Exploring student engagement with academic staff
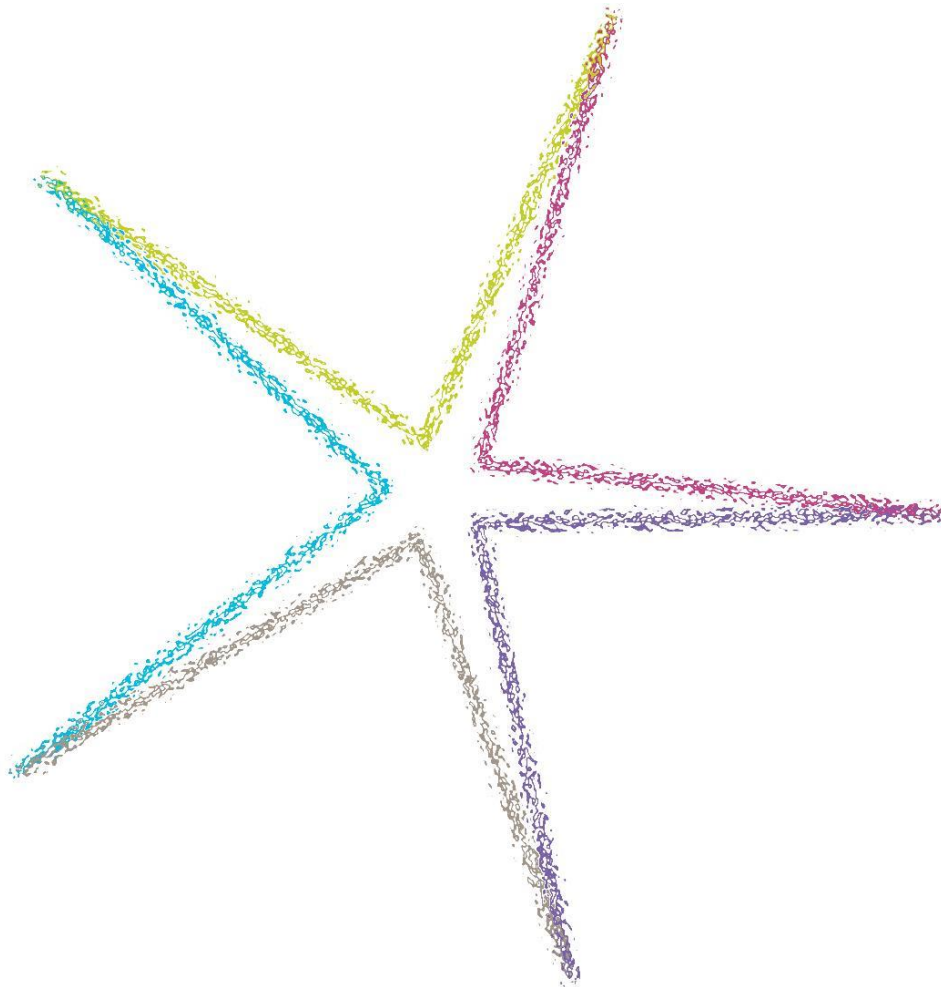
User guidance

CONTENTS

1: Overview

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Student Learning Experience in Scotland's colleges and universities has been transformed. The immediate emergency response and also the time of transition that followed have both been times of change and uncertainty. Staff in colleges and universities adapted rapidly, implementing innovations and strategies designed to bring continuity of learning and outcomes for students. Students and students' associations, too, have been vital in explaining the impact that the changes have had.

This period has demonstrated that student engagement is more important than ever, as is the role that staff can play in ensuring students are providing evidence about the learning experience.

This toolkit has been designed to provide academic staff with a range of strategies to review and reflect on these changes to the Student Learning Experience and to reflect more on partnership and student engagement in general.

