sparqs

CELEBRATING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT
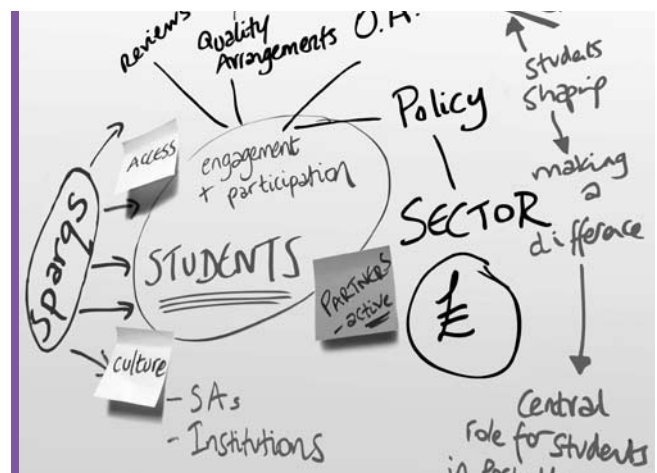
Successes and opportunities in Scotland's college sector

Executive Summary

Scotland's approach to student engagement is unique and pioneering. When sparqs was established in 2003, it was funded to work equally with colleges and universities. Subsequently, in 2007, as the funding arrangements for colleges and universities were brought together under the auspices of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and a joint approach to quality developed across Scotland, the sector agreed on three key principles underlying the quality arrangements. These are High Quality Learning, Student Engagement and Quality Culture. The resulting arrangements developed by Education Scotland (formerly HMIE) emphasised the role of students through a confidence statement against the question "How well are learners engaged in enhancing their own learning and the work and life of the college?" and forms one of two areas of the Education Scotland quality framework that runs across all aspects of quality review.

Few would deny that a lot has changed since this work started in colleges. The support of sparqs and the emphasis on student involvement in the quality arrangements has supported much pioneering work in developing the role of students as partners in enhancing the quality of the learning and teaching experience. The *Evaluation of the Scottish Funding Council's Strategy for Quality Enhancement in the College Sector*[1] by LSN in 2010 wrote:

"*The most notable signs of improvement were observed in the area of learner engagement… All research interviewees were highly supportive of the concept of learner engagement and usually also committed to ensuring the Learner Voice is at the centre of decision making.*"

The Education Scotland report – trends in inspection findings between 2008 and 2011[2] also found that:

"*Over the last three years colleges have grasped the concept of empowering learners with enthusiasm.*" and

"*Almost all colleges involve learners meaningfully and effectively in the life and work of the college.*"

1. *Evaluation of the Scottish Funding Council's Strategy for Quality Enhancement in the College Sector, Annual Report: Year Two* (Prepared by LSN for the Scottish Funding Council, September 2010) - hereafter cited as *2010 LSN Evaluation*.
2. *Quality and Improvement in Scottish Education: Trends in Inspection Findings 2008-2011* (Education Scotland, 2012) – hereafter cited as *Trends Report Between 2008 and 2011*.

Yet since the sparqs' mapping report[3] in 2005 there has not been a formal detailed review of progress in the area of student engagement across the sector. This report aims to unpick and document some of the trends and case studies behind the overall assertion that things have dramatically improved.

The report serves several purposes:

• Primarily it is an opportunity to celebrate and acknowledge the hard work and immense efforts of many students and staff in making such progress over the last ten years.

• Through documenting a selection of the wealth of activity across the sector, the report aims to share practice and inspire new developments.

• Whilst focused on the progress made, the report also provides the opportunity to reflect on trends and identify challenges for the future.

• The SFC has commissioned reports from both Education Scotland and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to provide evidence of quality enhancement over time and the impact of these enhancement activities in Scotland. This report complements these more formal commentaries on the Scottish quality arrangements.

