Guide to policy and procedures for teaching and learning
Section 4:
Student representation, evaluation and complaints

University of
Reading

Student-Staff Partnership Groups

Guidance for staff and students on how to run SSP Groups

Contents

Introduction

This guidance is for students and staff, and it will be particularly relevant to those students and staff who are members of Student-Staff Partnership Groups (SSP Groups). It aims to outline what SSP Groups are, why they are important and how you can put them into practice for your programme.

This guidance is not mandatory; it is recommended as good practice. It should be read alongside the University's policy on Student Representation, which sets out the structures for student representation that exist at the University and the (mandatory) requirements in terms of SSP Groups.

What are Student-Staff Partnership Groups?

SSP Groups are groups of students and staff that meet on a regular basis to discuss feedback from students on a particular programme or group of programmes. SSP Groups work to identify good practice (what is working well), explore issues and concerns raised by students and suggest solutions, and bring about positive changes to the student experience.

Areas for discussion are likely to include: the aims and objectives of programmes; curriculum development; mode of delivery and quality of teaching; assessment and

feedback; learning resources; diversity and inclusion; health and safety; sustainability; module and programme evaluation; student support, including the Academic Tutor System; placement opportunities; and School communications and student engagement.

Why are Student-Staff Partnership Groups important?

SSP Groups provide an opportunity for students to work collaboratively with staff to consider and enhance the student learning experience and to drive meaningful change within and, where appropriate, beyond the subject area.

The operation of SSP Groups is underpinned by the Principles of Partnership, as follows:

Partnership:

- Is based on values of trust and respect;
- Is empowering and inclusive;
- Enables the collaborative development of meaningful change;
- Creates a sense of belonging to an academic community.

SSP Groups help to develop positive relationships between staff and students, based on trust and respect, and to facilitate open dialogue. They also help to create a sense of belonging to an academic community within the School/Department, including students, academic staff, professional and support staff and the Students' Union. SSP Groups are intended to empower students and staff alike since both parties are jointly responsible for the process and outcomes.

Who is involved?

The **suggested** core membership of an SSP Group is:

- At least two nominated academic leads from the School/Department
- Course Reps (or alternates)
- A Secretary appointed by the relevant Support Centre Manager/ Henley Dean's Office

Alternate students may attend meetings when Course Reps are unavailable. Where appropriate, a member of the School/Department's academic society may also attend as well as, or in place of, the Course Rep.

The Secretary, as a representative of the Support Centre/Henley Dean's Office, should be encouraged to contribute to discussions as appropriate.

The following members of staff should be invited to attend meetings when a particular issue is raised in advance by students or there is a topic for discussion that falls within their remit. They should receive the paperwork before each meeting, and the

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Minutes/action points after each meeting. In some cases, a School/Department might decide that it is appropriate for a particular member of staff to attend all SSP Group meetings.

- A representative from the Library
- A representative from Careers
- A representative from Digital Technology Services
- A representative from Technical Services
- A representative from Study Advice
- The relevant Student Support Coordinator
- Programme Directors for Single and Joint Programmes

SSP Groups are encouraged to ensure an appropriate balance of staff and student members at each meeting. Please bear in mind that the presence of too many staff members might inhibit free and honest discussions.

Wherever possible, Course Reps should be offered the opportunity to co-Chair SSP Group meetings. The student co-Chair should work with the staff co-Chair (either the nominated academic lead or School/Department DTL) to: agree a list of topics for discussion; run the meeting; and approve the minutes/action points after the meeting. The student co-Chair will need to attend the relevant training session delivered by the Students' Union.

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co-Chairing meetings in the School of Biological Sciences

"Having the opportunity to co-chair meetings alongside staff really helped to build my confidence, and made me feel more valued as a student rep. RUSU's chair training allowed me to develop the skills necessary to chair meetings and I'm really grateful staff provided me with the chance to use these skills in such a positive manner." (Kyle Smith, Student Rep for Biological Sciences, 2018)

What is discussed?

A list of **suggested** topics for discussion is attached as Appendix 1. SSP Groups are free to adapt this as they see fit. The staff and student co-Chairs should agree a list of topics in advance of each meeting. The Secretary will then circulate the list to all SSP Group members in advance of the meeting, along with any other relevant documents.

