sparqs

CELEBRATING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Successes and opportunities in Scotland's university sector

Contents

Foreword

Student engagement is an increasingly important part of the landscape in Scotland's universities. As a key pillar of quality enhancement, backed up by a dedicated development agency in sparqs, the drive to put students at the heart of decisions made about quality and governance is here to stay.

As the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) puts it: "Student engagement continues as a key principle and as a fundamental dimension of quality." It speaks of "the shift from encouraging institutions with regard to student engagement to setting out expectations and, where appropriate, further requirements in this regard."[1]

In attempting to celebrate the successes of student engagement as well as point towards the challenges for the future, this report bears testimony to the innovation of staff and student officers throughout Scotland's university sector, and the way in which universities and students' associations have worked in partnership to make Scotland's learning, teaching and quality the envy of the world.

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Head of sparqs

Introduction

Background to the report

Background to sparqs

1.1 sparqs (student participation in quality Scotland) is an agency of the university and college sectors in Scotland. It is funded by the SFC to work with all universities, colleges, students' associations and other sector agencies to develop and promote student engagement in quality matters.

1.2 Through its staff based in Edinburgh and Inverness, sparqs provides a range of services that support those it works with, including a range of training packages for student officers and staff, a variety of research and publications, forums and events to share and develop practice, and developing solutions to institutional and sectoral priorities.

1.3 It is a time of change not only for the sector and for student engagement, but also for sparqs itself. This report into the successes and opportunities of student engagement in Scotland's university sector is published alongside a similar report for the college sector; and these coincide with the publication of a new Student Engagement Framework for Scotland, a new strategic plan for sparqs, and a new website at www.sparqs.ac.uk where full details of all this and more can be found.

Context of the report

1.4 Scotland's approach to student engagement is unique and pioneering. When the new Quality Enhancement Framework was introduced in 2003, student engagement formed one of the five pillars, and sparqs was created as its driver. This approach to student engagement is unparalleled in the world.

1.5 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 considerably. Students and students' associations have played an increasingly important and influential role in everything from curriculum design to internal reviews.

1.6 This is best summed up by the second evaluation of the Quality Enhancement Framework in 2010 conducted by the Centre for the Study of Education and Training (CSET) at the University of Lancaster, which 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."[2]

1.7 Core to this is the principle of partnership, and in Scotland's universities student engagement has never been intended to be something that students demand and universities provide. Vice Principals are just as likely as senior student officers to approach the enhancement of learning and teaching by wanting to know how best students can be involved in decisions.

1.8 Not only is this approach unique, but it has clearly changed over the years. For example, although student membership of institutional review teams has been a feature since the introduction of the Quality Enhancement Framework, student membership of internal review teams has increased from ten out of twenty-one universities sector in 2005 to standard practice among all nineteen today.

1.9 So while it is easy to say there has been a big change in student engagement in quality in an already pioneering sector, there has not been a formal, detailed review of it for some years. The last formal publication on this subject from sparqs was in 2005, with the production of two mapping exercises – one

for each of the university and college sectors – that explored the range of ways in which students were engaged in shaping quality.

1.10 Recommended action points of the university sector mapping report[3] included improvement of faculty-level representation, better engagement of non-traditional students such as part-time, distance learning and postgraduate students, and more support to students engaged at the institutional level. This work was useful in shaping sparqs' activity and its work with the sector in the following years, and this report contains evidence of much progress in each of these areas.

1.11 However, there is a clear need to update this story because there has been much change in the sector and in universities themselves. From mergers through to new frameworks and enhancement activities, the sector is now a different place. As such it is important to research the developments in student engagement since the 2005 reports, and there are four key reasons, therefore, for writing this report.

1.12 Firstly, the report aims to celebrate and acknowledge the innovations, skills, hard work and dedication of the many staff and students over the years who have made student engagement such a key part of institutional and sectoral decision-making, and who have seen that engagement, in turn, lead to the ultimate aim of an improved learning experience. The thanks of the sector are due to countless lecturers, administrators, managers, student representatives and others, for their work in so many areas over the past few years.

1.13 Secondly, the good work done by these practitioners requires to be documented and shared, in a way that can inspire new discussions and practice among universities. Throughout this report, many different case studies are highlighted and referenced, and are drawn from a range of publications and institutional practice.

1.14 From this, a third key purpose of the report is to point to some of the challenges that remain. While student engagement has been a clearly successful strand of the sector's work in recent years, there remain many challenges to be resolved and new areas of work to develop. From the trends and developments in this report it will be possible to identify some of these future challenges and point the sector towards possible new approaches.

1.15 Finally, a fourth purpose of the report is to complement reports published elsewhere in the sector about the success of quality enhancement, including the role of student engagement in this. Reports in both sectors, from both the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland[4] and Education Scotland[5], commissioned by the SFC, have described in a more formal way the progress made in enhancement.

1.16 This report, plus an equivalent publication for the college sector, describes in detail the journey the sector has taken in student engagement. It is important that as the sector changes it has a sense of taking stock and checking direction in terms of student engagement; while for sparqs as it develops a new strategic direction to match the sector's needs it is important to take stock of the work of universities it works with.

The report's methodology

1.17 This report has been informed on two levels – institutional and sectoral.

1.18 At the institutional level, sparqs has constantly learned from and shared with the universities it works with, gaining useful information and perspectives from staff and student officers. On top of this, sparqs has introduced Annual Support Visits, where it can engage with key practitioners at each university in a semi-formal way that allows the agency to regularly publicise its activities, learn about the university's student engagement work, and understand better how sparqs can support staff and students in what they do. 2012's visits not

only informed this report but gathered useful information for sparqs' future work and other publications such as its website.

1.19 At the sectoral level, meetings have also been held with key sector practitioners, and a substantial range of research publications from agencies and universities has been drawn upon. Key publications include CSET's second annual report evaluating the Quality Enhancement Framework[6] and QAA Scotland's *Learning from ELIR*[7] (Enhancement-Led Institutional Review).

The nature of student engagement

1.20 Broad sectoral commitment to student engagement has existed for years. A major milestone in its history as a concept in Scotland was the introduction of the Quality Enhancement Framework in 2003[8]. One of the framework's five pillars is student engagement, with sparqs, also created that year, being a major driver of this area of work.

1.21 This was then followed by a new joint framework for universities and colleges which created three principles: high quality learning, student engagement and quality culture.[9]

1.22 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 structures and processes, to the individual student engaging in self-reflection on the quality and nature of her/his learning – the learner as active participant in or as 'co-creator' of learning."[10]

1.23 For example, The Higher Education Academy (HEA) has identified six dimensions of student engagement in the academic environment, from individual learning through to national policy[11], while Trowler highlights a number of definitions that include both learning that leads to effective outcomes as well as students

being empowered to shape that learning.[12] The term is also often used in relation to extra-curricular activities such as volunteering or clubs and societies.

1.24 This range of interpretations of "student engagement" generates much discussion around the perceived role of students. For instance, are they to be treated as citizens, partners, learners, individuals or as prospective members of the workforce? In terms of quality, are they best engaged in formal two-hour meetings or through practical, informal discussions? Are students just there to give feedback, or also to help collate, analyse and present that feedback? Might they even have a role in creating the tools of feedback and working on the resulting action points?

A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland

1.25 To respond to these different interpretations of the meaning and implications of the term "student engagement", sparqs undertook a research project throughout 2011. Engaging a variety of groups in both the university and college sectors – such as teaching staff, sector-level practitioners, and students of varying levels of involvement – the project explored the various approaches to the term and drew conclusions from the findings.

1.26 The outcomes, published as a joint sector publication, *A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland*[13], identified five elements and six features of student engagement.

1.27 The five elements of student engagement define the different arenas in which students may be involved, accommodating the diversity of approaches referred to in previous paragraphs. They are:

1. Students feeling part of a supportive institution.
2. Students engaging in their own learning.
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.

1.28 The six features, which guide the elements of student engagement, are:

1. A culture of engagement.
2. Students as partners.
3. Responding to diversity.
4. Valuing the student contribution.
5. Focus on enhancement and change.
6. Appropriate resources and support.

1.29 The *SE Framework* has already had a role in shaping the approaches of the sector, by acting as a baseline and reference tool for discussions around student engagement. In particular, sparqs' own new strategic plan for 2013-2018[14] has been shaped by elements three, four and five of the framework, covering as they do sparqs' own remit of engaging students in shaping the quality of the learning experience.

1.30 As such, this report is shaped around those three elements. Following a brief chapter which summarises elements one and two; chapters three, four and five explore elements three four and five in turn, examining the practice and trends within each sphere and identifying some of the challenges for the future.

Elements 1 and 2 of 'A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland'

2.1 The first two elements of the *SE Framework* are broadly beyond the remit and function of sparqs, and are primarily a matter for a wide range of other agencies and bodies. Nevertheless, it is important to see elements three, four and five – around which this report is predominantly focused – in their full context. This chapter provides a brief outline of the first two elements, and highlights some areas where there may be links with the later three elements.

