





5 Key Elements of SE

The key agencies in Scotland have developed and agreed this framework for student engagement in Scotland. The framework does not present one definition or recommend any particular approach, but rather, aims to provide clarity to discussions and establish a shared understanding. In doing this, the framework provides a basis for sharing existing practices and approaches whilst supporting future developments.

## The Five Key Elements of Student Engagement



Key Elements:

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The divisions between these **key elements** are often blurred, and the relationships between them are many and complex. We believe it is useful to set them out here in order to promote discussion and to help future developments across all areas of student engagement.

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

The framework was developed after extensive research into understandings of student engagement carried out by sparqs in 2011, part funded by The Higher Education Academy.



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The framework also identifies a number of **features** of effective student engagement.

The Six Features of Effective Engagement are:

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### I. Students feeling part of a supportive institution



This element of engagement includes the range of activities and approaches that encourage students to come to, feel part of, feel supported by and participate in, an institution.

Ideally, this begins with providing activities and approaches that encourage students to enter education at a stage appropriate for them and continues all the way to completion. Students end their studies having had such good experiences that, essentially, they become ambassadors for their institutions.

It includes aspects of widening participation and removing barriers to participation. While some barriers will be dealt with through the curriculum, in this section we focus on the type of activities at an institutional level that may contribute to this objective. This could include approaches to providing support at an institutional level and offering activities which create a sense of community.



It is about striving to provide a positive all-round student experience in addition to the academic experience.

Many of these services and activities can benefit from being student-led or student-shaped. Examples would include the students' association organising events, student-led support programmes and peer-mentoring programmes, or students' involvement in the design and delivery of induction.

Activities and developments might include, for example:

- Community outreach, schools liaison programmes and links between schools, colleges and universities - programmes related to the recruitment and support of particular groups of students.
- Activities establishing relationships with students pre-admission.
- Induction programmes both by the institution and by the students' association, (including Freshers' Week).
- Mentoring and central support services, including welfare services.
- Practical arrangements such as transport, financial support, childcare, access to resources.
- Clubs and societies, and student volunteering.
- Social events.
- Good student facilities, social space, libraries and student accommodation.
- Institutional cultural approaches – setting out a supported independent learning culture.
- Alumni, graduation and awards ceremonies.

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## 2. Students engaging in their own learning

This element of engagement is about supporting students to take responsibility for successful learning, enabling them to shape their own experience and the outcomes they want to achieve. It is about encouraging students to be active partners in the learning process. In this section we focus on the ways institutions provide effective learning opportunities and support for students to develop skills in independent learning. This, in turn, encourages deeper levels of engagement with the educational experience.

Initially, this may (for example) involve providing support and activities to encourage students to access formal learning successfully, perhaps after a substantial period of absence or after unsuccessful learning experiences in the past. It is also about students developing an enthusiasm for learning and a commitment to a subject or vocation; encouraging students to be part of an academic or learning community alongside the professional staff. This is likely to include activities beyond the immediate classroom, such as academic-related societies, work placements or simulations and independent study. Overall, activities will help students to see learning as something more than what is assessed and accredited.

This element ranges from encouraging students to attend and be interested in learning, to developing students' participation in learning through their own voluntary engagement with activities designed to make learning active. It includes students having opportunities for choice within learning programmes and encouraging their active participation in class, thereby shaping their own individual experience. Many activities that are successful in this element might be student-led, (e.g. peer mentoring or academic societies), but are distinct from those which aim to gather students' feedback on the learning experience.

Other aspects of student engagement, that encourage students to comment on and work with others in shaping the direction of learning, are 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 other areas of student engagement this involvement can help these students develop stronger engagement in their own learning.

Activities and developments might include, for example:

- Programmes to support developing interactive and participative learning opportunities, suitable for the range of learners.
- Developing learning relevance – research-teaching linkages, workplace relevance, projects work etc.
- Assessment for learning initiatives.
- Induction to learning programmes – how to be a successful learner.
- Study support programmes.
- Study facilities that promote active learning.
- Academic mentoring – including peer-led.
- Personal Development Planning and the development of transferable skills and graduate attributes.
- Academic societies.
- College-wide issues influencing the curriculum, (e.g. fair trade, global citizenship, multicultural programmes etc...) and interdisciplinary project work or courses.
- Opportunities for student choice in terms of project work, assessment methods, dissertation and sub-topics within a subject area.
- Opportunities for students to lead learning, (e.g. through leading lessons and peer-to-peer activities).
- Strategies to identify disengagement at the individual, course and institutional level and actions to address these issues, e.g. attendance monitoring and personal tutor interventions.



