**Engaging Online and Distance Learning students in quality**

**A draft project outline**

sparqs’ project on engaging online and distance learning (ODL) students in shaping the quality of the learning experience was initially informed by a meeting of staff and student officers from four universities on Wednesday 11 May 2016. The universities represented, having expressed an interest in the topic at their 2015 sparqs Annual Support Visits, were the University of the Highlands and Islands, the University of Aberdeen, The Robert Gordon University and the Open University in Scotland.

More information about the project, as it is confirmed, will be published on the sparqs website at <http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/institute.php?page=525>

Based on the conversations arising from that meeting the project is proposed as follows.

**Project overview**

The project will aim, throughout the academic year 2016-17, to explore, share and develop practice in engaging online and distance learning students in shaping the quality of their learning experiences.

**Project output**

It is proposed that a resource be produced from the above work that:

1. Outlines the nature of the engagement of ODL students in quality.
2. Highlights challenges and effective practice.
3. Provides tools to help institutions and students’ associations develop their engagement of ODL students.

Such a resource should focus on three main areas:

1. **Engaging students:**
	1. ***Individual engagement*** – How are ODL students engaged as individuals in conversations about quality of their learning experience and their identity within the course and institution?
	2. ***Representation*** – How successfully do representative structures engage ODL students?
2. **Supporting institutions:**
	1. ***Strategy*** – what is the nature, importance and purpose of ODL delivery, and how does this affect the culture of the university?
	2. ***Technology*** – How do learning technologies contribute to student engagement in quality?
	3. ***Development*** – How do staff develop their engagement of ODL students, and how do students shape these mechanisms
3. **Sector perspectives**:
	1. ***Data*** – What can be learned from sector information, such as institutional surveys, review reports or other research publications, about how ODL students are engaged in quality?
	2. ***Sharing*** – How can universities effectively learn and share from each others’ practice in engaging ODL students in quality?

**Suggested key stages**

To produce this resource, there should be four key stages of work:

1. **Early engagement with universities** – Discussion in early autumn 2016 with key participants will explore how this draft outline matches needs, and will map potential activities within participating universities.
2. **Research** – Detailed work to be undertaken at each university over autumn 2016 to develop materials through, for instance:
	1. Work with student reps
	2. Work with academic staff
	3. Work with ODL students
3. **Development** – Testing or trialling of materials throughout 2016-17, perhaps mainly with academic staff and ODL students, to provide new data and possibly refine tools.
4. **Publication** – Creation of final resource by end of 2016-17 academic year.

Simon Varwell

Development Consultant

sparqs

Tuesday 7 July 2016