Element 1 – students feeling part of a supportive institution

2.2 Universities have huge impact beyond the realm of learning and teaching. They are communities in which people do more than merely learn or teach. They are environments where people can reside, make friends, and shape their futures in a whole range of ways. As such, universities tend to have strong "brands" that live on in their graduates and within the local community.

2.3 As the *SE Framework* explains:

" 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 institution. " [15]

2.4 An important aspect of this element is that if you can be engaged in receiving and even shaping opportunities in this sphere, then this has a positive transferability to learning and teaching issues. If students are encouraged to take an active and participative approach to aspects such as recruitment and induction, or clubs and societies, then they are therefore more likely to take a similarly active role in their learning. It embeds the idea that when aspects of the student experience are student-led, students will more fully engage with them.

Element 2 – students engaging in their own learning

2.5 Obviously learning is a core activity for a student, and inherent in this is their ability to not only successfully learn, but to develop a sense of ownership over their education as a means to developing high achievement.

2.6 To quote the *SE Framework* again, the element is

" …about 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. " [16]

At Glasgow Caledonian University, inter-professional education with health and social care students commences at Level 1 and continues through each level of the undergraduate, pre-registration curricula. In the last academic year, students on the Level 1 module, Foundations for Practice in Health and Social Care, have been encouraged to use their mobiles phones during lectures as a means of giving and receiving feedback from teaching staff. Approximately 900 students from thirteen professional disciplines take this module annually.

In an effort to facilitate increased participation in large lectures of up to 500 students, TextWall (www.textwall.co.uk) was introduced to provide an alternative means of enabling students to ask questions of teaching staff anonymously. A TextWall is essentially a web page to which learners can send a text message from their mobile phones. The messages are then stacked live on a large 'wall' which can be embedded within traditional PowerPoint presentations. This provides a facility for teachers to provide immediate feedback to students or to provide feedback 'slots' within the traditional lecture structure. The TextWall has also been used successfully to facilitate question and answer sessions within large lectures and to generate discussion and debate amongst a diverse student group.

This easily accessible and inexpensive technology, combined with a critical pedagogic approach has transformed the traditional large lecture environment in this module. Student participation has increased significantly in all lectures where the TextWall has been used. Students have clearly demonstrated their preference for using TextWall over traditional verbal questioning of teachers. These successes have encouraged the wider teaching team to consider the place of mobile phones within their teaching, and to re-consider the practice of always 'switching off' mobiles in the classroom.

2.7 If students are fully engaged in the process of learning, the next logical step is for staff to work in partnership with those students to encourage them to comment on what works and what doesn't and to develop new solutions. This is where the work described in element three of the *SE Framework* comes in, and this will be explored in the following chapter.

Element 3: students working with their institution in shaping the direction of learning

Introduction to the element

3.1 The third element of the *SE Framework* focuses on students, as both individuals and groups, offering their views on how their learning experience could be enhanced.

3.2 The *SE Framework* document explains:

> " 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. " [17]

3.3 Such activities can include both individual and collective tools. An example of an individual tool would be one-to-one meetings between staff and students; while class tools include things such as discussions, focus groups and module evaluations.

3.4 A further differentiation is between formal and informal tools.

3.5 Formal tools, such as surveys, involve processes that are a key part of the data gathering by quality mechanisms, and which produce evidence, facts and statistics that inform reports, meetings and evaluations, demonstrating a clear impact of student views upon the shaping of the learning experience.

3.6 Informal tools are where information and perspectives are gained from students in often undocumented and unplanned situations, such as staff "drop in" office hours, informal discussions during or after classes,

or staff perceptions of student views drawn from the process of teaching.

3.7 The formal and informal categories of tools strongly complement each other and both have been increasingly used by universities. Surveys, focus groups and the course representative system have all existed in universities for many years. Since the focus on student engagement in quality processes in Scotland there is much evidence of significant work in each of these areas and in work to bring them together to help develop strategic approaches to using student opinion in enhancement of quality.

3.8 The role of the course representative (or course rep) is also pivotal to this area of work. These students play a significant role in gathering student opinion, interpreting it and working with others to help use the gathered information to shape the student experience.

3.9 This chapter will explore the element through the following sections:

- A strategic, partnership-led approach to improving representative systems.
- Course representatives.
- Departmental representation.
- Gathering and responding to student feedback.
- Engaging the diversity of the student population.
- Student-led teaching awards.

A strategic, partnership-led approach to improving representative systems

3.10 In the past there has been a disjointed approach to managing and developing course representative structures. Running and organising elements of the structures, such as student-staff liaison committees and elections of representatives, was often a responsibility of the university or even individual departments. Students' associations often knew that developing and supporting course reps was an important ingredient in developing their ability to represent students effectively, but they usually lacked the remit or capacity to do this effectively.

3.11 Whilst course rep training was always a feature, its provision was sporadic, often depending from year to year on student officer priorities; and even when provided there were significant issues with getting course reps to attend, and wide variation in the content and effectiveness of training.

3.12 The National Union of Students (NUS) developed its first course representative training pack as far back as 1986, and from then associations across the UK began to increasingly focus part of their activity on academic representation.

3.13 Even when the first professional representation staff members in students' associations were created, there were persistent problems with the basic building blocks of a coherently managed course rep system, such as access to the names and contact details of course reps, communicating with them, and liaising with the university staff who were also working with them. Indeed there was often considerable debate in universities about whether responsibility for course reps lay with the students' association or the university itself.

3.14 The development of the Quality Enhancement Framework in Scotland's universities, however, helped to emphasise the need for partnership working, allowing for clarity in the co-operation between universities and students' associations and leading to significant improvement and sustained level of development across the sector.

3.15 In 2011's *Learning from ELIR* QAA Scotland found "a determination and commitment to improve student engagement through strategic initiatives"[18] within the partnership working between universities and students' associations. For example, universities have worked more closely with their students' associations, clarifying responsibilities and expectations, and in some cases directly funding projects or sustaining existing funding, with an expectation that resources are put into the support of academic representation.

Case Study

In 2005 Glasgow Caledonian University established a project called 'Partners in Delivery' to look at how the university and students' association could develop a more partnership approach to working. Prior to this there was little support within the association for representative activities. As a result of the project the university agreed to fund a Student Development Co-ordinator who would support class reps, elected officers and their new student leaders programme. The post made a significant difference to the quality of support the association could offer and quickly evolved into two posts - one dedicated to the student leaders programme and the other into a student representative co-ordinator. The post led to a much closer working relationship between the university and the students' association with the improved class rep training programme, the introduction of one of the first class rep conferences and one of the earliest school officer systems.

3.16 In general, then, students' associations have been enabled to take more ownership of the course rep system, managing aspects such as training of course reps, management of data recording, liaison with departmental contacts, collation of issues raised, elections, mentoring, and external learning and sharing. In doing so they have developed better partnerships with the university which takes a much stronger interest and provides support for this role. This partnership has allowed a range of strategic developments.

Case study

In 2011-12 the University of the West of Scotland reviewed its student-staff liaison groups. Meetings have been changed to focus more on elements of the sparqs' Student Learning Experience, such as curriculum, assessment and feedback, and learning resources. Meanwhile "you said, we did" forms a standard agenda item to highlight successes, and meetings are now chaired by students.

Both the students' association and the university will now be working towards offering more support. The student representative training will be revised to include agenda setting and chairing meetings to give student representatives more confidence. Furthermore, additional support is provided to staff members with responsibility for student engagement in academic committees at both school and faculty level, to increase the continuity of support given to student representatives.

3.17 Furthermore, *Learning from ELIR* found that "[since] the first ELIR cycle, the small specialist institutions have made significant progress in formalising student representation at the strategic level, and are now looking to develop the opportunities for student engagement in strategy and policy matters."[19]

Course representatives

Training and support for course reps

3.18 Many students' associations have increased staff support specifically for the support of course reps, and the training of course reps is now an established feature of every university's annual cycle.

3.19 One university, for example, has described how in 2007 no course reps attended training due to problems with communication and management of the details of those elected. However, significant resource has since been invested in the students' association by the

university, through both a dedicated full-time sabbatical officer with an education remit and a dedicated staff member for academic representation. This has led to training being delivered to over 200 students in 2012-13, reinforced by online training materials.

Highland Theological College is one of the smallest academic partners of the University of the Highlands and Islands. It has around 150 students and ten teaching staff (both full-time and part-time). Like any small institution or department, staff and students are on first name terms and share informal feedback on a daily basis.

It could be argued that, in such an environment, any formal course representation would be unnecessary. However, even with such good informal communication, formal representative structures are still vital to the college, and the college has course reps for a number of reasons:

• Ownership – it is vital that students have a transparent, formal opportunity to influence their education, and formal representation on committees allows the institution to demonstrate to students their role in shaping it.

• Accountability – even if informal interaction is thoroughly effective for gathering student views, there are internal and external processes that make it important to have a formal record of what decisions are made on the back of any such interaction.