Key findings

The report highlights a mixture of case studies, external evidence and general trends which illustrate improvements over the last two cycles in the following areas:

Management and development of student engagement

A strategic approach to student engagement is today evident across the sector. The previous "haphazard approach" to aspects such as course rep training and support is now integrated into colleges' processes and strategies. The sparqs College Advisory Group members talked of how the introduction of sparqs gave colleges an: *"external impetus and real support to help them develop approaches and learn from each other"* and of how the subsequent introduction of student engagement within Education Scotland reviews was greeted positively by colleges as an opportunity to take this forward. The progress is evident across the sector, with colleges not just carrying out a range of activities in this area, but managing and developing them as part of their strategic processes. Nearly all colleges have student engagement strategies and related working groups and committees that include student members – not just overseeing current work but also looking for ways to further enhance and develop their activities. Banff and Buchan College is one of many examples of such strategies being developed in partnership with the students' association. The enthusiasm for developing student engagement activities is evident.

Alongside this strategic support has been an increase in staff support in this area. Student engagement now usually lies specifically within the remit of a member of the senior management team and staff within quality and/or student services. In addition, many colleges have recruited staff specifically to take this work forward.

The *2010 LSN Evaluation* found:

❝ *Some colleges have developed Learner Engagement Officer (LEO) posts, which are viewed by staff as positive for their role in encouraging and supporting learner engagement. However, concerns had been raised… these might detract from the commitment of all staff… and undermine the role of student president.* ❞

Interesting examples of provision of college staff support can be found at Coatbridge, City of Glasgow, Shetland and Clydebank Colleges. Of note, is the assertion that LEO and similar posts have been retained even during recent funding cuts, indicating the value colleges place in these roles.

❝ *I have seen a real shift in attitudes towards student engagement within institutions from minimal involvement to an embedded student engagement ethos and culture from staff and students. This could not come at a better time to make sure students are at the forefront of decisions during this time of regionalisation.* ❞

- Student from Cardonald College

3. *Report of the Further Education Mapping Exercise of Student Involvement in Quality Assurance & Improvement Processes* (sparqs, 2005) – hereafter cited as *2005 sparqs' mapping report*.

Gathering of and responding to student feedback

There has been an explosion in the ways in which colleges go about collecting student feedback. The *2010 LSN Evaluation* found that:

" *learners and student presidents also recognised the positive changes, particularly in relation to the range of opportunities now in place in colleges for them to provide feedback on learning and teaching and their wider experience of college.* "

Not only do colleges collect student opinion in a variety of ways, but they have also developed more effective processes for responding to such feedback. Out of the last twelve college Education Scotland reviews during 2012 – 'responding to student feedback to influence learning' was identified as a key strength in six colleges, with ten out of the twelve having good work in this area highlighted within the body of the report.

The development of the role of course reps has been important in this progression and is discussed later, but colleges have also undertaken a whole range of other activities including, developing questionnaires, student forums, informal lunches, online forums and conferences. There are many interesting and useful examples included in the main report, e.g. 'The Chair' at Cumbernauld College and 'Go Out and Talk' (GOATing) at Forth Valley College.

As important as the development of the number of mechanisms, is strong evidence that feedback is being used to make a difference to the student experience. Reviews regularly point to colleges using this feedback effectively and point to a wide range of changes in practice, including: numeracy teaching practice; developments in IT strategies; changes to learning and teaching approaches and assessment schedules; major changes to programme content and delivery; and library and VLE developments. This progress has also been backed up with a much stronger focus on 'closing the feedback loop' with many colleges operating good 'you said, we did' systems.

For example, at Cardonald College:

With increased staff support forty focus groups, which focused solely on L&T, were carried out across a wide selection of courses ranging from Access to HND Year 2 level. The feedback gathered directly affected delivery and future planning, as staff used the findings to make improvements, some examples being the replacement of units which students disliked, the introduction of more practical/less theory in some courses and a shift in timing of assessments to decrease assessment burden at specific times during the academic calendar.