The list of topics for discussion will be driven largely by feedback received from students via the Course Reps. Staff members of SSP Groups and Course Reps can also suggest key areas for discussion, which might be linked to current priorities within the School/Department or to areas for development suggested by module/programme

evaluation or student surveys; for example, reviewing the assessment for a particular module or discussing accessibility of field trips.

SSP Groups are required to receive and review the relevant External Examiners' Reports and Schools' responses to these Reports each year. A wide range of other reports and data will also be available to SSP Groups should they wish to consider them. These include National Student Survey (NSS), Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), UK Engagement Survey (UKES) and careers data, the outcomes of module and programme evaluation, and documentation for six-yearly Periodic Review (the School's Self-Evaluation Document and the final Periodic Review Report). The staff co-Chair should ensure that SSP Group members are made aware of what is available and where to find the information.

Gathering feedback before meetings

Course Reps should send a brief written summary of any issues raised by their peers to the (co-)Chair(s) in advance of SSP Group meetings. This allows time for discussion and (where possible) quick resolution of issues outside of meetings, and leaves more time during meetings to discuss and resolve more complex issues and to develop particular areas of work through a partnership approach.

Course Reps can gather feedback from their peers via ROSiE, a quick and simple digital rep tool which provides Student Reps with a way to gather (and report on) student feedback on all aspects of the student experience. Course Reps could also gather feedback through Student Voice meetings, by conducting a short survey or by using online tools such as Padlet. They could email their peers using Blackboard or via the Student Support Centre or Henley Dean's Office.

Gathering feedback in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics

"A key part of our strategy to empower students as change agents is giving them numerous avenues to have their voice heard and be given influence; working with Course Reps to build an authentic and genuine student voice is an essential component of this.

Firstly, it is important to minimise the time between students being asked for feedback and feeding back what has been done with their contribution. This is especially important for empowering Course Reps and for the Department to demonstrate a genuine commitment to listening to the student voice and working in partnership with students. Led by Dr Peter Chamberlain, we have, since Autumn 2015, been posing a simple survey to our students in the third week of each teaching term. This provides students with a simple, high profile mechanism for providing us with feedback on their current experience at a time when we can act on this to implement enhancements. Using Survey Monkey, we ask each Part of our cohort separately the following three questions:

1. Tell us about something(s) that is/are going well with your modules this term. What's working well for you? Why is it good?
2. Tell us about something that is going badly with your modules this term? What do you find unhelpful? How could it be better?
3. Anything else you want to tell us? (Remember this is anonymous!)

The results from this survey are shared with Course Reps and acted on where appropriate, and reported to SSLC. Course Reps are encouraged to use their networks to report back to the cohort alongside more formal reporting from the Department about actions taken in response to student input.

In addition to this, we maintain a number of on-going channels for students to have their voice heard and acted on:

- Regular contact between Course Reps and the staff co-Chair of SSLC, including email as well as weekly drop-ins
- Open drop-ins where the staff co-Chair of the SSLC is available in a student space such as the Departmental Common Room
- An accessibility reporting form which sits on all Blackboard courses and can be used for students to alert us anonymously to any particular needs
- A "feedback" email address for written comments.

Having a variety of ongoing mechanisms is important for resolving minor issues rapidly. Those items which require committee oversight are added to the agenda of the next meeting or resolved via an alternative process." (SSLC co-Chair, 2020)

"As for the surveys, I think they were great! Very good in length - not too long so you give up early….these surveys actually get read and taken into account." (Course Rep, Department of Mathematics and Statistics, 2020)

Action Planning and Evaluation

Straightforward changes that are agreed at an SSP Group meeting should be implemented as quickly as possible; for example, providing students with an additional resource on Blackboard. The SSP Group should keep a record of any changes made as this helps to demonstrate the impact of student feedback, and the feedback loop should always be closed (see the section below on Closing the feedback loop).

In the case of more complex changes, changes which may occur over time or changes which have a number of steps to them, creating an action plan can help SSP Groups to keep track of agreed outcomes and monitor their implementation. For example, creating more opportunities for partnership working on a programme or providing greater diversity within reading lists.