• Communication – representation works both ways and, in feeding back from the committees that they sit on, representatives help other students realise the wider context in which decisions and changes are made.

• Perspective – no matter how good the informal engagement with students is, representatives still sometimes bring analysis and ideas that staff simply haven't considered before.

• Development – representatives gain skills and can often move on to further levels of representation within the wider university context or even nationally. These opportunities simply wouldn't exist if the college depended solely on the informal aspect of engagement.

3.21 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 2003-06."[20]

3.22 A national training programme for course reps was one of the key priorities when sparqs was established and this training still forms a key part of our core provision. The focus on equipping students in this role to comment effectively on the sparqs' Student Learning Experience and work with staff to shape solutions and enhancements has been core to many of our developments and differs from other models around the world. It has ensured a large number of students in

Scotland are directly involved in contributing to developing quality.

3.23 The training content itself strongly reinforces the role of course reps as commenting on and working to enhance the Student Learning Experience. There is widespread assertion that student contributions are now more focused on this role as a consequence. Evaluation data from sparqs' course rep training regularly identifies large changes in student understanding of their role after undertaking the training. For example, in 2011, 96% of participants understood or fully understood their role, compared to 52% prior to the training.

3.20 It is also clear that course reps have been recognised not just at larger universities, where reps play a valuable role in communication between staff and students, but also even at smaller specialist institutions where staff-student interaction is easier.
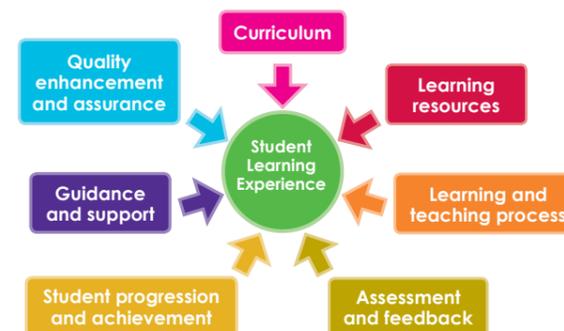
The Student Learning Experience.

3.24 The numbers of course reps trained directly by sparqs has grown over the years, from around 1000 in 2003-04 to over 2500 in 2010-11. However, this forms only a part of the total number of course reps trained across Scotland, as sparqs continues to support universities to develop and deliver their own training.

3.25 In 2005, sparqs began to move from delivering its training via its full-time staff to a model involving student trainers. A pilot was run in the University of the Highlands and Islands whereby a small team of students was recruited and trained to deliver sparqs' course rep training, and this model was expanded to the west of Scotland and then the whole country. Currently sparqs employs around twelve Associate Trainers, recruited from across the country and from both sectors, all of whom are, or have been, course reps, and who work for sparqs part-time alongside their studies.

3.26 A step on from this has been, since 2011, working with a growing number of universities to recruit and train their own teams of student trainers to deliver course rep training. In the first year of this Institutional Associate Trainer scheme three universities took part, and the number of participating universities now stands at eight.

3.27 These institutional training teams have the benefits of enabling a greater sense of local ownership of training, increased capacity in terms of numbers of sessions delivered, more relevant materials, and more locally-

aware trainers who have accurate knowledge of institutional examples, terminology and systems. This also provides an immediate and visible 'career development' for well-engaged course reps that has never existed before.

3.28 Moreover, course reps, institutional staff and the Associate Trainers themselves have noted that there has been significant added value in the course rep training being delivered by students, as they can speak from experience as fellow representatives who themselves are currently studying a course. Universities with their own training teams also comment on how these student trainers can help deliver other aspects of student engagement and have helped develop other activities such as student engagement in internal reviews or in faculty-level decisions.

3.29 Sectoral support mechanisms have been introduced by sparqs for those involved in managing course rep training. These include events such as materials development days, whereby effective practice in content and delivery can be shared, alongside important sector-level developments. This means that those involved in training within universities are better supported and networked, and can constantly review and enhance their delivery.

Of Scotland's universities in the academic year 2012-13:

• Four delivered their own training in systems independent of sparqs' delivery (though they still drew upon sparqs' sectoral resources and events to learn, share and develop).

• Seven were supported by sparqs to recruit institutional training teams to manage their own delivery.

• Seven received training directly from sparqs' Associate Trainer team.

• One institution, split across campuses, receives sparqs' training in one campus and has its own team in another campus.

3.30 The *sparqs' 2005 Mapping Report* into student engagement in the university sector found that there were "major concerns" about "…whether student representatives were themselves representative of their peer group" in that reps "often dwelt on negative points, which clearly did not reflect the more positive appraisal given courses by more informal feedback, or indeed by measuring the course by achievement."[21]

3.31 Today, though, the sparqs team regularly hears from university staff who feel course reps are more effective than previously, and readily attribute this improvement to the training. *Learning from ELIR* stated that "student representation at programme level is being strengthened with greater focus on the Student Learning Experience".[22]

3.32 Key developments discussed elsewhere in this report have also contributed to this change in focus, including the growth in events and forums aimed at course reps, and improved links with other levels of representation.

Course rep resources

3.33 Other developments in support have included effective definitions of the role, allowing students interested in becoming a course rep to fully appreciate the work involved, the likely commitment and the support they will have at their disposal. While in past years there may have been a tendency for course reps to define their own role, or leave details to training provided by sparqs or others, universities and students' associations have become increasingly thorough in recent years in agreeing and articulating this pivotal role.

3.34 A number of universities and students' associations have developed online resources for their course reps, addressing previously identified issues raised by representatives. Such resources are generally designed to supplement rather than replace face-to-face training, though often the materials do enable a level of support to be provided to representatives who have not attended training

or who study by distance learning and are not able to visit the campus.

3.35 Three universities use either the virtual learning environment or students' association website to run training and interactive chat facilities for representatives. Many more have more simple webpages for course reps that contain relevant resources such as university regulations, key staff and students' association contact details, training materials or the course rep handbook.[23]

3.36 For example, The University of Edinburgh has a detailed section of its website relating to course reps[24], including latest news for reps, training notes including guidance on communication and engaging with meetings, the course rep handbook, and information for staff who work with course reps. The website neatly summarises the responsibilities of course reps as to:

- Interact and identify with the group of students they represent.
- Identify student issues and needs.
- Participate in, and report back from, student-staff liaison committees.
- Provide feedback to students on issues discussed.
- Tap into training and support.

Accreditation and reward of course reps

3.37 While it is important for course representatives to know their role, institutions often say it is not just the job description that is important but also what a course rep can gain from undertaking the job. There has been increasing recognition, therefore, of the need for course reps to reflect on skills development, hence frequent link ups with volunteer accreditation programmes operating elsewhere in the institution. Course rep accreditation schemes often have roots in, or share features with, similar schemes for clubs and societies officers or volunteering programme participants. In one university, the accreditation and skills programme involves keeping a log, which is

available online, and participants get access to workshops from employers and a final interview to develop skills.

3.38 The Higher Education Achievement Report[25] (HEAR) is a recent initiative to create a standard national record of students' achievements. Section 6.1 of the report allows for the recording of extra-curricular activities such as work done as a course rep.

3.39 Such accreditation 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.

Course rep events

3.40 In the past course reps attended staff student liaison committee meetings and worked with academic staff to solve problems occurring at a course level. However, there was little opportunity for course reps to get together to share experiences or identify common issues across the university.

3.41 An important development, therefore, has been a rise in the number of opportunities for course reps to meet on a termly or annual basis in a conference or forum format. These events allow reps to network with each other and key staff including senior management, and create a space for discussion of current strategic issues relating to learning and teaching, the course rep experience, and university or students' association policy relating to the learning experience.

3.42 Topics that conferences have explored include coursework and assessment, academic feedback, resources for course reps, major curriculum restructuring projects, and the representation of 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 Scotland Enhancement Theme 'Graduates of the 21st Century'.

3.43 Currently, at least seven universities have course rep events ranging from conferences to forums, including 'learner lunches' at The University of Edinburgh, and this has been an area of substantial learning and sharing between universities. In all but one example, the course rep conferences are quite distinct from the course rep training which takes place at a different time and place.

The University of Strathclyde Students' Association calls its course rep conferences "Student Congress", and has held them annually for about six years.

In a major development in 2011 it was changed from an end of year event that focused on sharing best practice, to a start of year event to ensure course reps are fully aware of the issues as they enter into their roles.

The 2012 Student Congress saw attendance from around ninety course reps, with involvement from senior management that included an hour-long question and answer session with the Principal. Workshop subjects included the postgraduate student experience, the Higher Education Achievement Report and feedback.

The perception of students' association officers and staff, plus evaluation from participants themselves, suggests that the event is an important way of ensuring that course reps are fully equipped with a good understanding of the current learning and teaching priorities of the university, as well as giving them an opportunity to get to know one another and discuss future campaigns.

Departmental representation

3.44 The departmental level – which universities often call faculties, schools or colleges – is a crucial conduit that connects individual subject areas and courses with the institutional level. It can connect the practical, everyday experiences of individual students with the strategies and systems that govern the learning experience but may often seem invisible to the majority of students.