Developing course rep systems

Course reps and the systems that support them are talked about positively in many of the last twelve reviews, with two colleges having this work identified as a key strength and a further six describing effective systems. Words used to describe course reps included "well trained", "effective", "enthusiastic" and "motivated". As noted earlier, there were many examples of course reps providing useful feedback about the learning and teaching. This contrasts starkly with the finding in the *2005 sparqs' mapping report* that *"around half the college staff …commented that there was difficulty in getting course reps to discuss learning and teaching issues around their specific curriculum areas."* All members of the sparqs College Advisory Group commented that they had seen an improvement in this respect, noting:

" *a significant move from discussions around toilets and car parks to excellent learning and teaching discussions.* "

" *We have just developed a new framework which will support a stronger and more inclusive Students' Association.* "
- Student from Coatbridge College

The training of course reps is now an established feature of the vast majority of colleges' annual cycle. The numbers trained directly by sparqs, normally between 2000 and 2500 each year, represent only a fraction of those trained, as sparqs continues to support institutions to develop and deliver their own training. Twelve colleges have delivered sparqs 'tailored' or adapted training over the last three years and a further thirteen colleges now deliver their own training, with support and materials offered by sparqs. In 2011 sparqs trained fifteen college staff to deliver their own course rep training. Colleges have moved from a situation where training was rarely or sporadically provided, to embracing the national support from sparqs to deliver effective training to a standard across the country. As a result, they are now developing the resources and confidence to start to adapt, develop and extend training to suit their own circumstances.

Education Scotland reviews frequently comment on effectiveness of course reps being linked to training. Conversely, in the one college that had a caveat relating to student engagement in 2012, this in part seemed due to problems in getting course reps to attend training and thus carry out their role effectively.

The training content itself strongly reinforces the role of course reps as commenting on and working to find solutions relating to the student learning experience, with widespread assertions that student contributions are now more focused on this role as a consequence. Evaluation data from training regularly identifies large changes in student understanding of their role after undertaking the training – in 2011 96% of participants understood or fully understood their role, compared to 52% prior to the training.

Colleges are working to address the needs of a diverse student population in this respect, with several examples of activities to support the engagement of students with additional support needs, including adapted training from sparqs and a few other examples of part-time, evening student engagement.

Training alone has not delivered this success. There are many examples of interesting and innovative practice in colleges that has improved the type of discussion that takes place. Several colleges have reviewed their meeting formats to engage students more widely in productive discussions, with action including: advertising agendas more widely and in advance; structuring agendas around the 'Student

Learning Experience' used in training; and diversifying the types of meetings, including lunch time informal meetings, conferences and focus groups. The main report has several examples, including the 'Learner Voice Conference' at Cumbernauld, 'The Pledge' at Coatbridge, 'Learner Summits' at James Watt and peer-led feedback sessions at Banff and Buchan.

Departmental representation

New levels of student representation around school, faculty or departmental level have started to be developed in colleges. These systems can serve a range of purposes, including helping to connect the work of course reps with that of the association, improve communication with staff at this level and take forward a variety of research and campaign-type activities. They can be a significant aspect in developing the ability of students' associations to represent a wide range of students effectively, based on evidence from a range of activities. There are interesting examples at Dundee, Kilmarnock and Borders Colleges.

66 *At college I feel a lot better and more confident because I feel my voice is heard and that I'm being treated like an adult and am more involved in things that I want to change or that need to change.* 99
- Student from James Watt College

Students' associations and working with the college

The *2010 LSN Evaluation* found:

“ *There were more examples of active and effective student presidents and students' associations who were known to learners and who interacted with class representatives.* ”

Out of the twelve reviews carried out in 2012, two colleges had key strengths related to their students' association, with a further five having positive comments within the commentary. Comments often refer to "strong", "effective" presidents and sometimes refer to a wider executive student team. Numbers of student officers being paid to carry out the role have risen since 2005.

In 2005 there were seven full-time and three part-time sabbatical officers. We estimate there are now around eleven full-time and eight part-time, funded sabbatical officers. Whilst this increase is not dramatic, colleges frequently attribute improvements in the effectiveness of students' association activity to these posts, alongside dedicated staff support.