An action plan should include the agreed steps that are being put in place to enhance provision on the programme. The actions within the plan should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound. This will help the SSP Group to assess the impact of actions taken. Action plans are most effective when co-created by students and staff.

To monitor and evaluate the success of planned changes, it is important to consider evaluation at the design stage of the action plan before any changes are implemented. This will enable the SSP Group to put an evaluation plan in place and make it easier to assess the impact of actions taken upon their completion.

The institutional Evaluation and Impact Framework website contains a suite of resources and guides to help plan and conduct successful evaluation.

Closing the feedback loop

It is vital that SSP Groups 'close the feedback loop' by reporting back on the outcomes of student feedback. Students should be informed about the issues that have been discussed by the SSP Group, and any changes that are being made as a result of their feedback. Where changes cannot be made, the reasons for this should be clearly communicated.

Minutes from SSP Group meetings should be circulated by email to SSP Group members within two weeks of each meeting. They should include a table of agreed actions, and a note of any progress made since the meeting in addressing those actions. The Minutes and actions list should also be made available to all students on the relevant programme(s) via Blackboard.

In addition, the Course Reps and co-Chairs should decide how a summary of the key outcomes of each meeting, including progress on any actions agreed, will be communicated to the wider student body. This could be done by designing 'Shout out' slides for staff to display before/after/during lectures giving an overview of key points and changes/responses, or by using "Together we have…" templates to share outcomes
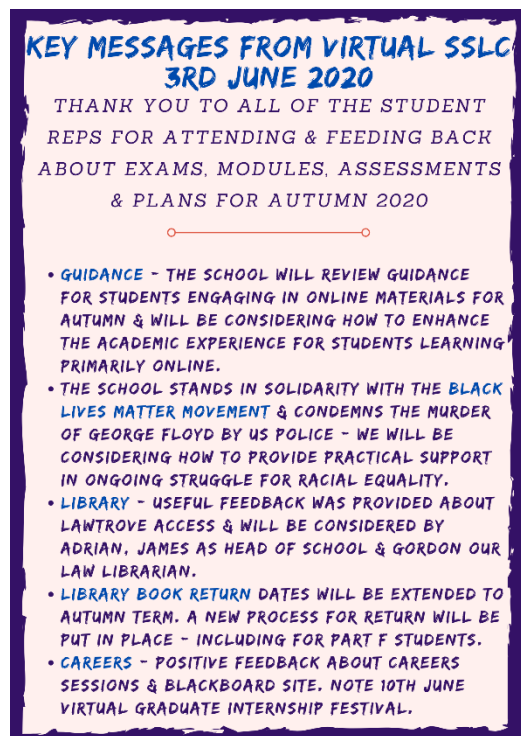
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from SSP Group meetings. Course Reps might also wish to make use of more informal channels, such as closed WhatsApp/Facebook groups to share this information.

For more information and examples of good practice, please refer to the Closing the Feedback Loop toolkit.

Closing the feedback loop in the School of Law

"We had often had complaints about students not knowing the outcome of SSLC meetings. This year we trialled a key message summary slide (created by the Chair) of the main points from the SSLC - the minutes falling firmly into the category of 'too long; didn't read' for most students and staff. We put this up on the electronic whiteboard in the student common room, on the School of Law Blackboard site and on the SSLC noticeboard … and various other noticeboards around our building. It was also shared with colleagues to use in their lectures. Additionally, we share the key messages summary with all students via an announcement on the SSLC Blackboard site." (Chair, School of Law SSLC, 2019/20)

KEY MESSAGES FROM VIRTUAL SSLC 3RD JUNE 2020

THANK YOU TO ALL OF THE STUDENT REPS FOR ATTENDING & FEEDING BACK ABOUT EXAMS, MODULES, ASSESSMENTS & PLANS FOR AUTUMN 2020