3.45 The development of new levels of representation was first highlighted as an area of positive practice in a university ELIR report in 2006 which stated that "The school officer role is an innovative approach to addressing the challenge of linking local and institutional representation, and represents good practice."[26] Now at least twelve universities have developed systems at this level. These vary from relatively new systems that are initially operational in just a small number of faculties or departments, through to ones that are well-established and have been operational and effective for some years. Understandably, those institutions who do not use such a system tend to be smaller or subject-specific.

3.46 These departmental representatives – often called School Presidents or School Officers – have become key channels of communication between course reps and senior students' association officers. Their work with course reps within each department has become a significant ingredient in the ability of students' associations to represent students in a comprehensive and evidence-based manner.

3.47 But importantly they are also a key channel of communication with teaching, management and administrative staff in their departments. 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.

At the University of St Andrews, School Presidents meet with deans, the Vice Principal (Proctor) who is responsible for learning and teaching, and the students' association's Director of Representation who is the lead student officer for learning and teaching.

This has been extremely useful in developing a range of concrete actions with the university including helping to shape key decisions around changes to the shape of the academic year

3.48 Representation at this level has led to improvements in connecting up representation between the strategic and operational. Such systems have been significantly more effective, therefore, when other tools are also in place – such as the resources and events for course reps mentioned earlier in this chapter.

The University of Stirling Students' Union underwent a staffing review in 2009, establishing new roles to support student officers and course representation. This increase in capacity allowed the union to undertake a review of the university's representative structures, identifying a key gap between course level representation and institutional level representation.

Over the past two years this gap has been closed through the introduction of a school level student representative. These reps operate as key contacts for course representatives at the grass roots and as subject level reps within the union, taking forward and advocating student feedback on course development as well as approaching learning and teaching from a more strategic perspective feeding into institutional policy.

As one school officer reports:

" Being a school officer has been an amazing opportunity. It has given me the chance to become more involved with the student representative process, my Student Staff Consultative Committee and in my school. Being able to provide a student voice at a level where there hasn't been any before was an amazing opportunity. I would recommend being School Officer as it is a worthwhile position to be in if you want to make a difference to your own and you peers' student experience. "

- Jessica Sweeney, School Officer, History and Politics

3.49 Some universities have introduced project work as a key part of a departmental representative's duties. This has involved research and campaign activity on key departmental or university-wide priorities, to better inform planning and decision-making.

At Heriot-Watt University over the last two years, school officers have been carrying out research into the university's mentoring system.

Initially this focused on finding out how the system worked in each department, and from this it spread into looking at how different years in different departments used mentors.

Once this research was conducted, it was clear that each department had a varied system and the next step was for the school officers to look at this and see if there was a single model that would fit the university. After much more debate and research the school officers realised that students appreciated the variety in mentoring, and creating a 'one size fits all' model for the university would disadvantage students.

This research was presented to the University Learning and Teaching Board, and has led to the university reviewing its mentoring policy taking the school officer findings into account.

The school officers then focused on research carried out by NUS UK into personal tutoring, and spent time ranking the ten different areas of its charter into the priorities for Heriot-Watt University. The findings from this were presented to the university's Learning and Teaching Board. Following on from this research, the board realised that the mentoring system at Heriot-Watt did need updating, and a staff survey on mentoring was carried out.

The results of the student research and the staff survey were then collated, and the key findings from both have now been adopted into university policy, and the university has employed new staff members to work with the mentors across the university to provide training and development for them.

3.50 sparqs recently produced a toolkit to assist institutions in developing and enhancing their departmental representative systems. It includes support in defining and filling the role, working with staff, and engaging with issues around the learning experience.[27]

Gathering and responding to student feedback

3.51 Module evaluation forms have been a mainstay of university quality systems for many years. However, such feedback was not always used systematically and students often could not see positive change as a result of their feedback.

3.52 The last few years, however, has seen an increasing focus on gathering and responding to student feedback effectively. In *Learning from ELIR*[28], ten out of the fourteen universities reviewed received positive comments on the work they were doing in this area. The type of issues commented on included the use of surveys/student opinion in making a difference to the learning experience; strategic and specific action planning resulting from student feedback; the development of a strategic approach to survey use; linking internal survey use with national surveys; and ensuring formal and informal means of collecting student opinion are balanced and linked.

3.53 In particular *Learning from ELIR* commented that "institutions are becoming increasingly aware of the need for consistent and effective communication back to students about the outcomes and actions taken in response to their feedback"[29]– a welcome development given the persistence of the problem of 'closing the feedback loop' in several studies. For instance, the 2009 HEFCE report, known as the CHERI report, stated that "An overarching and recurring theme from recent studies is the failure to 'close the feedback loop' and provide students with information about what consideration has been given to their views (provided via surveys and through student representatives), and what actions (if any) have been taken as a result."[30]

3.54 Many universities make regular use of "You Said… We Did…" in conjunction with module evaluations, allowing students to see the effects that the previous year's feedback had on shaping the module and reinforce the value of giving such feedback.

3.55 The introduction of the National Student Survey (NSS) in 2005, and to a lesser extent other national surveys including, Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey and Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (both HEA) and the International Student Barometer (i-graduate), have in some way provided an impetus for some of this work.

3.56 The NSS was, until recently, voluntary for Scottish universities, but has nevertheless seen participation continually increased with sixteen of the nineteen universities in Scotland participating in 2012. From 2013-14 it will be compulsory as part of the requirements for the Key Information Set (KIS).

3.57 Students have been actively involved in promoting and supporting student interaction with NSS results and importantly in working with universities on the analysis and subsequent action planning.

The University of Dundee recently identified from NSS data the need to further develop feedback on assessment, to improve student learning and the overall student experience. Staff and student officers worked with sparqs to develop a Feedback on Assessment Toolkit to help teaching staff and course representatives within the university's schools to talk about the challenges and identify opportunities for enhancement in relation to feedback on assessment.

The toolkits encouraged conversations around the underlying principles of feedback, different methods of feedback, and evaluating and sharing practice.

These toolkits were piloted within three schools and then rolled out across the university. Facilitated workshops are offered as part of the university's inspirED Educational Development programme and the toolkit is to form part of a new initiative being developed to support academic staff in programme leadership roles.

The toolkit has already encouraged reflection on practice within all the schools who participated in the initial pilots. For example, in response to discussions during a workshop, the School of Law is currently planning a redesign of their module evaluation form to explicitly gather student comments on assessment and feedback.

3.58 There is another interesting example at the University of Aberdeen.

At the University of Aberdeen, the three colleges of the university are required every year to write a response to their relevant NSS results, along with recommendations on what they would work on in the coming year to improve their results.

The students' association attended training provided by NUS UK to analyse the NSS results for themselves. They did this drawing their own conclusions and wrote a paper to the Academic Senate alongside the colleges' responses, with recommendations to the university.

This proactive response was well received by the university and resulted in a working group being formed with the Vice Principal of Learning and Teaching and the Directors of Learning and Teaching from each college, to work on solutions to the main issue, which was feedback on assessments and exams.

The work of this group resulted in a renewal of the university's feedback policy, a dedicated feedback website for staff and students, with examples about how to give back better feedback and use it for students' own benefit.
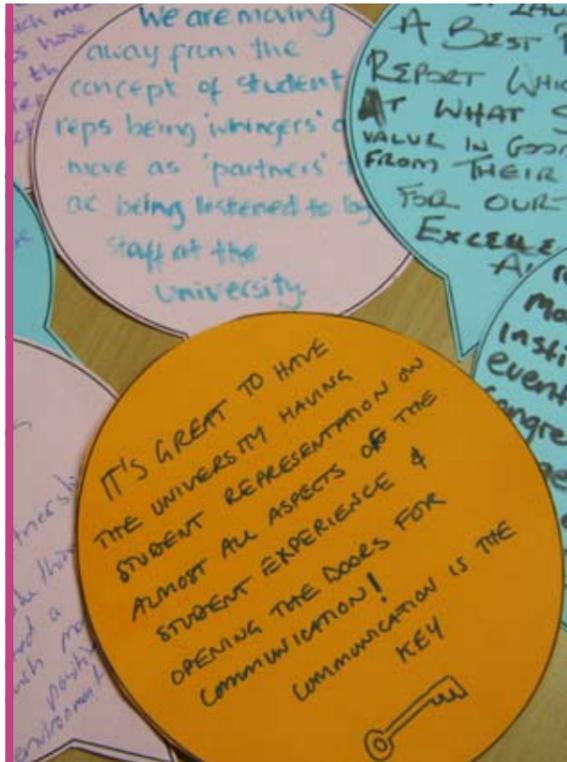
3.59 *Learning from ELIR* also found that

❛ institutions are increasingly using technology to communicate more directly with individual students, and especially to gather feedback online. ❜ [31]

3.60 For example, the 2012 ELIR report for The Robert Gordon University found, in relation to student feedback, that:

❛ There are clear and effective mechanisms for gathering and responding to student feedback. A new on-line 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. ❜ [32]

3.61 Whilst there has been a rise in the amount of work done by universities to capture student feedback through formal questionnaire activities, there has also been much growth in informal mechanisms as well.

