sparqs

CELEBRATING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Successes and opportunities in Scotland's university sector

Executive Summary

Scotland's approach to student engagement is unique and pioneering. When the new Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) was introduced in 2003, student engagement was one of the five pillars and sparqs (student participation in quality Scotland) was established as a key driver. This approach is unparalleled in the world.

Few would deny that in the following ten years the position of students and their role as partners in enhancing the quality of the learning and teaching experience has developed. The second evaluation of the QEF[1] in 2010 wrote of the:

> ❝ *extent to which student engagement-as-representation is becoming embedded. Elected officers are representing the student voice at all levels and their role includes sitting on committees, negotiating with senior managers, promoting student concerns, and influencing key issues and strategies within the university. They see their role as important and influential and feel that their institution on the whole responds to their feedback.* ❞

Yet since the sparqs' mapping report[2] 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 Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has commissioned reports from both the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and Education Scotland 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.

1. *The Second Annual Report of the Evaluation of the Quality Enhancement Framework: Thematic Summary* (Centre for the Study of Education and Training, Lancaster University, October 2010) – hereafter cited as *2010 CSET Report*.
2. *Report of the Higher Education Mapping Exercise of Student Involvement in Quality Assurance & Enhancement Processes* (sparqs, 2005).

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:

Strategic approach to improving course rep systems in partnership

Learning from ELIR[3] found:

" *a determination and commitment to improve student engagement through strategic initiatives* **"**

within the partnership working between universities and students' associations. Clarifying and strengthening the roles of both parties has led to a significant improvement and a sustained level of development of activity across the sector. The efforts of students' associations to make contact with, train and communicate with course reps, that have long been a struggle, have now been supported with the introduction of the QEF. There is evidence across the sector of universities funding and supporting the students' associations to carry out these activities, clearly indicating its support for them to have this role, whilst taking a much stronger interest in its development. There are interesting examples at Glasgow Caledonian University and University of Dundee of this level of strategic interest and co-operation between university and students' association.

Course rep training and support

The training of course reps is now an established feature of every university's 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. During 2011/12 three institutions developed their own student trainer schemes with a further four joining the programme in 2012/13. The *2010 CSET Report* found that:

" *although there are sometimes problems recruiting enough student reps, they are well trained, effective and able to participate in more activities than in 2003-6.* **"**

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. There is widespread assertion 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.

Learning from ELIR also stated that:

" *student representation at programme level is being strengthened with greater focus on the student learning experience.* **"**

Other forms of support and development relating to course reps includes ongoing reviews and developments related to course rep systems, improvements to formats of meetings to develop effectiveness and the development of resources, handbooks and online materials.

Several universities have introduced, or are investigating introducing, schemes to reward or accredit course rep activity either through bespoke schemes, recording on transcripts or recording as part of section 6.1 of the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR). Such activities serve not only to reward reps for their efforts, but also add the opportunity for further skills development and self-reflection as well as further clarifying their roles and responsibilities and the support available.

" *We are moving away from the concept of student reps being "whingers" and more as "partners" that are being listened to by staff at the University.* **"**

- Student from the University of Strathclyde

---

3. *Learning from ELIR 2008-11 Student Representation and Engagement in Quality* (QAA, 2011) – hereafter cited as *Learning from ELIR*.

Course rep events

Several universities have introduced events which bring students, or sometimes more specifically course reps, together for conferences or forum type events. These events have improved the knowledge and effectiveness of student representatives on university-wide issues, highlighted common issues experienced by reps within subject areas to be resolved through more strategic developments and helped shape students' association work with the university on policy development and major change projects. Topics for discussion have included coursework and assessment, academic feedback, resources for course reps, major curriculum restructuring projects and representing postgraduate students. At the University of the West of Scotland, for example, course rep conferences have helped shaped their 'learner manifesto' and work relating to the QAA Enhancement Theme, 'Graduates of the 21st Century'.