- GUIDANCE – THE SCHOOL WILL REVIEW GUIDANCE FOR STUDENTS ENGAGING IN ONLINE MATERIALS FOR AUTUMN & WILL BE CONSIDERING HOW TO ENHANCE THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE FOR STUDENTS LEARNING PRIMARILY ONLINE.
- THE SCHOOL STANDS IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT & CONDEMNS THE MURDER OF GEORGE FLOYD BY US POLICE – WE WILL BE CONSIDERING HOW TO PROVIDE PRACTICAL SUPPORT IN ONGOING STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL EQUALITY.
- LIBRARY – USEFUL FEEDBACK WAS PROVIDED ABOUT LAWTROVE ACCESS & WILL BE CONSIDERED BY ADRIAN, JAMES AS HEAD OF SCHOOL & GORDON OUR LAW LIBRARIAN.
- LIBRARY BOOK RETURN DATES WILL BE EXTENDED TO AUTUMN TERM. A NEW PROCESS FOR RETURN WILL BE PUT IN PLACE – INCLUDING FOR PART F STUDENTS.
- CAREERS – POSITIVE FEEDBACK ABOUT CAREERS SESSIONS & BLACKBOARD SITE. NOTE 10TH JUNE VIRTUAL GRADUATE INTERNSHIP FESTIVAL.

"'Key messages' summary slides and posters are particularly useful in achieving the overall goals of SSLCs. The key points produced are useful to staff in summarising the overall outcomes of an SSLC but also useful to students as the summary slides effectively help to close the feedback loop. I believe the most challenging part of the role of student representative is in feeding back to students. […] These summaries provide one key resource, allowing students to be able to quickly grasp one account of the most recent SSLC. This is very important as each SSLC's key messages are clear and can be referenced back to. As well as this, a digital resource can be published throughout blackboard and across the Law School, meaning more people are likely to see it and hopefully take note of it." (Part 1 Course Rep, 2019/20)

Top tips from and for staff and students: Organising and running an effective Student-Staff Partnership Group meeting

Organising an SSP Group meeting

- Schedule meetings at a time when the majority of staff and students are likely to be able to attend. Be mindful of the needs of diverse groups of students; for example, commuter students, those in employment and those with caring responsibilities.
- Schedule all SSP Group meetings at the beginning of the year and send calendar invites in advance to all Group members.
- Alert the wider student body to upcoming SSP Group meetings well in advance to encourage students to contribute feedback and suggestions.
- Notify the Representation Team in the Students' Union of the dates of meetings to assist with training and support for Student Reps.
- Consider ways to facilitate non-campus-based students' attendance at, or contribution to, meetings (for example, part-time/distance/flexible learning students, apprenticeship programmes, placement students). This might include attendance via video call, MS Teams or contribution via electronic discussion boards (see also the Top Tips below on organising and running virtual and asynchronous SSP Group meetings).
- Try to ensure an appropriate balance of staff and student members at each meeting. This will help to encourage open and honest discussions.
- Consider the location and room layout which can help to create a less formal atmosphere. For example, a circle of chairs with or without a table can feel more informal.
- Order refreshments if possible, or let people know to bring their own. Something as simple as providing biscuits can help to create a friendly, welcoming atmosphere.

Chairing an SSP Group meeting

- Keep meetings relatively short to avoid them feeling like a 'chore' but ensure they allow sufficient time for discussion. Around 75 minutes is often appropriate. A shorter meeting time might be more appropriate for a virtual meeting.
- Familiarise yourself before the meeting with critical information in the previous meeting minutes and other papers so that you can understand fully the discussions.
- Encourage members to familiarise themselves with any documentation circulated in advance and to think about any key areas for discussion in advance of meetings, so they come prepared.

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- Start the meeting by checking that everyone knows each other's name, and if not, ask everyone to introduce themselves (starting with the co-Chairs).
- Foster an inclusive environment where everyone is encouraged – but not required – to share their opinions. Encourage members at the start of each meeting to speak honestly and freely. Invite any student members who have been quiet to contribute, if they wish to do so.
- Move away from an 'us and them' approach to 'all of us' and encourage joint ownership and responsibility for resolving issues.
- Lead positive discussions by encouraging Group members to turn complaints into collaboration and to identify actions to solve problems; for example, "What can be done to address this problem?" "How can we achieve a better outcome?"
- Summarise any agreed actions and ensure they are allocated to a person or group of people to do within a specified timeframe.
- Identify any issues which need to be escalated for consideration e.g. by the School Director of Teaching and Learning.
- Avoid using too much formal language to create a friendly atmosphere.
- Make sure the meeting keeps moving through the agreed items for discussion, and that it finishes on time.
- State that the minutes of the previous meeting are taken "as read" to save time if there is lots to discuss. This implies that everyone has already read the minutes, and if not, give them time to speak up.
- Remember to thank people for their work, especially when they give updates.
- Check the minutes before they are made available to others. They should be an accurate record of the discussion, but you should be mindful of any sensitive topics.