The objectives of the toolkit are:

1. **Think about the student role in self-evaluation and quality enhancement of the learning experience.**
2. **Work in partnership to develop staff development materials that are appropriate to departmental, institutional and national contexts.**

The toolkit contains six workshop templates, which can be used by staff, or staff and students together. The topics of the workshop templates are:

1. **Understanding the Student Learning Experience.**
2. **Co-creation of assessment methods.**
3. **Discussing survey findings.**
4. **Review of course innovations and adjustments.**
5. **The course rep role.**
6. **The students' association.**

Each workshop is prepared for use with an editable slide pack and accompanying notes for organisers. These are available on the [toolkit's page on the sparqs website](#). The guidance notes for each workshop are presented as a flexible outline, leaving room for **customising** the theme of the workshop and the choice of activities. This customisation is both appropriate and necessary, to ensure that the workshops work for staff and students in your specific institutional contexts.

We are grateful to staff at Advance HE, College Development Network, Dumfries and Galloway College, Edinburgh Napier University and the University of Dundee for their support in developing these materials.

2: Using these materials

These flexible materials will be of interest anyone with an interest in enhancing the quality of the learning experience for students. They can exist as standalone events for one class, programme or staff team, but more powerfully can be strategically planned as development activities across a department, school or faculty, or indeed the whole institution. Creating materials should be an exercise in partnership between staff and student representatives.

Therefore, developing your materials may involve:

- Learning and teaching leads within curriculum areas or faculties.
- Class teachers or lecturers.
- Course reps and lead reps (such as faculty reps).
- Educational developers, academic development course leaders or CPD managers.
- Senior managers with responsibility for quality or learning and teaching.
- Representatives of the students' association, such as academic representation staff or lead education officers.
- Any independent facilitation, such as sparqs, if useful to you.

These templates are designed to be flexible. They can be used for a range of purposes and with a variety of participants. In some cases, the descriptions are written as if for a specific group (often this is a mixed staff/student discussion), but in all cases they can be adapted for other combinations of participants.

Materials could be developed for use in VLE spaces, in online meetings and workshops, face-to-face meetings if possible, or within regular committees or development spaces.

While existing events or structures may be useful platforms for these discussions, you should reflect on how, if students are involved, this pre-determined culture can be truly inclusive. Consideration should be given to truly neutral partnership spaces co-created by the institution and students' association that disrupt the power dynamic and give space for staff and students to contribute confidently and learn from each other. After all, partnership has been described as:

> "a dialogic and values-based approach to learning and teaching that has the potential to be transformative, developmental and fun"
> (Gravett, Kinchin, & Winstone, 2019, p. 13)

and as a process that:

> "can create liminal spaces within which power and exclusion can be deconstructed, critiqued, and potentially redressed"
> (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019, p. 79)

Suitable contexts and participant groups for these materials include the various options on the next page, although you may identify many others beyond these.

1. Workshop for a module, unit or course Discussions involving students and staff.	**2. Workshop for a faculty or department** Discussions involving course leaders and course reps.
3. University-wide or college-wide workshop Discussions involving teaching staff and student reps.	**4. Staff induction** Workshop material included within induction content for new staff.
5. Staff conferences or events Workshop offered as content as part of the institution's programme of staff development opportunities.	**6. Staff meetings** Workshop material included on agenda.
7. Student–staff liaison committees Workshop included as activity within course-level committee meetings.	**8. Learning and teaching committees** Workshop included as activity within meetings of department or faculty level academic committees.
9. Formal academic qualifications such as PGCAPs or TQFE Workshop included as an activity within course curriculum for lecturers' professional development.	**10. VLE Discussion Boards** Workshop arranged as an asynchronous discussion to which staff or both staff and students have access.
11. Resource for academic staff Static materials and notes created to be made available on staff intranet or similar.	**12. Other contexts** The workshops are designed to be customised by users, suitable for your context.

After you have implemented materials that you have developed from this toolkit, two important actions to consider are:

1. What will happen to the information collected? How will any data (including feedback from students, if they are involved) be incorporated into further dialogue about learning and teaching, and into the decision-making processes at course or faculty level?