Departmental representation

The development of new levels of student representation around school, faculty or departmental level was first highlighted as an area of positive practice in a university ELIR in 2006. Now, at least twelve universities in Scotland have developed systems at this level. These systems have been widely used to help connect the work of course reps with that of the students' association, improve communication with staff at this level and take forward a variety of research and campaign type activities. Reps at this level undertake a range of duties including attending staff student liaison meetings, regular meetings with the students' association - often forming the association academic affairs type committee and meeting with deans or heads of faculties. They have been 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. For example, at the University of St Andrews the effective meetings that take place between school presidents and senior academic management have influenced developments in the shape of the academic year.

Gathering of and responding to student feedback

In *Learning from ELIR* positive practice was identified in this area in ten out of the fourteen institutions. Work is being undertaken in: developing the way surveys are designed, distributed and collected; improving the use of survey data for strategic and local action planning; increasing use of technology to communicate directly with individual students and gathering feedback online; and linking internal survey data with national student surveys.

The 2012 ELIR report for The Robert Gordon University found:

" *there are clear and effective mechanisms for gathering and responding to student feedback. A new online Student Experience Survey has enabled the University to respond more effectively to the needs of different student groups. The University has also taken positive steps to enhance feedback to students on their assessment, responding to the outcomes of the National Student Survey and internal student evaluations.* **"**

Learning from ELIR also noted an increased awareness within institutions of the need for 'closing the feedback loop'. The National Student Survey (NSS) and to a lesser extent other national surveys, have in some cases provided an impetus for this work. Students have been actively involved in promoting and supporting student interaction with NSS results and importantly in working with institutions on the analysis and subsequent action planning. There are interesting examples at the Universities of Dundee and Aberdeen.

" *Student engagement hasn't just improved the partnership between institution and student. It has created a community of people working towards a better education for Scotland. Each year that passes this strengthens and creates the best experience possible for both present and future students.* **"**

- Student from Edinburgh Napier University

Student-led learning and teaching awards (SLTAs)

Developed as a way of counter balancing the negative feeling of many responses to student surveys, SLTAs provide a way of demonstrating the nature of the constructive partnership at the heart of learning and teaching. From a couple of early initiatives, a pilot project supported by The Higher Education Academy (HEA) and National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland helped further developments between 2009 and 2010 and led to the practice becoming widespread throughout Scotland. It was so successful that HEA extended the project to NUS UK where 63% of universities now run similar schemes. As the practice of nominating, selecting and celebrating award winners through ceremonies has become embedded, students' associations are now turning their attention to how they can use the evidence and practices identified through the schemes to contribute to enhancement practices, with interesting examples at University of Strathclyde and The University of Edinburgh.

Partnership between university and students' association

There is a clear sense that partnership at the highest level between students' association and university has dramatically improved. Whilst in many ways this is a cultural improvement that is difficult to quantify, it is nevertheless a dominant feature of the conversations sparqs regularly have with students and staff.

In 2004 the ELIR for University of Glasgow commented:

" The University and the SRC might want to reflect upon how they could most effectively work together to help sustain a partnership that actively contributes to the development of a policy for the enhancement of student learning. "

By their 2010 ELIR there was quite a different story:

" Partnership has delivered significant developments in policies and provision, all of which contribute positively to the student learning experience. "

A series of activities, initiatives and hard work by the University and SRC have led to this turnaround but undoubtedly, as elsewhere across the sector, much will be down to overall changing attitudes and approaches. In *Learning from ELIR* ten out of the fourteen institutions reviewed received positive comments relating to the nature of the partnership with the association and the

effect of this partnership on quality, for example - there exists a:

" mature and professional partnership between the university and the students' union. "

Many of the practices highlighted throughout this report have helped to develop this partnership. A significant development is the credibility of the students' association senior officer bearers and their ability to contribute effectively at university decision making processes. The 2005 sparqs' mapping report found that whilst students had places at various committees and working groups there was often a difficulty in getting students to attend and when they did attend they had problems engaging with the processes. It also highlighted concerns from staff about the representative nature of students on committees.