3.62 Some of the most innovative examples of capturing informal engagement have been developed using technology in the classroom. Students have long voiced the view that their feedback does not lead to a resolution until they have moved on from the module. However, technology can allow for instant responses to be gained and immediate action to be taken, for instance in the delivery of a lecture. Personal response systems allow students in large classes each to use a small electronic box to answer questions – meaning lecturers can instantly test whether students have understood a certain concept, or what students think about the topic they are learning.

3.63 Focus groups have been another means of successfully gathering student views, and universities and students' associations have used them in a wide range of circumstances at both course and institutional level.

Case study

When the University of Aberdeen opened its new library, it was understandably a big development project that would take some adjustment for students, and indeed for staff in responding to the needs and feedback of students.

Class reps were invited to monthly focus groups in the period after the opening, in which they were able to contribute their feedback on how students were finding the library. Facebook and Twitter were also used to gather student views.

3.64 Focus groups have also been used by universities as a way of connecting senior management with the student view. At the University of Aberdeen, 2011-12 saw the introduction of meetings every six months where students can meet with the Principal and ask any questions they like.

Case study

At The Robert Gordon University, formally scheduled meetings between student representatives and the Principal at the university have now been held for over ten years, and following initial success these were extended to cover other members of senior management.

The mechanism was introduced to complement existing structures, and to provide an opportunity to gather first-hand feedback at an institutional-wide level.

All student representatives are invited to meet annually with their respective Dean of Faculty during Semester 1, and with the Principal and/or Deputy Principal during Semester 2. The Dean of Students and President (Education and Welfare) are also in attendance. The meetings are an informal opportunity to discuss any areas of interest with senior staff, and to highlight any positive, as well as developmental issues, representatives may have identified with classmates. The meetings also offer an opportunity for senior staff to seek opinion on certain aspects of the student experience.

A summary of institution-wide themes, and/or issues, arising across meetings is prepared and circulated to relevant schools and student-facing services for information and response as appropriate. School/course specific issues raised are also forwarded to relevant staff for consideration. The updated summary, including responses against the themes/issues raised, is considered by relevant committees and circulated to student representatives for information.

During session 2011-12 students in attendance indicated that, in general, they were satisfied with their experiences of the university and that courses met their expectations. Two specific examples of topics which were taken forward as a result of feedback are:

- Teaching and learning – operational aspects of the university's VLE.
- Campus environment – experiences of university accommodation.

3.65 While there are many examples of effective work in the area of feedback, *Learning from ELIR* nevertheless identified several continuing challenges. These include ensuring a balance between informal and formal systems of gathering student opinion, pulling together the results from a variety of surveys to influence policies and strategic developments, ensuring active participation from students, reaching hard to reach students, and closing the feedback loop. [33]

3.66 The *2010 CSET Report* also found that while 80% of staff respondents thought that students were interested in improving the quality of learning, only 35% of respondents thought that students currently actively participate in decisions about their learning experiences. [34] So there is clearly still much to do in translating student interest in learning into an active participation.

3.67 Overall, it is clear that much work has taken place in improving systems, investing in technology and making systems work. However there is still great potential in involving students more widely in the design, analysis and action planning from this type of data to fully untap the capability they have to co-create their learning experience.

Engaging the diversity of the student population

3.68 Universities have always struggled to fully engage groups of students who are often described as "non-traditional". Such groups include part-time, distance learning, postgraduate, international and mature students, plus students with special learning needs. Much research has been done in this area and a number of tools have been developed.

3.69 However, such groups have often been at the forefront of the rise in student

numbers and the move to widen access to higher education. As universities strive to make their learning more flexible and inclusive, it is vitally important that the means of engaging these students in commenting on and shaping their own learning also develops. This was and remains a challenge.

3.70 The increasing focus on internationalisation at institutional and sectoral levels has spurred a great deal of work on understanding the experiences of international students at Scottish universities. Through the *Students Without Borders* project, NUS Scotland and sparqs published a report in 2010[35] that mapped the experiences and involvement of international students across the sector. This led to a number of universities working to develop how they engaged their international students not only in learning and teaching, but in the university generally. The report highlighted a number of points for action, for example the need to better communicate the value and means of engagement, that are quite applicable to the wider student population as well.

3.71 The report was followed by a toolkit[36] produced by NUS Scotland that allowed students' associations to explore a range of activities from induction to academic support, to ensure that international students could be fully engaged and included in the life and work of their institution.

3.72 The International Student Barometer has also allowed universities to get a better sense of international students' perceptions of their learning experience, and the results can have significant impacts on a range of activities from marketing and recruitment through to learning, teaching and support services.

Case study

At The University of Edinburgh, findings from International Student Barometer (ISB) data are presented in an annual feedback session. In 2012-13, the university produced an executive summary picking out the key points and areas of interest, and planned further discussions about how it might address any shortcomings and to also consider the areas in which they are successful.

For example, a number of years ago the university's accommodation provision was flagged up in the ISB, with a variety of comments covering similar themes and low satisfaction scores. This was important for the university because international students are significant users of university accommodation so the findings altered the way that provision was delivered. This included changes to processes for booking and contracts as well as considering a wider array of support and events for students living in accommodation. Subsequent ISB data has shown a clear improvement in students' perceptions of accommodation.

Another area where feedback has been important to the university is in the area of assessment. For example, recent data has pointed to delays in students receiving feedback for coursework. The university's Senatus QA committee has worked with this issue and is currently in the process of identifying ways of improving the feedback timing and type for students.

Feedback from ISB data has also been used to target resources in areas which require improvement or to look at models and examples of where the university is being successful.

The university finds that ISB data often mirrors trends found in other surveys – such as user surveys or more formal routes like the National Student Survey. Nevertheless, it has still found ISB to be useful and some actions have clearly arisen from its results.

3.73 Another dimension to universities' internationalisation has been the many thousands of students studying at international sites managed or accredited by Scottish universities. For a number of years many universities have run sites throughout the world, especially in Asia, although there remains significant uncertainty among a number of students' associations about their capacity and role in representing the interests of these students. Engagement of these students by universities and students' associations is obviously a challenge. While there are some good examples such as rotational staffing or the establishment of representatives at international campuses, the resource implications of such models are clearly significant. For example, students at Heriot-Watt University play a role in the Student Senate at its Dubai campus.[37]

3.74 A big challenge also still exists in engaging students on postgraduate courses, both taught and research. While these represent a significant proportion of many universities' student profiles, many students' associations report difficulties in successfully engaging them, and this is an area where concerted sectoral activity could be of significant benefit.

3.75 There have been some notable successes. One students' association has described how the conventional approach of an unpaid elected officer to represent postgraduate students has not worked, and a better focus has been developed via a specific undertaking in the job description of the sabbatical officer for education. Meanwhile another university's students' association has introduced a dedicated new centre in which postgraduates can engage with the association and take part in a range of curricular and extra-curricular activities.

Case study

At Heriot-Watt University a system of postgraduate research representation was established in 2007. The system is similar to the school officer system at the university, and involves paying postgraduate research representatives a small honorarium to carry out the role.

They meet regularly with students' association staff and university postgraduate co-ordinators to work on representational and social activities. They have engaged with the results of the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey and developed programmes of change around issues identified. They also put on an annual academic conference.

Case study

Edinburgh University Students' Association (EUSA) runs a postgraduate network through its Postgraduate Action Group, which seeks to engage postgraduate students in the university community through professional and social development and networking opportunities. The network is currently developing, but events include consultations on study and research space, social opportunities, and sessions about business and entrepreneurship.

More information is available at http://www. eusa.ed.ac.uk/democracy-and-campaigns/ eusapostgrad/postgradnetwork/

3.76 There has also been some innovative work done across Scotland's universities to engage part-time students, who are of course often postgraduate students also.

Student-led teaching awards

3.77 One of the significant innovations in student engagement in recent years has been Student-Led Teaching Awards (SLTAs). Originally created by a small number of universities in Scotland, they were conceived as a way to encourage students to think positively about their education, to fill a perceived "gap in the market" for high-profile rewards for teaching, and to demonstrate the nature of constructive partnership at the heart of the learning experience.

3.78 In 2009-10, HEA and NUS Scotland ran a pilot project with a larger group of universities, and now the model is commonly used across the sector.[39] It has also spread to England, with 63% of HEIs running SLTAs.

3.79 SLTAs are annual, and typically involve nominations being sought from students for certain categories relating to the learning experience, such as best feedback on assessment or best course. A judging panel consisting of student officers and sometimes staff then assess the nominations (which can sometimes number in the thousands) by both quality and quantity, and awards are then presented.

3.80 Interestingly, while evidence suggests that ordinary students do not necessarily view their involvement in the awards as "engagement", the large numbers of students involved in nominations across Scotland's universities represents a significant number to be involved in shaping and commenting on the Student Learning Experience.