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

This element of engagement relates to the ways in which students can comment on their learning experiences either individually or as a group. It builds on the idea of students working in partnership with academics and other staff at the subject level to bring about enhancements in their learning experience.

This might simply be about responding to student feedback on learning, teaching and assessment (or other matters) raised through surveys, student committees or even complaints. It is about ensuring that students know what actions have been taken as a result of their feedback. At its most engaging, this element includes the processes and activities which give students appropriate opportunities to influence the way in which curricula are designed and implemented. Importantly, it is about students not just identifying problems, but working with staff to develop solutions, implement actions and explore/identify future developments.

These activities can take place in the classroom and be about the relationship between a tutor and their students, or they might have a departmental or school/faculty level focus. Clear links between these subject-focused activities and institutional level learning and teaching development are important, as are clear links to the representative activities of the students' association. By definition, there will be links with the formal processes of quality assurance and enhancement.

Activities and developments might include, for example:

- Methods of systematically collecting and analysing student views and opinions, including surveys, end of module questionnaires and focus groups.
- Involving students in the design, collection and analysis of student surveys etc.



## Further Resources

- Work to support course reps and the operation of Staff Student Liaison Committees (SSLCs), including work to support course reps accessing a wide range of student views and work to develop SSLC agendas beyond feedback and problem solving to partnership working.
- Additional levels of representation, including reps at the departmental, school or faculty level.
- Student-focused learning and teaching conferences and events designed to give students a context in which to develop their understanding of relevant issues, and an opportunity to comment on their experiences and contribute to wider discussions.
- Activities to encourage feedback and participation from all parts of the student community.
- Work to involve students in programme monitoring and review, new course developments and strategic developments in learning and teaching policy, including membership of appropriate committees.
- Student-staff project teams working on specific projects, (e.g. changing the primary foci of assessment, curriculum review, improving feedback etc.).
- Making information on performance available and accessible to students and appropriate to different levels, (e.g. Key Performance Indicators, retention and progression, national and institutional survey results and comparisons, and quality review information).
- Facilitating discussion around trends and issues identified.
- Tutor-led activities designed to get feedback and facilitate discussions on improvements in the classroom.
- Activities designed to help students comment on and contribute to shaping their current experience in addition to summative feedback.

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### 4. Formal mechanisms for quality and governance



### Further Resources

This element focuses on formal engagement with institutions through representative structures and processes operated primarily by students' associations. It is about ensuring that student representatives can work in partnership with their institutions to enhance the student experience at a strategic level, as well as representing individuals or groups of students in an effective manner.

To be effective, activities need to develop the ability of the elected representatives to deliver a considered student view point based on hard evidence, democratic processes and due attention to meeting the needs of all students. They must, therefore, link with the activities of students involved in commenting on and working with others in shaping the direction of learning.

Importantly, it is about providing an independent student voice within the quality assurance and governance mechanisms of the institution to ensure that the student learning experience is central to decision-making, development and enhancement activities. It differs from simply gathering student opinion because a representative voice can take an informed position on issues, work to achieve compromise or settlement agreements, and own a jointly negotiated solution. It recognises that in developing a partnership with students the individual voice is less powerful than the collective, and therefore the need for students to have representatives.

Whilst it is embodied by student membership of committees and involvement in processes, it is about more than a student simply being present when decisions are made. It is about an approach to student engagement which ensures student involvement in change, in partnership with staff at their institutions.

Although the important feature of this element of engagement is the independent, collective student

voice, responsibility for making the association and the representative structures work needs to be shared across the partnership.