2. Once any decisions have been taken, or changes made, what information should be reported back to students and staff in order to close the feedback loop? This is especially important where students have contributed to change and may not always know how impactful their ideas and suggestions have been.

3: The changing Student Learning Experience

sparqs' Student Learning Experience (SLE) diagram is a tool for supporting student engagement in shaping their learning. **The diagram identifies seven distinct but interdependent elements of the learning experience**. These provide a helpful framework for discussion, as data-gathering questions, and for summarising and reporting findings.
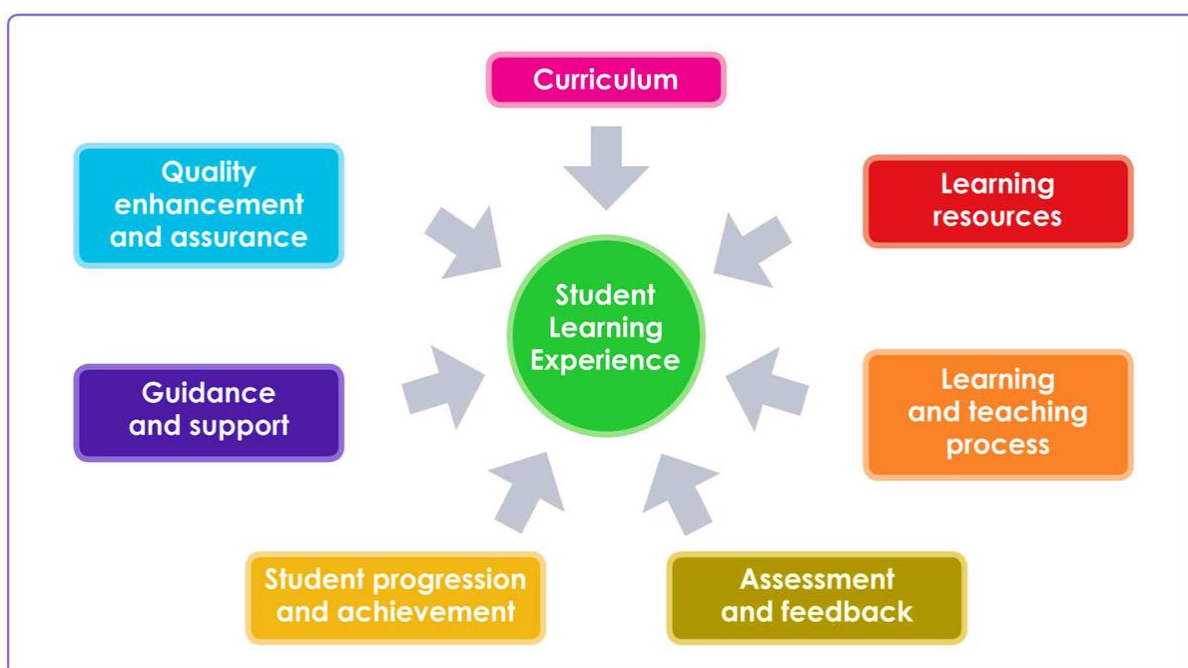

Diagram: The SLE Model (Student Learning Experience).

Many of the templates in in this toolkit make specific reference to this SLE model. In these cases, it can be advantageous to ensure that participants are familiar with the model, which might therefore be outlined within a workshop itself, or beforehand as a prior activity.

Course reps (in both colleges and universities) encounter the SLE diagram in their training, where they are encouraged to gather the opinions of classmates across all seven areas.

Course reps also have a resource that provides questions related to all seven areas, that reps can use with the classes they represent. You can find this SLE tool for course reps on the sparqs' website. It was updated in August 2020 with questions that directly relate to the COVID-19 learning experience.

4: Partnership: the policy context

Students' associations, partnership and student engagement are central concepts for Scotland's university and college sector. As such they should be at the heart of your thinking in planning how you will use this toolkit and in your wider staff development and quality enhancement work.