There has been a noticeable improvement in the role of the student board member. In 2005 just over half of the college staff interviewed indicated that attendance by student representatives at such committees was poor. In the twelve reviews in 2012, reports repeatedly commented that the board valued and encouraged the student views being articulated through the student board member and often commented on the role of students, president and sometimes wider executive team members on the committee. In the *Trends Report Between 2008 and 2011*, Education Scotland also found:

“ *effective systems for representatives at faculty level as well as on major cross-college boards and committees.* ”

sparqs College Advisory Group members commented on the improved attendance, effectiveness and professionalism of student board members.

The Forth Valley College 2012 Education Scotland review found, for example:

“ *The Board of Management values learner contributions highly ensuring appropriate action is taken promptly to issues raised by learners. Through the Student Union executive, learners are represented well on, and make valuable contributions to, the Board and its sub-committees, raising important learner issues.* ”

There is evidence of several deliberate attempts to better support the role of the student board member,

including induction and mentoring activities and regular opportunities and support for students to present papers. Where staff support has been increased for the students' association, this has had a significant effect on students' association effectiveness at board or strategic level. At Banff and Buchan College the student board member is supported at the board meetings by the Student Engagement Officer. National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland and sparqs' Supporting College Student Governors event is often credited with improving the ability of student board members and this has, over the last few years, been extended and developed as colleges continue to support attendance. This year 56 students attended the programme.

There is evidence of students' associations becoming more central to college strategies. Several students' associations, including Aberdeen, Forth Valley and Elmwood Colleges, carry out a self-evaluation as part of the college's overall learner engagement self-evaluation and there are examples at Banff and Buchan and Dundee Colleges of students' association strategic planning occurring and then being incorporated onto overall college strategic planning.

Students' association ability to represent students effectively across the college has been enhanced by their involvement in the vast array of activities to collect student feedback and by improved links with course rep systems.

“ *When I was at college when I was 17 nobody listened to anything students had to say. Now back at college at 33 there are a lot of changes and the students have a lot to offer and have their points of views heard.* ”
- Student from James Watt College

Student involvement in formal review processes

Students are increasingly involved in college self-evaluation processes and there is evidence throughout Education Scotland review reports of colleges using student feedback from a variety of means effectively. The focus on student involvement seems to be around using students to effectively elicit more valuable and honest feedback. Interesting examples exist at Aberdeen College and Dumfries and Galloway College.

Similarly, the introduction of the 'Student Team Member' to the external review team has led to an increase in access for students to the review and this role is widely valued.

Students' associations are contributing to reviews through the Learner Engagement Questionnaire. An example of work in this area can be seen at Cardonald College.

There is more scope for students to engage in quality processes but this is often limited by the capacity of the students' association.

National engagement

The sparqs College Advisory Group felt that there had been a marked improvement in college officers' ability and opportunity to engage at a national level and that college staff were more supportive of the benefits such involvement could have to college activities. Several members commented that the development of NUS Scotland's support over the last six years, including The Gathering, changed format of conferences, the Networks (including the Education Network) and individual college support, was instrumental in this development and complemented well the increased ability and focus of reps on making a difference to college life. Many colleges cited the work of their students through the recent NUS national campaigns on college funding and bursaries as important aspects of their work, contributing not just to national policy decisions, but also having positive effects on engagement of students at a local level and community engagement. The example in the main report from John Wheatley College illustrates this well.

College students contribute effectively at a national level to the College Quality Working Group, but in general there is currently a lack of opportunities for students to work with college leaders at a national level.

Future challenges

Whilst there has been tremendous progress in the area of student engagement, there is still work to be done. Between 2008 and 2011 25% of colleges had main points of action relating to improving arrangements to enable learners to enhance the work and life of the college. Yet, these findings are from the first round of the new review method. Our enhancement approach means colleges are constantly reviewing their progress and addressing a range of complex issues, meeting new challenges along the way. Given the other pressures on the sector during this time, the progress that has been made is a testament to the commitment of many students and staff and to the real value students have added to quality processes, paving the way for continued development to meet the challenges.

A key challenge is to ensure we can realise the full potential of working in partnership with students. To do so, we need to consider further developments that will enhance their role. Our challenge is to move from students contributing views and opinions and facilitating the collection of feedback, to students working more closely in shaping the systems, feeling more ownership of them and using systems to support them to play a significant part in finding solutions and being full partners in the strategic direction of the college. The development of students' associations is key to this.