Activities and developments might include, for example:

- Elections and democratic processes which select and inform student leaders.
- Systems, processes and events to ensure a link with students and student views emerging from other areas of student engagement, (e.g. faculty-level reps, student conferences).
- Formal representation on institutional committees, and involvement in quality assurance and enhancement processes.
- Informal liaison with senior management, strategy away days, regular Principal liaison groups etc.
- Access to and engagement with institutional performance data, Enhancement-Led Institutional Review, Education Scotland reports, national survey data, institutional survey data, KPIs etc.
- Institutional support for students' association development and activities - joint strategy development groups/events, funding for projects and staff support.
- Activities to develop effective and appropriate representative structures and processes for all students.
- Joint strategic planning with institutions on large change projects – such as estates developments, curriculum development or responses to KPIs.
- Student Partnership Agreements.
- Students' association campaigns for change.



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### 5. Influencing the student experience at national level



Further Resources

This element of engagement is around the opportunities students have to shape the development of education policy at a national level, working with others to contribute to the success of the sector as a whole.

It is also concerned, however, with the opportunity this affords students to develop an understanding of pertinent issues, how these might be addressed, and what contributions action at a local level can make to wider efforts. It helps create student 'experts' who are able to comment on their own experience and also place it in the context of the wider educational experience.

Activities and developments might involve, for example:

- Student representatives on national committees.
- Developing and supporting opportunities for students to influence the work of sector agencies and their initiatives.
- Helping students engage with national data and trends.
- Involvement with National Union of Students and their activities.
- Student involvement in and learning from external review processes.
- National campaigning activities.
- Influencing government strategy on education.
- Enhancement Themes activity.
- Helping student leaders inform national policy developments based on student opinion within their own institutions.
- Developing opportunities for students to discuss experiences across institutions at appropriate levels, e.g. subject or discipline level.







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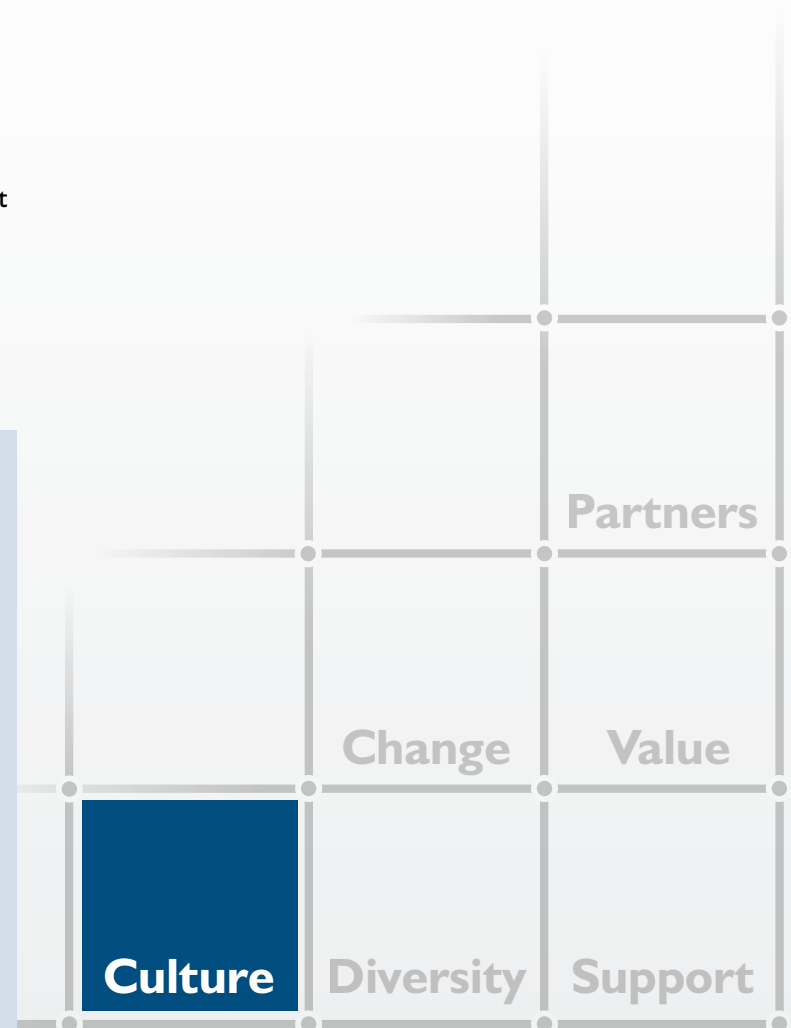
### A culture of engagement