As Scotland's agency for student engagement, **student partnerships in quality Scotland (sparqs)** strives for a sector where, according to our strategic plan, "students are partners in shaping the quality of learning, making positive change to their own and others' experience, however and wherever they learn". To achieve this, our mission is to "foster a culture of partnership between students and staff which enables the Scottish education sector to respond to challenges and realise its ambitions to provide the best possible experience for each and every student."

Within Scotland's colleges, the 2012 **Report of the Review of Further Education Governance in Scotland** recommended changes to college governance and students' associations' abilities to contribute to it, recommending that "Student participation and representation become a commitment across the College Sector. Student Associations should be strengthened and become appropriately funded, autonomous and sustainable".

This recommendation led to the creation of the **Framework for the Development of Strong and Effective College Students' Associations in Scotland** (see page 10). Similarly, sparqs' and Education Scotland's joint resource **A Toolkit for Effective Learner Engagement** puts partnership at the heart of the questions colleges and students should be exploring in improvement and enhancement.

Partnership is at the heart of the work of lecturers in colleges too. The **Professional Standards for Lecturers in Scotland's Colleges** talk about an approach that…

- "Values the contribution students as learning partners can make individually and through systems of representation to the delivery and enhancement of the learning experience." (1.1)
- "Promotes, enables and empowers students to engage". (1.2)
- "Collaborates with students… to deliver excellence in learning." (1.3)
- "Understands the nature of student engagement strategies and how these contribute to the development of effective and positive learning relationships." (2.2)
- Understands how to encourage students to work in partnership and collaborate in their own learning and the enhancement/development of learning. (2.2)
- "Purposefully builds constructive and respectful learning relationships with students and partners." (3.2)
- "Actively nurtures, encourages and responds to the student's views and opinions individually and through systems of representation." (3.2)

Meanwhile **in universities**, student engagement is a pillar of **Scotland's Quality Enhancement Framework**, and the **UK Quality Code for Higher Education** defines partnership as

> "based on the values of: openness; trust and honesty; agreed shared goals and values; and regular communication between the partners. It is not based on the legal conception of equal responsibility and liability. Instead, partnership working recognises that all members in the partnership have legitimate, but different, perceptions and experiences. By working together to a common agreed purpose, steps can be taken that lead to enhancements for all concerned. Partnerships reflect a mature relationship based on mutual respect between students and staff."

In a similar vein, the UK **Professional Standards Framework** (PSF) is a globally-recognised framework for benchmarking success within higher education teaching and learning support. Colleagues in universities are encouraged to use the PSF as a means to reflect on their teaching and support of student learning in order to continually develop their educational practice. Dimensions of the framework include the following:

