's expectations regarding opportunities for students provide feedback on their learning and wider experiences (*see Section 6 below*). EBS is able to make use of the aforementioned online representation training tool for students at ALP's.

5. Proposed Institutional Approach and Position: IDL/PGT Online

At Heriot-Watt, IDL is now routinely being referred to as PGT Online, reflecting the fact that taught programmes by IDL are now being offered now only at PGT levels and there is a shifting approach in methodology to focus increasingly on online modes of delivery.

In terms of anticipated changes in the student population since ELIR3, which the University also has to comment on in the introductory contextual section of the Reflective Analysis, HWU has made a strategic decision to grow PGT student numbers via the PGT Online initiative. In contrast to ALP's, this is not a single School initiative, and involves at least EBS, EGIS and SoSS.

Therefore, in terms of how the University presents its approach in ELIR4, the focus will be on articulating the mechanisms by which PGT Online students are able to express their views on their learning and wider experiences.

At the University Committee for Learning and Teaching's Strategy Away Day on 16 January 2019, the Committee considered again IDL student representation, noting that engagement with IDL students had indicated repeatedly that they did not want, nor need, the traditional student representatives; student surveys, peer discussion groups and contact with academic/support staff provided IDL students with a more effective, more immediate form of communicating their views.

Action

In view of the above, the UCLT is invited to consider, with a view to endorsing, its Away Day conclusions as the institutional approach to, and position on, representative processes for PGT Online.

6. Proposed Institutional Approach and Position on Student Representation

The University has specified many key, fundamental positions on the student learning experience as well as on learning and teaching (see UCLT Away Day Report, 16 January 2019; endorsed by the UCLT at its meeting on 23 January 2019; see Minute 7.2):

- *Identical academic standards; diversity of learning experiences;*
- *The quality of the learning experience will enable students to achieve all of the programme's specified learning outcomes;*
- *All Heriot-Watt programmes of study will provide students with the opportunity to develop their academic, personal and professional potential, and the University will seek to enhance the experience of students across all modes and locations;*

⁴ The Director of Learning and Teaching, Edinburgh Business School, is providing a statement on student representation in EBS, including both ALP and IDL, for inclusion in the ELIR4 RA. This statement will also be added to this present paper in due course.

- *The University adopts an inclusive, non-segregated approach to all its academic activities and learning environments.*

It is proposed that these principles should be extended to include one on opportunities for students to provide their views on their experiences, so that the University can justify its different approaches in response to factors such as: the cultural and legal environments at different campuses; the needs of differing groups of students; student numbers. At present, the Principles 1.24 and 1.27 cover “Representation and Feedback” in Part 1: The Student Experience of the University’s Multi Code:

Principle 1.24: Representation: On-Campus Students

Representative processes must be in place at the University and School levels on the UK and all overseas campuses to enable students to engage collectively as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their learning experience.

Principle 1.25: Representation: Students on Partnership or IDL Programmes

The University and Schools must put in place mechanisms to facilitate the representation of the collective student view on partnership and IDL programmes, tailoring these as appropriate to the mode of delivery.

Principle 1.26: Feedback from All Students

All students, irrespective of mode of location of study, must be provided with opportunities on a regular basis to feed back on their experience (both learning and general experience).

Principle 1.27: Responding to Student Views

The University and Schools must provide a formal response to issues raised by all groups of students (UK and overseas campuses, IDL and partnership), indicating areas addressed and equally providing a rationale for issues which have not been taken forward.

In addition, Principle 1.15 states:

Students must have, at the outset of their programme, an identified contact (usually a mentor), either local or remote, who can give them constructive feedback on academic performance and guidance on their academic progression. Where appropriate, students should have regular opportunities for discussions with their peers about the programme. Students must have appropriate opportunities to give formal feedback on their experience of the programme.

It is proposed that all of the above principles be retained in the revised Multi Code, and, in addition, that a single, overarching principle is established, which summarises the institutional approach on feedback and representation, and that this principle be added to the relevant Learning and Teaching Briefing Papers which summarise the fundamentals of the University’s approach to the student learning experience.

Action

The UCLT is invited to consider, with a view to approving, the following, overarching principle is proposed:

All students, irrespective of mode of location of study, will be provided with regular opportunities to provide feedback on their learning and wider experiences through mechanisms such as surveys and representative structures, with mechanisms being tailored to meet the needs of students and to suit the type of delivery.

HWU ELIR3 Follow-Up Report

Extract on Representation of IDL and ALP Students

Student representation – *progress plans to create representative structures for students studying with an Approved Learning Partner or through independent distance learning, building on positive representation systems evident in the Edinburgh and Dubai campuses, and emerging in Malaysia.*

Analysis of best practice, both internally and externally, regarding the representation of Approved Learning Partner (ALP) and independent distance learning (IDL) students was undertaken by the Quality and External Partnerships team within Academic Registry. This analysis informed a discussion paper which was considered by the Student Learning Experience Committee at its meeting on 11 November 2015. The Committee agreed that ALP and IDL student representation should form part of the planned Student Administration Revitalisation Programme (SARP), which was launched in January 2016 (see section 5.1).

At the Learning and Teaching Board Away Day on 8 March 2016, the Student Union chose as its item for the “strategic student matters” slot on the agenda the theme of ALP and IDL student representation. The key areas covered were:

- Current representative structures
- Reasons for the focus on IDL and ALP student representation
- Possible directions
- Implications for the Student Union and for the University

At the Away Day, it was agreed that Student Union and key individuals on Learning and Teaching Board, whose Schools were active in IDL and ALP activity, should meet as a short-term working group to propose a common view of how to respond to the issues and questions identified at the Away Day. In this way, the issues would not just be the responsibility of the Student Union to resolve. Directors of Learning and Teaching and Student Union representatives have volunteered to be part of a short-term working group (2 meetings) to take this forward and to report to the Learning and Teaching Board.

Since the Student Learning Experience Committee (reporting to the Learning and Teaching Board) had previously considered ALP and IDL student representation, this issued was delegated by LTB to SLEC. At its meeting on 6 April 2016, Student Learning Experience Committee considered a range of proposals and papers related to ALP and IDL representation, including comments from students provided as part of the new Annual Survey (March 2016). The Student Learning Experience Committee agreed, in addition to the actions approved by the Learning and Teaching Board at its Away Day, that the working group should meet once the new Student President was in post (from 1 June 2016).

The working group will be informed by the outcomes of the new Annual Survey (March 2016), which included questions for ALP and IDL students on representation, and the student survey undertaken in spring 2016 by Edinburgh Business School, which likewise included questions on representation.