The *2010 CSET Report* showed the situation was clearly changing:

" The students' associations are reported to have increased their influence over time and senior managers now take the students' associations more seriously and see them as more credible. New structures and policies within the institutions have also increased the influence of the students' association. "

During the recent sparqs' 'annual support visits' there was a clear enthusiasm and regard for the contribution from senior officers, with several examples of places on committees and roles being extended. Many institutions commented that there was virtually no committee where students were not represented and commented that officers were effective and enthusiastic. Universities were frequently looking for more opportunities to engage with officers at this level. There has been a substantial development in officers using the range of activities described throughout this report to develop stronger evidence bases for their work, contributing to this improvement in credibility.

" It's great to have the university having student representation on almost all aspects of the student experience and opening the doors for communication! Communication is the key. "

- Student from Glasgow Caledonian University

## Student involvement in formal review processes

When student reviewers were introduced as part of the ELIR review team in 2003 it was considered a particularly innovative and distinctive step. At this time universities were encouraged to consider similar roles for students in internal review processes. In 2005, 10 out of the 21 institutions at the time were receptive to, or had started to include, student reviewers in this way. Today this is standard practice in all 19 universities. Universities appear to have been convinced of the value of this approach and are looking for ways to extend this, involving students in reviews of student services and international campuses, for example. *Learning from ELIR* found that student involvement in review:

" *helps provide a greater focus on the student experience, as part of a more holistic approach to enhance the student experience.* **"**

National engagement

National engagement of students in committees, like that at an institutional level, has always happened, but today seems more widespread and effective. NUS Scotland has developed support systems for student reps on national committees, ensuring they are informed and fully briefed on the range of issues discussed. QAA Scotland has developed and worked

towards its own student engagement strategy for involving students in its work. The SFC's University Quality Working Group in 2007 was chaired by a student officer. There have been important developments in the role of students within the enhancement themes. In 2010 it became a requirement to have student members of the institutional teams and recently a network for these student members has been developed by QAA and sparqs. In 2008/09 the SFC funded a project with NUS to support national student engagement – *Student Learning Enhancement & Engagement Committee* (SLEEC) – which has since been developed into NUS Scotland's Education Network. The network allows students to share experiences and keep informed of national developments, such as the recent updating of the quality arrangements, Key Information Sets (KIS), 'Developing and Supporting the Curriculum', assessment and feedback, flexible delivery and issues related to the learner journey. Such discussions help to equip student officers better for discussions on these issues within their own universities, as well as shape NUS policy.
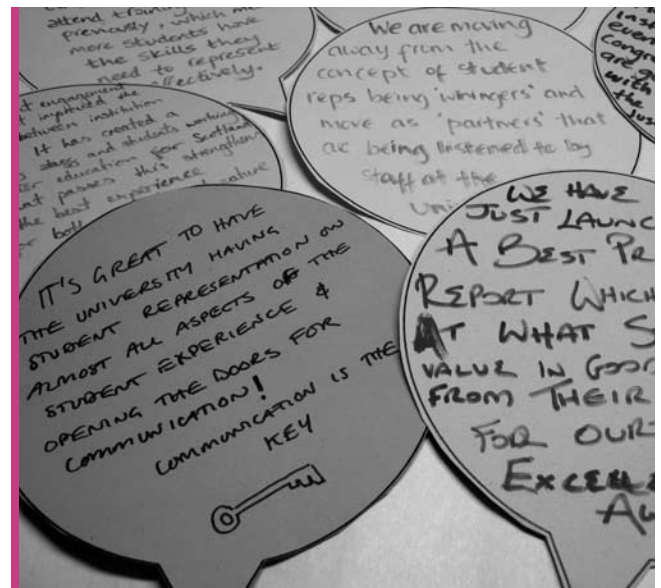
" *It's awesome seeing the university actively approach students on issues. Working in partnership to make things better - it's created a much more positive environment.* **"**

- Student from Heriot-Watt University

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*[4] 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.[5]
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 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.

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. In 2012 sparqs introduced 'annual support visits' to engage with key practitioners at each university in a semi-formal way. The first round of these visits, carried out with the vast majority of universities, 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 two key reports - *The Second Annual Report of the Evaluation of the Quality Enhancement Framework: Thematic Summary*[6] by CSET and *Learning from ELIR 2008-11 Student Representation and Engagement in Quality*[7] by QAA.