- "Develop effective learning environments and approaches to student support and guidance." (A4)
- "How students learn, both generally and within their subject/disciplinary area(s)." (K3)
- "Respect individual learners and diverse learning communities." (V1)
- "Promote participation in higher education and equality of opportunity for learners." (V2)
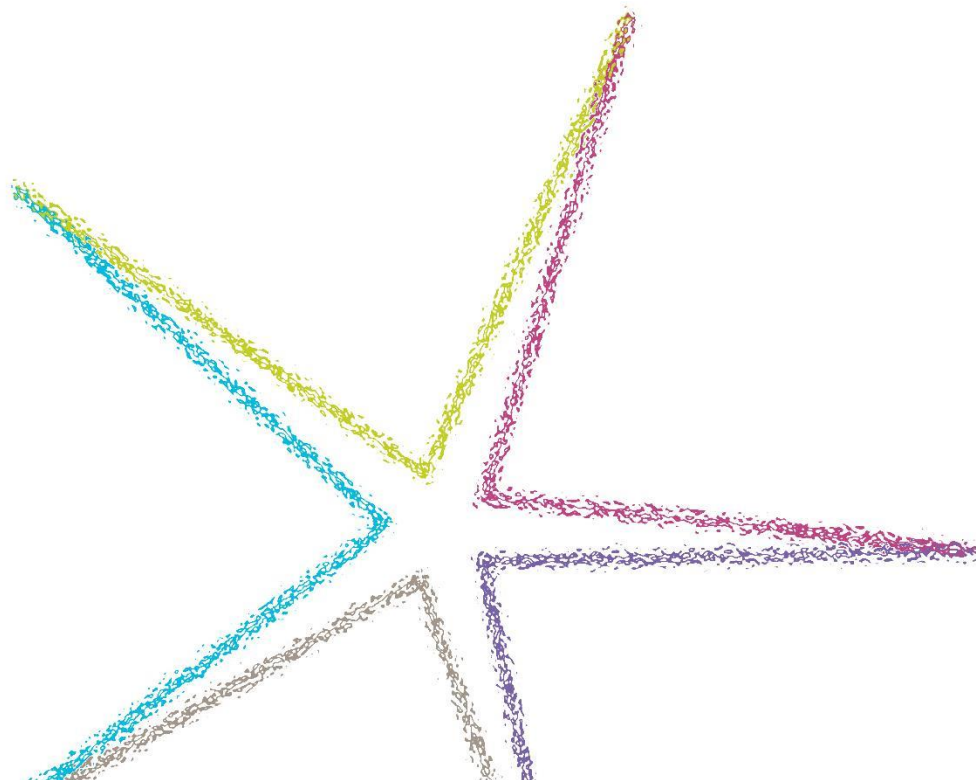
5: Academic literature about student engagement

There is a growing wealth of publications about student engagement, with articles appearing in a range of journals relating to further and higher education across the world. Helpful entry points to that research include a number of literature reviews that help show the change and development in thinking around student engagement over time.

They include broad literature reviews:

- Trowler, 2010
- Lester, 2013
- Healey *et al*., 2014
- Mercer-Mapstone *et al.*, 2017

Literature reviews have explored specific aspects of student engagement, such as:

- In curriculum design (Bovill *et al., 2009*).
- In assessment (Ní Bheoláin, 2020).
- Of 'hard to reach' students (Shaw *et al*., 2017).

The introductory chapters in the following edited books also give a helpful overview of the wider literature and thinking in student engagement:

- Bryson, C. (ed.) 2014. *Understanding and developing student engagement*. Abingdon: Routledge, 1-23.
- Lowe, T. and El Hakim, Y. (eds.) 2020. *A Handbook for Student Engagement in Higher Education: Theory into Practice.* London: Routledge. 3-26.

There are even whole journals dedicated to student engagement, including:

- Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal.
- Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change.
- International Journal for Students as Partners.

Within that literature, students have been described as having various different roles in shaping their learning experience, including partner and many others, which you may wish to think about as you use this toolkit. Three articles that will help you begin to explore these roles and what they mean for staff are:

- Scoles and Green (2016).
- Dollinger and Mercer-Mapstone (2019).
- Varwell (2021).