Organising and running a virtual SSP Group meeting

- Agree meeting etiquette in advance; for example, keeping your microphone and webcam switched off when you are not speaking.
- Ensure that members do not feel pressurised to use their webcam if they do not wish to do so.
- Agree in advance whether the meeting (or part of the meeting) will be recorded and whether the recording will be shared with the wider student body. Ensure that everyone is notified in advance.
- Ensure that all attendees know how to use key tools e.g. Hand Raise, quick polls.
- Consider creating and sharing a short video clip/email/VLE discussion board or announcement before the meeting, for example introducing a key area for development that will be discussed during the meeting, so that all members have an opportunity to consider the points they want to make.
- Ensure the co-Chairs have a well-organised attendance list, for example with Course Reps ordered by Part, and that they systematically draw in all members to the discussion.

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- If using Blackboard Collaborate, make the student co-Chair a moderator so they can bring fellow students into the discussion and avoid particular people dominating.
- Ask specific members to speak/respond to particular issues to prevent everyone trying to speak at once.
- Use tools such as the whiteboard in Blackboard Collaborate for shared development of ideas during meetings.
- Decide in advance whether breakout groups would be useful for key discussions during the meeting. If so, agree the reporting-back etiquette before groups start, and use pre-allocation to ensure a mix of students/staff in each group.
- Consider holding a second meeting for a more developmental part of the agenda, for example if there is a proposal to be discussed in more depth.

More information about using webinars to hold meetings online, including advice on which tool to use and about accessibility, can be found in the Online Teaching Toolkits.

Organising and running an asynchronous SSP Group meeting (when face-to-face/virtual meetings aren't possible)

- Agree a timeline for Course Reps to provide written feedback and a timeline by which they can expect a response. Specify how the feedback should be provided and how the response will be communicated e.g. via a discussion board or announcement on Blackboard or by email.
- Invite relevant staff to feed into the response.
- Consider carefully the responses to concerns/issues raised and the framing of responses. It is important to demonstrate that staff hear and understand any concerns, whilst also re-aligning expectations and providing signposting where necessary. Ensure that at least two members of staff agree with the response provided to students. This may include Module Convenors, Programme Directors or Academic Tutors, as relevant to each case.
- Request additional information where comments are unclear or where further feedback/suggestions for improvements would be useful.
- Offer follow up meetings, discussions with individuals/groups where appropriate.

Alternative approaches

Coffee Club (Henley Business School)

What is the Coffee Club?

The Coffee Club was first introduced in 2018/19 on a trial basis. It covers the Business and Management suite of programmes (approximately 1000 students) and replaced the previous Student-Staff Liaison Committee, which had experienced poor attendance by students.

The Coffee Club meets three times each term, so roughly once per month, and meetings are timetabled for the whole year in advance. They are very informal and typically last for one hour. Coffee is provided wherever possible!

Who is involved?

The Programme Area Director runs the Coffee Club. All students are invited to attend by a group email. Programme Directors also send targeted invitations to more 'active' students. Course Reps are expected to attend. The number of academic staff is restricted to ensure there are more students than staff in attendance (typically, Programme Directors/Programme Area Director, a representative from Careers and a Programme Administrator attend).

What is discussed?

There is no set agenda. Students are asked what is going well and what is not going so well. Staff also suggest other topics for discussion and consult students on planned programme changes.

Due to the informal nature of meetings and the fact that students outnumber staff, students tend to be very open about issues and students and staff can have candid discussions about potential causes.

Closing the feedback loop

Action points are recorded, and some actions taken in response to feedback are reported back to the wider student body in a weekly School newsletter. The Coffee Club is still working on how to communicate the outputs of meetings most effectively, given the sensitive nature of some of the issues that are discussed.