Behind all of the work on student engagement lies a commitment shaped by some strong messages at a national level and backed up by institutional attitudes and behaviours. The central role of students in our national quality arrangements helps to reinforce similar roles within institutions but also encourages a wider adoption of student engagement as a key feature of the Scottish post-16 education sector. Key messages around student engagement and its importance will need to come from senior staff within the institution and be reinforced by actions and behaviours throughout the institution. In developing a culture of engagement it is important to define institutional approaches and priorities in a clear and accessible manner, provide specific forums to ensure its development whilst ensuring it is an approach that permeates activities across the spectrum.

Features of a good culture might include, for example:

- Student membership at all levels of institutional decision-making committees and processes, with exceptions only when clearly justified.
- Processes for overall responsibility for co-ordinating and monitoring student engagement in quality.
- A culture of regular engagement at informal level between representatives and staff.
- The recognition that staff and students have much to learn from each other's perspectives and hard work.
- A culture of honest learning and sharing both within and between institutions.
- Strong leadership on the student engagement culture and ethos from senior management and senior student officers.

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## Students as partners

Partnership is a widely accepted concept in Scotland. It is a feature of our quality arrangements and of a wider approach across the sector. There is debate around students as partners and students as consumers which has gained prominence with discussions around fees and funding, public information and the growth in private providers and this adds complexity to the concept. In developing partnership with students it is important to recognise the issues relating to perceptions around position, power and influence. The roles of representatives are important in supporting the individual student within large and complex institutions, as are activities which encourage all students to feel part of the partnership. It is important to recognise the different but equally valuable contribution of students. They bring to discussions their own expertise and experience.

Partnership can be developed in many ways, for example:

- In the development of individual students as active participators in learning.
- Between the institution, its students' association and the student body.
- Between students, their associations and national agencies.
- At the level and type of discussion between students, their representatives and the institution.

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### Responding to diversity

The student population is diverse, as is the nature of institutions – mechanisms for engagement should acknowledge this diversity to enable all those who wish to engage regardless of their background.

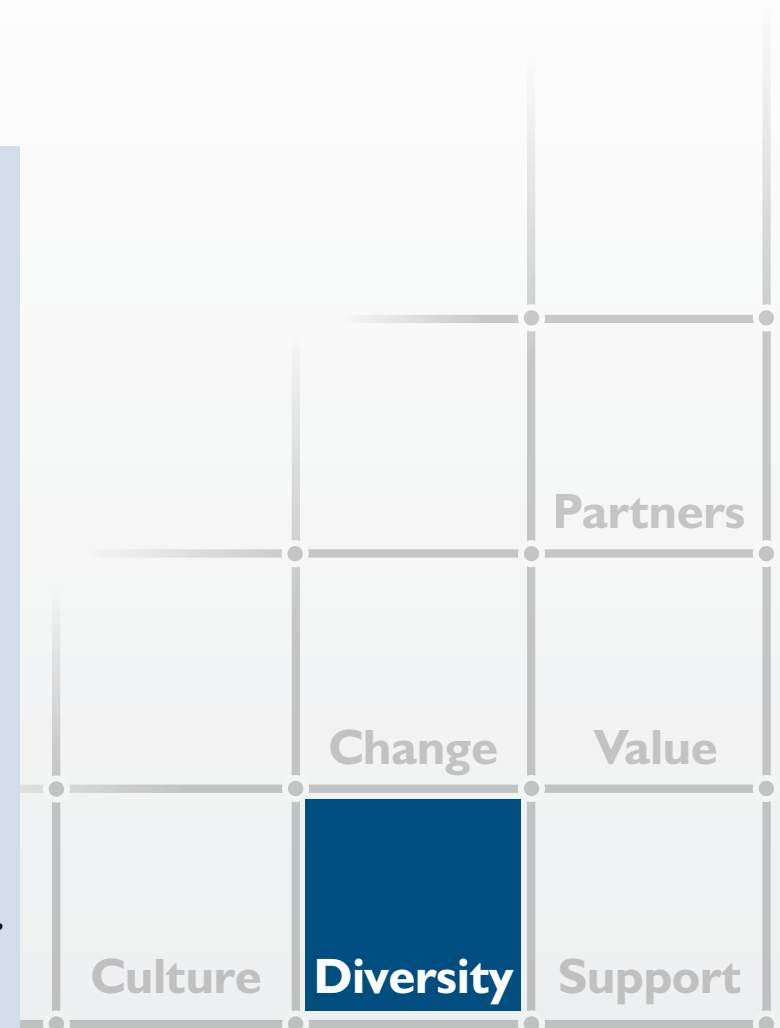
When considering diversity we need to pay attention to protected characteristics as covered by equalities legislation, mode and level of study and socio economic background and related aspects of widening access.