6: Tools and frameworks for conceptualising partnership

There are a number of resources available describing partnership and student engagement, and illustrating how to build them. Two important national tools are the Student Engagement Framework for Scotland, and the Framework for the Development of Strong and Effective College Students' Associations in Scotland, both mentioned earlier.
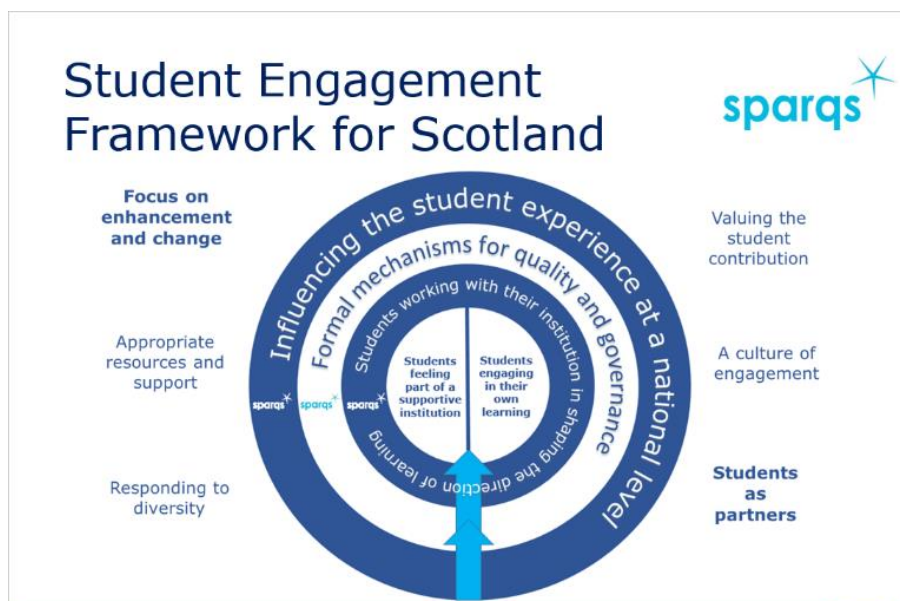
A further simple tool to generate discussion about the roles that students play in quality dialogue is sparqs' Student Partnership Staircase (see also Varwell, 2021). On the first step of the staircase, students might merely provide information to staff, course reps, the institution or national bodies, for instance by completing a survey. As the steps progress up the staircase, students contribute more by jointly owning and designing feedback tools, being recognised as legitimate experts in their learning experience, and ultimately having a role in full partnership with their institution.
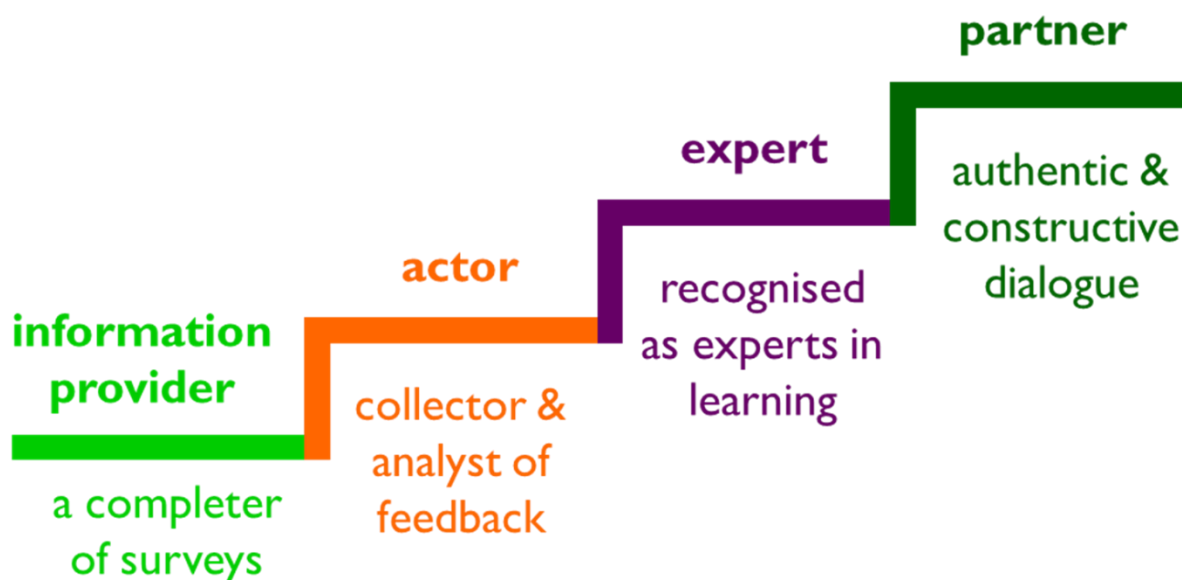
Finally, your institution and students' association may have jointly published a Student Partnership Agreement (SPA) or student engagement strategy, promoting ways in which students can participate in dialogue and decision-making. Find out if you have an SPA, SE strategy or equivalent statement, identify the current areas of focus for partnership within them, and consider what implication this might have for the staff development materials which you create out of this toolkit.