3.81 HEA has recently produced a report that highlights the lessons learned and opportunities presented by SLTAs, stating that they are:

" • A positive way to build and develop good relationships between the student body and their institution.

 • An immensely popular and morale-building opportunity to bring students and staff together to celebrate success and mutual appreciation.

 • A promising way to find out more about what students value most in their learning experience, including their conceptions of excellence in teaching. " [40]

3.82 The report charts SLTAs' rapid rise and hugely positive impact, including on evidence for staff development, on students' association engagement of its membership, and on student perceptions of excellence in teaching and learning. It describes SLTAs as a "considerable success" and "a unique framework for the strengthening and development of staff-student relationships and of union-institution partnerships."

Chapter 4

Element 4: formal mechanisms for quality and governance

Introduction to the element

4.1 The fourth element of the *SE Framework* focuses on the formal engagement of students in institutional structures – primarily conducted by representatives and officers of the students' association, such as departmental reps or executive officers with academic remits.

4.2 This engagement is characterised by partnership, meaning that the relationship between senior management and senior students' association officers should be about working together towards a common goal, both fully involved and regarding each other as equally valid participants.

4.3 The *SE Framework* explains:

> " 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. " [41]

Chapter three discussed the benefits this strengthening partnership has brought to the improvement of representative systems and how this has been an important factor in developing a considered student viewpoint from which the university can learn. In this chapter we discuss the often more formal ways in which this partnership has developed at the institutional level.

4.4 The chapter explores the element via the following sections:

- Partnership between university and students' association.
- Student involvement in formal review processes.
- Student involvement in major organisational change.
- Student Partnership Agreements.

Partnership between university and students' association

4.5 The relationship at the highest level between students' associations and universities has been increasingly characterised by a strengthening partnership. In past years, engagement at a formal institutional level was less effective, with minimal student engagement in major change projects and significant variation in the uptake and effectiveness of student places on committees.

4.6 Partly this improvement can be attributed to the enhancement-led model of quality that is now shaping quality and more powerfully focusing universities' attentions on learning and teaching – as can be seen, for instance, in the increasing importance of university learning and teaching committees. But another factor is an increased focus on learning and teaching matters on the part of students' associations, who historically tended to be more active in areas of political campaigning, social and cultural activities, and commercial operations.

4.7 In many ways this is a cultural shift over many years that is hard to measure and quantify, but it is nevertheless a key theme in conversations sparqs regularly has with students and staff.

4.8 The shift has, however, also been evident through external review. For example, following the University of Glasgow's 2004 ELIR, the report commented that:

> " The University and the SRC [Students' Representative Council] 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. " [42]

But 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. " [43]

4.9 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.

4.10 In *Learning from ELIR* ten out of the fourteen universities 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." [44]

4.11 Many of the practices we highlight throughout this report have helped to develop this partnership. A significant feature has been increasing 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. [45]

4.12 However by 2010, as noted in the *2010 CSET Report*, 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. " [46]

4.13 The findings of the *2010 CSET Report* cited in paragraph 1.6 of this report illustrate the seriousness with which senior student representatives are being treated by universities. In its research, CSET was told by respondents that they felt that university management and academic staff took a real interest in feedback from students (90% and 60% agreed respectively).[47]

4.14 During sparqs' 2012 Annual Support Visits, there was a clear enthusiasm and regard from senior staff for the contribution from senior officers, with several examples of places on committees being extended and student officer roles being strengthened. Many universities commented that there was virtually no committee where students were not represented and commented that officers were effective and enthusiastic. Student officers are also involved in a wide range of working groups, informal discussions, plus events such as learning and teaching conferences, senior management away days, and strategic planning forums.

4.15 In the past, student officers have claimed that they would need to pursue opportunities to engage with senior staff, and some committees would be deemed by the university to be too sensitive or technical for student involvement. Today, however, the reverse is almost the case, in that students' associations are increasingly influential and credible, and university management are now frequently seeking ever more opportunities to engage with officers at this level.

4.16 There are a number of drivers to which this shift can be attributed. Firstly, senior student representation has been increasingly well supported, with an emphasis on empowering committee chairs and clerks, supporting representatives themselves with distinct training, and providing better connection to students' association policy-making.

4.17 Secondly, just as increased staff resource has been a key ingredient in improved course representation, it is also important at the strategic level. Such staff roles tend to include supporting senior officers in their committee preparation, alongside other representational support such as the course rep system – and of course creating a clear connection between the two levels.

4.18 Meanwhile, as with departmental representatives, senior student officers at the university level depend on access to reliable data and experiences from course representatives. Therefore the importance of departmental representatives and networking opportunities for course reps has been crucial to the effectiveness of senior officers.

4.19 Ultimately however, there is a now a shared understanding between staff and students at all levels that a strong partnership between universities and students' associations is a crucial contributing factor to quality enhancement.

Student involvement in formal review processes

4.20 When student reviewers were introduced as members of ELIR teams in 2003, it was considered a particularly innovative and distinctive step, and was noteworthy internationally. Today, students are a playing a fully established and unquestionably central role in ELIR teams.

4.21 At the same time as the introduction of student reviewers in ELIR, universities were also encouraged to consider similar roles for students in internal processes such as subject review. By 2005, ten out of Scotland's then twenty-one universities were receptive to, or had started to include, student reviewers in this way. Yet student membership of internal review teams is now standard practice in all nineteen universities today.

4.22 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."[48]

4.23 Student reviewers have often have a key role in checking whether students were involved in the creation of the self-evaluation document, and may or may not lead on the student-related parts of the review's agenda.

4.24 Students in ELIR teams are, of course, recruited by QAA Scotland. The role of student reviewer in internal review is normally incorporated into departmental or faculty representative roles, though in a small number of universities the role is undertaken by an executive officer with an education responsibility. Universities tend to view the student reviewer role, not least for internal reviews, as a key opportunity for representatives' personal development, and reviewers' experiences will often help them in moving into more senior representative roles.

4.25 There is also, of course, significant student engagement in the other side of the table, so to speak. It has long been common for review panels to meet with students to hear their views about their learning, but there is now a move to a deeper engagement too, as universities and departments seek to work with students in preparing for and undergoing the review. Student officers such as departmental representatives are widely involved in a variety of tasks such as preparing materials, identifying strengths and weaknesses, writing the self-evaluation document, and meeting with the review panel. Effectively, it is not the job of students to simply validate or otherwise the claims put forward by the department, but to be a part of identifying and shaping those claims.

4.26 Interestingly, one students' association has reported instances where internal review panels have asked to meet "ordinary" students who do not have any representative roles, and such students have often not fully understood the enhancement nature of the process, and have shown a very defensive sense of pride

in their department. While this, at least, demonstrates good relationships at the course level between staff and students, the difference between this input and the constructive criticism of prepared reps was noted.

When The Robert Gordon University was preparing its reflective analysis for its recent ELIR, the lead writer asked the students' association to provide comment on a draft version. They in turn invited sparqs to assist by providing an external view. sparqs staff analysed the draft, identified key extracts that related to the learning experience, and turned these into questions for a student focus group.

From this process the university received useful student input that sometimes challenged the claims being made, but in many more cases actually strengthened the document's claims by providing new perspectives and evidence that the lead writer had not previously considered.

Student involvement in major organisational change

4.27 It is important, of course, not simply to engage student representatives in the regular processes of enhancement that are found in annual or periodic review mechanisms. Occasionally, institutions undertake processes that radically reshape the nature of their institution or curriculum, such as reorganising faculties and departments, reforming the curriculum, or indeed mergers with other institutions. The student view can be crucial in this stage, because of course the primary purpose of any such major reform should be to achieve a positive change to the learning experience.

4.28 Such major changes often include curriculum reform, and where this is happening in Scotland, students are being put at the heart

of discussions about what the curriculum looks like and how it is organised.

In the University of Aberdeen's recent process of curriculum reform, students were involved throughout. At the very beginning, senior student officers were part of the steering group. This included visiting universities in other countries such as Australia and Hong Kong to discover what they were doing. Two senior student officers were invited to the committee to explore wide ranging impacts.

During implementation years, departmental reps were involved in curriculum reform at the school level. The nature of reform brought about more interdisciplinary subjects, which brought more students from different disciplines together. Student-staff liaison committees focused on curriculum reform changes and staff received increased feedback from course reps, leading to change.

The success of reform is a testament to the developing partnership between the students' association and the university as both were part of the formulation and implementation, and students continue to shape the direction of the curriculum.

4.29 Staff and students at another university have described how they felt that the last few years were spent on developing better systems, and only now they are starting to bed in is their attention turning towards using those systems to create an agenda for change. Students at this university have been involved deeply in discussions about the curriculum, and have been directly responsible for suggesting changes such as new modules, the introduction of sustainability as a key concept, and student contributions to lecturer training events.

The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland has recently redesigned their curriculum, and both staff and students were heavily involved in its redesign. There was a small working group that was responsible for curriculum design and communication, which had both staff and students as members.