Issues to consider include, for example:

- Institutions may need to adapt their approaches to learning and teaching to meet the needs of a diverse population – therefore the engagement of these students in commenting on and working with others in shaping the direction of learning is particularly important.
- The level of engagement. We wish to encourage students to take on active student engagement roles. Students filling in a questionnaire or module feedback form are engaging, as are course reps or full time elected officers. Systems need to recognise that some students will for various reasons choose to limit their engagement to a level appropriate for them.
- Systems and opportunities being appropriate. Whilst students may choose their own level of engagement, the development of opportunities and systems need to allow all students who want to, regardless of their background, to participate fully.
- Methods of engaging particular groups of students need to feed into representative structures. Students' associations need to ensure they can represent all students as far as possible, and this will require the support of their institutions.



Further Resources





Further Resources

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## Valuing the student contribution

In recognising the progress that has been made in student engagement it is important to acknowledge the often remarkable efforts of students themselves. Students are balancing study, work and other commitments - yet even at the junior levels of involvement a course rep will be committing around forty hours volunteering a year to do their job well. At more senior levels they are taking on complex roles and participating in activities that others around them are being paid to do.

In valuing the student contribution it is important to:

- Ensure students are supported in their efforts and do not have unrealistic demands made of them.
- Make clear the difference their contributions have made.
- Recognise, reward and accredit their contribution.
- Value the expertise they bring without expecting them to have the same expertise as others.

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## Focus on enhancement and change

Student engagement should enable enhancement and change – in the students themselves, in the student experience, in the institution and in the sector as a whole. Scotland has a strong emphasis on enhancement within its quality arrangements and student engagement activities which encourage a similar emphasis on enhancement as opposed to problem solving are similarly important.

In monitoring the effectiveness of student engagement it is important to look at outcomes in terms of the difference activities have made to the student educational experience. It is also important to develop ways to ensure that students, those involved in student engagement activities and the wider student body, are aware of the importance that student engagement can have in influencing change.

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### Appropriate resources and support

Progress in student engagement does not happen by accident. The world-leading work in Scotland has been underpinned by financial support at a sector level through Scottish Funding Council funding of sparqs and at an institutional level. In supporting students to carry out their roles it is important to address issues relating to continuity and sustainability. It is also important to recognise that developing engagement opportunities and support requires particular sets of skills and expertise. Dedicated staff support can provide a permanent point of contact, guidance and training and help to develop a base of professional knowledge and experience within what can be a complex area of work.

It is difficult for some of the roles students undertake to be fulfilled adequately by part-time volunteer students. Sabbatical student officers are increasingly important in ensuring effective student contribution across a range of institutional activities.

Other resources that can help support student engagement include (for example) web and technology resources, access to secretarial support, training and support for staff and funding to release student time for work on particular projects. It is recognised that staff within the institution also need support to carry out student engagement activities effectively – staff co-ordinating a staff student committee for example, will need time to develop this role and recognition for their efforts.

Resource issues to consider may include, for example:

- Representatives having the ability to do their job – for instance through the ability to communicate with those they represent.
- Student members of committees being given inductions and being supported through a “before, during and after” approach to their role in meetings.
- A joined up and centrally resourced co-ordination of representative support.
- Networking opportunities with other representatives.



Further Resources