- **How can you draw on these policy documents, frameworks and the wider student engagement literature to shape your activities in academic development?**

- **How might they inform your approach to the six workshop templates within this toolkit?**

- **How can sparqs help you explore these initial questions?**

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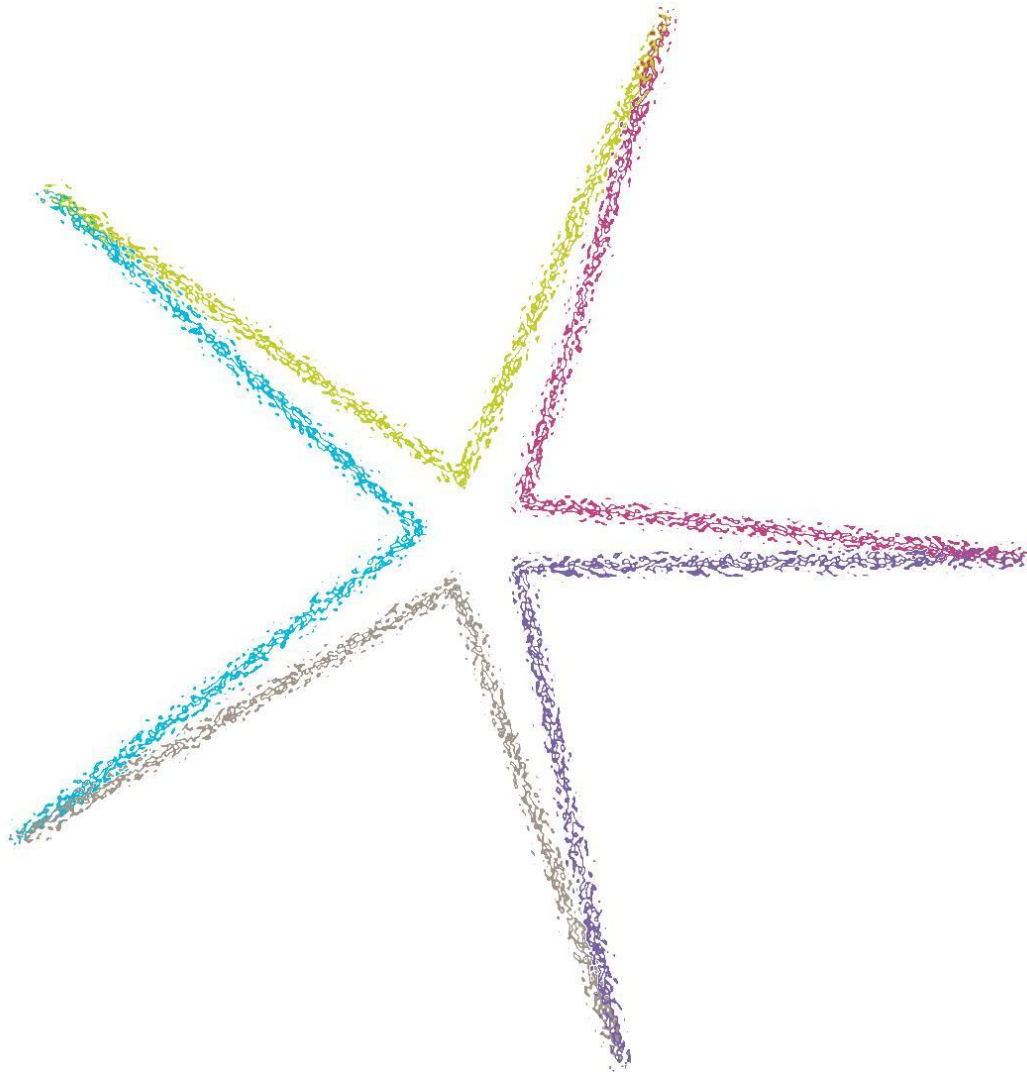
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