This group developed a wide variety of ways for staff and students to engage with the curriculum changes. One example was using a large room for any staff or students to come and share their thoughts, ideas, questions, and present any work that they had completed as part of curriculum design. All of these comments were taken into consideration by the small working group.

As a result, through the work of curriculum reform, staff and students now feel that students are co-creators/owners of their education experience.

Glasgow School of Art's Product Design Engineering course recently held a "Design a First Year" event. Its purpose was to ask graduating students for suggestions as to how the first year of the course might best prepare students for subsequent years. The event was attended by eighteen students (almost half the graduating students). Food and drinks were offered and there were three activities. In the first, the students were asked to come up with an exhaustive list of things that the first year might usefully do for students. In the second, they were asked to think of themes for the first year (such as "learning how to make stuff"). In the third activity they were asked to sketch out a project-by-project plan for the year.

The students – who admittedly were self-selecting and thus probably over-represented the able/keen/confident element of the student body – responded with vigour. The most prominent suggestions were shorter projects in first year, greater concentration on developing drawing skills, and looking at ways for first year students to get an idea of what it is like to be a designer.

Staff made efforts to act on the first two suggestions in the following academic year, though the students struggled with planning a first year due to a lack of time.

Student partnership agreements

4.30 Introduced by the Scottish Government's review of post-16 education,[49] Student Partnership Agreements[50] present opportunities to reflect the distinctive, less consumerist, and enhancement-based nature of the relationship Scottish institutions have with their students and student representative bodies.

4.31 A sparqs working group, made up of staff and student representatives from interested institutions and sector agencies, identified a model of agreement which was most suited to Scottish institutions. Rather than setting out expectations for staff and students within the institution, the Student Partnership Agreement shows students the various ways in which they can work together with staff to enhance their learning experience. A second section emphasises the partnered relationship between an institution and its students' association, and identifies areas for enhancement upon which the institution and students' association will work together during the next academic year.

4.32 The work so far has involved strong co-operation, not just between students' associations and institutions, but also between institutions and sector agencies. The Student Partnership Agreement guidance has been welcomed by many universities, and it is

hoped to be taken on as part of a wider strategic planning process in colleges following regionalisation. It is anticipated that Student Partnership Agreements will draw attention to the relationship between institutions and their students' associations, and in this way strengthen the partnership approach in the Scottish sector.

Case study

In July 2013, The University of the Highlands and Islands became the first university in Scotland to launch a new Student Partnership Agreement. sparqs supported the development of the document, which sets out how students and staff can work together to improve the student experience.

The agreement was signed by university principal and vice-chancellor, James Fraser, and University of the Highlands and Islands Students' Association (UHISA) president, Rachel Parker (pictured right).

The document was developed in light of recommendations in the Post-16 Education Green Paper which advocated all Scottish universities to have a Student Partnership Agreement with their student association. The government hoped the agreements would highlight how students can influence the life of their university and set out areas which staff and students can work on together to improve the student experience.

The university contributed to the sparqs working group which developed the agreements at a national level and the Student Partnership Agreement emphasises the importance the university places on its students and their experience by ensuring staff work with the students' association to enhance the areas students feel most strongly about.

Areas which the university and its students will focus on this year include finalising and implementing a social experience policy and extending the activities and resources used to promote student mental health.

Influencing the student experience at national level

Introduction to the element

5.1 This chapter relates to the fifth element of the *SE Framework* – the engagement of students in decisions made at a sectoral level about learning and teaching quality. To quote the framework directly:

" 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. " [51]

5.2 This is not always easy. Engagement in national activities is widely recognised as a good development for senior students' association officers because it provides a better context for local discussions, and this in turn helps to inform their work in their own universities. However, there is a feeling among some student officers that without adequate support it is hard to find the time to engage effectively at this level.

5.3 The chapter will explore the *SE Framework* through the following sections:

- Student engagement in national committees and agencies.
- The Enhancement Themes.
- National student subject networks.

Student engagement in national committees and agencies

5.4 Students have long been members of national committees, such as those governing the SFC or QAA Scotland, and many national committee positions date from the time of the introduction of the Quality Enhancement Framework. However today student engagement on such bodies is more widespread and effective. For instance, the SFC's Joint Quality Review Group in 2007 was chaired by a national student officer.

5.5 NUS Scotland, in conjunction with sparqs, has developed support systems for student reps on national committees, as well as other senior university student officers, ensuring they are informed and fully briefed on the range of issues discussed.

5.6 Sector agencies have also done work to explore the nature of student engagement and how students are involved in their own decisions. QAA Scotland, for example, developed its own student engagement strategy to outline how it engages students in its own work, and this has been more recently updated and incorporated into QAA Scotland's publication *Strategic Directions, 2012-16*[52] and expressed through its regular joint work with sparqs. QAA Scotland also provides a network for students involved in reviews.

5.7 NUS Scotland and sparqs, naturally, provide a range of forums in which students can interact and shape the national debate, and support the work of students involved not just in national committees but other activities such as

sector events, Enhancement Themes and international activities.

5.8 In 2008-09, the SFC funded a project managed by NUS Scotland to support national student engagement. The Student Learning Enhancement and Engagement Committee has since evolved to become NUS Scotland's Education Network.

5.9 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.

5.10 Meanwhile a more specific gathering, the Education Core Group has been created and supported by sparqs and NUS Scotland for student members of national sectoral committees. Its aim is to discuss and share perspectives on the work and priorities of national committees and sector bodies, to help student members gain a better understanding of the national picture and be more effective in their work. The group involves students from both the university and college sectors together, enabling a useful sharing of practice and developments between the two sectors.

5.11 Student representatives, including from NUS Scotland, are involved in a number of such bodies. These include the SFC's University Quality Working Group, QAA Scotland's Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee and Universities Scotland's Teaching Quality Forum; as well as a range of sectoral and governmental bodies and working groups.

The enhancement themes

5.12 The Enhancement Themes have, since their establishment, provided a great opportunity for universities to share practice on topical issues that are facing the sector as a whole. While students have always been strongly encouraged to take part in the work of Enhancement Themes, the student role at an institutional level was formalised in 2009-10 when it became a requirement for universities to have a student member on their teams for each theme.

5.13 Outputs from Enhancement Themes have often highlighted work done in the sphere of student engagement, such as student feedback tools and student engagement in developing the curriculum and developing personal attributes.

5.14 Students on institutional teams tend to be student officers active within the education or academic representation realm. There are significant support needs here, in terms of understanding issues, researching the range of materials, and negotiating with staff. However, support is increasingly being provided at a sectoral level by sparqs, to ensure that student institutional team members are able to work together to share experiences in the form of the Enhancement Themes Student Network and this approach is being continually assessed and improved on.

5.15 At a national level, student engagement in Enhancement Themes ranges from senior officers delivering key note addresses at conferences, to writing papers for national committees, and from writing newsletter articles to facilitating focus groups with students to get their opinions.

5.16 There is some sense from across the sector that student engagement has been a struggle for students because often themes have been perceived as less relevant to student needs and interests, and that more recent themes have been easier to engage in. However, with 'feedback' and 'the first year experience' being past topics, this increased engagement may also be due to increased support provided to universities.

Indeed, students have often been a part of projects funded from Enhancement Themes and have even led them.

Case study

The University of Stirling Students' Union recently completed a project, funded by Enhancement Themes money, that attempted to highlight the difficulties faced by students who were working towards a joint degree and how the schools' lack of communication was having negative effects to the students. A student survey was created in order to obtain data on timetabling clashes, assignment clashes and also the level of academic support in place to joint degree students.

The data from the survey backed the need for increased academic support across joint degree programs (mainly in the form of personal tutors), and also for more communication between schools when they have joint degree programs running, in order to ensure that there are not two deadlines due on the same day for each school.

5.17 Universities are increasingly adopting a variety of other techniques to engage students in their own Enhancement Themes work.

Case study

The University of the West of Scotland has taken a number of innovative approaches to engaging students in the Enhancement Themes.

With the 'Graduates for the 21st Century' theme, the university engaged students from their second year of study in discussions around the theme, and kept those students on in later years. Given that the theme operated over three years, this allowed for continuity in student engagement, leading to a deeper and richer understanding for both staff and students.

With the 'Developing and Supporting the Curriculum' theme, the university asked its departments to "tender" for work, presenting how they would progress the issues raised by the theme. Students were asked to be involved in the design, presentation and implementation of these departmental projects.

National subject level engagement

5.18 The sector has, from time to time, explored the opportunity for students to engage with peers beyond their own institution. While much good work has been done by students' associations and universities to engage students in internal discussions about the nature of the student experience, there is an increasing awareness that students have much to learn and share from other universities. For instance, just as staff have found great value in national networking with equivalents, so it has been recognised that a course rep may have just as much to learn from reps in the same subject at a different university, than reps from different subjects at the same university.