Despite the tremendous progress that has been made, Griggs found learner/student representation to be "patchy across the sector with non-autonomous and underfunded associations a key problem".[4]

Regionalisation presents many challenges to colleges. However, it does offer an opportunity for merging or federating colleges to review their support to students' associations and develop new and effective methods of working with them. This will be extremely important in progressing student engagement and helping ensure students can play their full part in supporting the further development of a strong college sector for Scotland.

4. R.Griggs, *Report of the Review of Further Education Governance in Scotland* (January 2012).

The meaning of 'Student Engagement'

Broad sectoral commitment to student engagement has existed for years. However, the term student engagement has never been fully defined, with a range of interpretations used throughout the sector. The SFC notes that the scope of student engagement "*may range from formal engagement and representation in institutional processes to the individual student engaging in self-reflection on the quality and nature of his/her learning.*"

A *Student Engagement Framework for Scotland*[5] refers to five key elements of student engagement. These are:

1. Students feeling part of a supportive institution.

2. Students engaging in their own learning.[6]

3. Students working with their institution in shaping the direction of learning.

4. Formal mechanisms for quality and governance.

5. Influencing the student experience at national level.

This report is shaped mainly around the last three of these framework elements as these relate directly to the work of sparqs and the role of students in quality and quality systems. However, student engagement as described here, is important in contributing to

the successful development of activities which make learning more engaging. There is also evidence to suggest that when students are involved in such areas of student engagement this involvement can help these students develop stronger engagement in their own learning. Given the amount of work that has taken place in colleges in the first two areas of the framework, some examples of activity are included in the main report but not in this executive summary.

Methodology

The findings of the report are based on the following:

- Sectoral knowledge within the sparqs team gained working with and learning from institutions and their students' associations and our partners in sector agencies over several years. The work of sparqs is supported by two advisory groups and the College Advisory Group has provided much support and evidence. There have also been calls for case studies from all colleges. Together these

methods have provided many of the case studies, examples and information on trends.

- Review of external evidence of work on student engagement, in particular, we have drawn evidence from an internal desk-review of the twelve Education Scotland reports for 2012, the 2010 LSN *Evaluation of the Scottish Funding Council's Strategy for Quality Enhancement in the College Sector*[7] and the Education Scotland report *Quality and Improvement in Scottish Education: Trends in Inspection Findings 2008-2011*.[8]

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5. *A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland* (sparqs, Education Scotland, The Higher Education Academy Scotland, NUS Scotland, QAA Scotland, Scotland's Colleges, SFC, Universities Scotland, December 2012).

6. The use of the term 'learning' throughout the framework can apply to learning, teaching and assessment.

7. *Evaluation of the Scottish Funding Council's Strategy for Quality Enhancement in the College Sector, Annual Report: Year Two* (Prepared by LSN for the Scottish Funding Council, September 2010).

8. *Quality and Improvement in Scottish Education: Trends in Inspection Findings 2008-2011* (Education Scotland, 2012).

Conclusions

Whilst outside the remit of this report, it is important to note the growing partnership between individual student and college. Many reviews comment on the effectiveness of this relationship, with students increasingly being able to shape their individual learning experience. It is difficult to visit a college without meeting a student who can tell you about the transformational effect college has had on their life.

These achievements sit alongside those of colleges in gathering and responding to student feedback where there has been significant progress and much excellent and innovative practice, widening the role of students in this regard.

Students have seen their role have a real effect on the college experience and student representatives and officers have developed to take on more significant roles at the college level. They are contributing student views effectively in a range of areas and working with college quality and student support staff to develop activities which enable students to contribute effectively to the work and life of the college. What is evident amongst the sector is that this is an area where colleges have achieved success and take great pride in the work they have done with their students. What is also evident is that colleges have seen the value of student engagement in helping to provide an experience that students will value, will create effective learning and will support student and college success.

Full report available online at www.sparqs.ac.uk

Acknowledgements