4. *A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland* (sparqs, Education Scotland, HEA Scotland, NUS Scotland, QAA Scotland, Scotland's Colleges, SFC, Universities Scotland, December 2012).
5. The use of the term 'learning' throughout the framework can apply to learning, teaching and assessment.
6. *The Second Annual Report of the Evaluation of the Quality Enhancement Framework: Thematic Summary* (Centre for the Study of Education and Training, Lancaster University, October 2010).
7. *Learning from ELIR 2008-11 Student Representation and Engagement in Quality* (QAA, 2011).

Case Study

Heriot-Watt University came 4th amongst universities in the UK for overall student satisfaction in the NSS in 2012; up from 29th position in the previous year. This excellent outcome sits alongside other excellent performance results including top in the UK for Student Experience in the Sunday Times University Guide, which also named it Scottish University of the Year for the second year running.

Professor John Sawkins, Deputy Principal (Learning and Teaching), said:

" Both the University and the Students' Union believe this success was built on the strong working partnership we have developed over the past few years. "

Heriot-Watt recognises that the quality of the overall student experience reflects both its strategy for learning and teaching, and its integral work on services and the environment. It also believes that student feedback and deliberative research should inform enhancement and development.

Heriot-Watt has introduced a range of methods to develop student engagement in the enhancement of learning and teaching at a subject and university level over the last few years. These have included; developing a systematic approach to collecting and responding to student feedback, improved course representation structures, training and support, a well-developed and resourced school officer system, and partnership working with students throughout the formal decision making structures including the strategic University Learning and Teaching Board and the Student Learning Experience Committee.

Heriot-Watt has used these developments to make a real difference to policies and practices across the University. This approach to NSS results – a manifestation of partnership working between staff and students - has systematically involved senior student officers working with senior members of academic staff in developing action plans. In addition, course representatives and school officers work at a departmental level to add context to the statistical data and help share good practice across schools and the wider University.

Conclusions

The achievements of universities and students' associations in advancing student engagement are significant. Students have moved to a position where their involvement in matters relating to learning and teaching, governance and quality is taken for granted. Much of the work is concerned with building and developing effective systems and practices, but also building a culture of partnership.

Students have used these processes to contribute to significant developments across the sector. Students have shaped university-wide initiatives such as changes to the academic year and curriculum redesign, whilst solving teething problems at a subject level as these have been introduced. Similarly, they have contributed to major developments such as new libraries and virtual learning environments, whilst acting as focus groups during implementation. They have worked in partnership with academic departments to develop actions plans arising from national and local survey results, improving many areas of the student experience from academic feedback to personal mentoring. Students have shaped university policies and approaches to graduate skills development whilst initiating and embedding specific programmes at a subject level. Student contributions at all levels are more credible and respected.

The ability of students to shape university-wide policies and developments has certainly improved. However, at a subject level, contributions are still more likely to be around identifying and solving problems rather than genuine involvement in curriculum design and developments. There are excellent examples within the sector of innovative practice in encouraging students to think about what and how they would like to learn, developing a culture of partnership of the individual student in learning, but we have not yet realised the potential of our activity in this area.

The example case study from Heriot-Watt University serves to illustrate how sustained activity in developing student engagement can lead to improved outcomes. Many of our efforts have been around improving our process. Our challenge now is to ensure we now use these processes to deliver student centred enhancements.

The introduction of Student Partnership Agreements[8], an outcome of the Scottish Government's post-16 review[9], will be an important development in helping to capture and monitor the work done on student engagement within institutions and across the sector, prioritising work on areas still to be addressed, such as post-graduate students and ensuring a focus on enhancement of the student experience and facilitating a way to evidence impact.

8. *Developing and Implementing a Student Partnership Agreement* (sparqs, forthcoming 2013).
9. *Putting Learners at the Centre – Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 Education* (The Scottish Government, September 2011).

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

Acknowledgements

sparqs would like to thank all university students and staff and partner agency colleagues who have contributed to this report, in particular all those who made time to engage in our 'annual support visits' to help with our data gathering processes. We would also like to thank members of the sparqs University Advisory Group for both their input and the case studies and examples shared with us.