Impact/successes

"The coffee club is invaluable to us as students. It provides not only a safe place to voice concerns but also an opportunity to feel part of a wider community as it allows us to network through years and with professors. … Students very much enjoy having the chance to ask for help on a less formal basis and to feel like they have an impact on the way we learn and are assessed" (Part 2 student, 2019/20)

Given the frequency of meetings, changes can be made quickly. At the first ever meeting, students raised a concern about an issue in a particular module which was then resolved by the third week of term.

HBS introduced a new module called Understanding Sales on the basis of feedback from students in the first year of the Coffee Club. The module was introduced within 12 months; it received high feedback scores from students and was praised by the External Examiners.

NSS scores for Student Voice improved significantly for the Business and Management suite of programmes from 2019 to 2020, increasing by 8.5 percentage points to 74.2%.

Challenges

Work is continuing to address a number of challenges associated with the Coffee Club. Although attendance has improved compared to the previous SSLC, it remains low with a small number of engaged students attending (although they do canvas their peers). Student Reps rarely attend meetings; contributions tend to come from students who are active in other roles (e.g. running student societies). One of the biggest challenges is how to engage Part 3 students.

Student Impact Network (SINners) (School of Literature and Languages)

What is the SIN?

The SIN is a co-operation of staff and students making changes and making them fast. It is an informal, responsive, nimble structure which works alongside the Student-Staff Liaison Committee.

Who is involved?

The School Director of Teaching and Learning and the Teaching and Learning Associate lead the SIN. Any student in the School can join by asking to be added to the mailing list, and they can then attend as many meetings as they would like. Anyone can instigate the organisation and running of a meeting. So far, meetings have been run by a few individual students, the SDTL or other colleagues and T&L School Support. Particular members of staff are invited to attend meetings depending on what is being discussed.

What does the SIN do? What is discussed?

The SIN makes change happen – quickly.

It works with openness and respect; helping staff and students (who are not necessarily Student Reps) understand how structures of departments and systems work. Everything feeds into relevant T&L working parties and projects and reports within the School structure.

The Network does not deal with matters rightly considered by the SSLC. It doesn't have a regular meeting schedule or aim for full attendance at each meeting. A member of staff might identify a specific area they wish to ask students about, or the SIN might be involved in working collaboratively with staff on a particular project that is underway.

How often do meetings occur?

Due to the spontaneous nature of the meeting organisation, SINners meetings can occur as often as people decide. In 2018/19, the SLL SINners met eight times.

Gathering feedback

When a question or idea is put forward, the SIN discusses it and the student members then talk to a few of their peers about the topic and gather opinions to bring to the next SIN meeting. In this way, the SIN can present the student voice with confidence. Often, the topics being discussed in meetings are relevant to concerns the student members and their classmates have raised.

Impact/successes

SINners focusses on problems that are immediate and can be sorted out quickly and efficiently. In SLL, the SINners has helped on improving Blackboard school review,

offered text suggestions for the new Arts and Humanities Foundation Year and talked directly to the DDTL in DEL about a Part 3 review taking place, making changes to dissertation support and structures.

"SINers have helped review Blackboard module page formatting, along with dealing with other problems that can be solved quickly and immediately." (Part 3 student and SIN member, 2019/20)

Version control

Version	Keeper	To be reviewed	Approved by	Approval date	Effective from
1.0	CQSD	July 2023	UBTLSE	7 July 2020	2020/21 academic session

Name of School or Department

STUDENT-STAFF PARTNERSHIP GROUP

Meeting of the <mark>School of X</mark> SSP Group to be held on <mark>DATE</mark> at <mark>TIME</mark> in <mark>LOCATION</mark>.

[Note: SSP Groups can adapt this list of suggested topics for discussion as appropriate.]

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Introductions
2. Apologies from members unable to attend
3. Notes from the last meeting including an update on the progress of action points
4. Feedback from the Board of Studies in response to matters raised by the SSP Group
5. Feedback from Course Reps
   a) What is working well?
   b) What is working less well?
   c) Ideas for change
6. Key areas for discussion and working in partnership *(to be agreed in advance by staff and student members)*
7. Any Other Business *(could include Library, IT, Resources, Health & Safety, Technical Services, Support Centres, Academic Tutoring)*
8. Summary of agreed actions
9. Reminder - date of next meeting