5.19 Obviously where a subject is taught in a number of places across the country, universities that teach it will often differ greatly in terms of the interests and expertise of staff, the nature of industrial and workplace links, class sizes, teaching techniques and library resources. There are many good ways of teaching a subject, and students have gained a useful sense of context and critical capacity when reflecting on their learning experience if equipped with comparative examples.

5.20 sparqs and HEA first explored ways of providing opportunities for this type of discussion through a pilot project of National Student Subject Networks in a number of subjects,[53] which provided some interesting discussions and helped develop future strategies for this area of work.

5.21 More recently sparqs has worked with HEA to undertake a scoping exercise to investigate where opportunities already exist for students to meet around discipline or professional areas, and ways in which these existing networks could be exploited.

5.22 There is a sense from sector practitioners that such networking could be beneficial in developing conversations about quality, building upon wider industrial networks that offer, for instance, student competitions or professional memberships. This remains an area of work that the sector has yet to fully exploit.

Conclusions

Introduction

6.1 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. An example of the major cultural change that has taken place can be found in the following overview of the work undertaken at Heriot-Watt University.

Case study

Heriot-Watt University came 4th amongst universities in the UK for overall student satisfaction in the National Student Survey 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.

It 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.

6.2 The way that the sector has risen to challenges and developed some innovative practice demonstrates that there is a clear desire to continue advancing student engagement by ensuring that the role of students is deeper and more meaningful in the fullest possible range of issues.

6.3 Importantly, there is a consensus in the Scottish sector that a partnership and enhancement model, where students play a full and equally valuable part in shaping and developing the learning experience, should be progressed. This contrasts with some of the pressures on approaches elsewhere in the UK resulting from consumer oriented national policy initiatives. Nevertheless, student engagement and the 'Students as Partners' initiative are now developing elsewhere.

6.4 Obviously there are commonalities across the UK, and the introduction of the Quality Code[54] across the UK's university sector re-affirms the shared expectations and indicators of quality across the nations. But, for the first time this shared understanding includes a dedicated chapter on student engagement that sets out the practices expected of universities, including that they should "in partnership with their student body, define and promote the range of opportunities for any student to engage in educational enhancement and quality assurance."[55]

6.5 However, a number of other developments are specific to the direction that the Scottish sector is taking. The introduction of Curriculum for Excellence in Scottish schools, for example, means that students will expect to be engaged in their learning and in the shaping of it, and universities and students' associations will need to respond to this assumption that engagement is built into the learning experience.

6.6 There is debate about the usefulness of the current developments in public information and how well the UK standard captures the nature of provision in Scotland and how useful this is to student engagement in its widest terms.

6.7 Further steps will be required to meet these challenges and as with those taken in past years, will be partly about structures and partly about cultures. A great deal of work has been done, and lies ahead, in developing effective systems and practices from the course level to the most strategic sectoral levels. However underpinning this is a culture of partnership, where those structures are brought to life by discussions between staff and students about how partnership can help bring about further progress and enhancements.

6.8 Past successes are numerous. Student engagement has led to a great many enhancements at the course and department level – relating, for instance, to individual and class-based changes in learning, action plans built around data from surveys, and focus groups that explore everything from academic feedback to personal mentoring. But at the university level, too, there has been impact on topics from reforms of curriculum or the academic year, through to changes to libraries and virtual learning environments, and development of graduate skills. Throughout, student contributions have been increasingly well respected and credible.

6.9 In short, student engagement in Scotland is building from a strong and internationally renowned baseline. That said, there is rightly a caution against complacency because it is clear from research, including that undertaken specifically for this report, that there is still much to be done and there is a growing emphasis on this work elsewhere from which we can also learn. QAA UK have a student engagement team; as do HEA, who are supporting a stream of work referred to as 'Students as Partners'; and NUS UK have just secured funding for a new HEFCE-funded Higher Education Student Engagement Unit. To some extent this is about "getting the basics right", but the effective practice evident throughout the sector, plus the considerable networking and sharing opportunities that are available, should give staff and student officers confidence that this can be achieved.

6.10 Based on the evidence of this report and the ongoing work sparqs undertakes with universities, it is suggested that four key challenges face the sector in the near future that can fully realise the potential of partnership. They are:

1. Ensuring that student representative structures are professionally supported, well-resourced and effective.

2. The inclusion of all students in engagement, including traditionally unengaged students such as postgraduates, distance learners and others.

3. The increased engagement of students in questions around curriculum design.

4. Improved support for students engaged at the national level.

6.11 These topics have long been challenges within universities. The fact that many of these mirror the recommendations of the *2005 sparqs' Mapping Report* into student engagement in the university sector (as outlined in chapter one) suggests that tackling them in partnership at institutional and sectoral level will remain a challenge and opportunity for the years ahead.

Effective representative structures

6.12 Over recent years there have been significant improvements in how universities and students' associations recruit, support, train and learn from their course reps. Indeed, given that some years ago many universities simply would not know how many course reps they had or who was responsible for them, it represents great progress that a range of face-to-face and online tools are now being used to help course reps engage fully with the different elements of the student experience, are being treated as equal partners by staff, and are having a real impact on shaping institutional strategy.

6.13 However, there are still instances where not all course reps access training, and their impact has not been sufficiently measured. Whilst the format and level of discussion of course rep meetings have improved there are still many instances where the discussion focuses on day-to-day problem solving rather than wider learning and teaching issues and they remain an under-utilised resource. Departmental representative systems are also not universal, meaning that there can often be a disconnection between "front line" and strategic considerations on the learning experience, and where senior officers simply do not have access to a broad enough range of student views.

6.14 Further, while a number of universities have implemented good systems of module feedback, there are still examples of low take-up rates and students not being fully involved in designing feedback tools or analysing their results.

6.15 Therefore ensuring that the basic infrastructure of feedback and engagement is in place throughout universities is still a challenge. Work needs to be done that involves student representatives and a variety of teaching and quality staff in ensuring that systems are comprehensive and effective while still being relevant and specific to universities.

Inclusion of all students

6.16 Allied to this is the problem that universities across the sector continue to report difficulties in engaging a range of non-traditional students. These include international students, postgraduates, part-time and distance learning students, and others.

6.17 A range of practice exists, including use of dedicated officers, student societies and other initiatives, that attempt to understand the issues of, and engage, such students. However, staff and students across the sector identify that much progress can still be made, not

least with postgraduate students who are a considerable proportion of many universities' student profiles.

6.18 By exploring and developing a range of methods of involving many different groups of students, the sector can increase its understanding of, and response to, the challenge of engaging them.

Curriculum design

6.19 There is a sense across the sector that students are increasingly, effectively engaged in many aspects of the Student Learning Experience, but that creation of the curriculum is one area where staff-led design remains dominant. There are excellent examples throughout the sector of innovative practice in encouraging students to think about what they would like to learn and how they would like to learn it, conversations which present important and powerful impressions to students that learning is something they must help to shape rather than simply sit back and experience.

6.20 This presents implications for a range of activity from professional academic development and educational research, through to academic regulations and student induction. There is a challenge, therefore, for universities and students' associations to work in-depth together on exploring how students can be fully engaged in the life of a course – right from its inception.

6.21 By drawing together the experiences of staff development managers, student officers, heads of faculties and sector practitioners, conversations can take place that better capture, understand and disseminate practice in this area, and encourage students and staff together to think more deeply about how they can develop a curriculum that even further revolves around the student.

6.22 This very strongly depends on students conceptualising their learning as not just within a university but within a nationwide network of students studying the same subject. So there is significant opportunity here for meaningful and useful student engagement at the national subject level, and for national structures to explore how they can draw on differing student experiences.

The national level

6.23 While students are at the heart of a range of decisions at the sectoral level, there is a feeling that more can be done to make students in universities, particularly senior student officers, more aware of, and engaged in, national discussions.

6.24 This is not simply about engaging students in national decision-making, but about linking this to the local dimension by creating ever-stronger arenas for learning and sharing practice from within universities. While there has been an enhancement in the networking and sharing for students and staff engaged in developing student engagement, there is also an opportunity for course reps and others to consider developments at the national subject level.

6.25 Student officers, and indeed the staff that work with them, describe how engagement in national forums can contribute to more effective and informed student engagement, but time and resources can often be a barrier to this. By better engaging students in discussions at this level, a greater impact can be felt within universities as knowledge and experience is more easily transferred and shared.

Conclusion

6.26 While it is tempting to regard some issues as a "final frontier" for student engagement, the nature of enhancement means that new challenges and dimensions will always loom on the horizon. What the next wave of challenges beyond those highlighted in this report are, time will tell. But clearly, there is no "end game" to enhancement, and given the continually changing student population, no "end game" to student engagement either.

6.27 That said, this report has aimed to celebrate some of the milestones already achieved, while identifying some of the next ones. The example case study from Heriot-Watt University in paragraph 6.1, for instance, serves to illustrate how sustained activity in developing student engagement can lead to improved outcomes.

6.28 What is key to many of these successes and milestones has been the resourcing of student engagement. When students' associations and universities have allocated sustainable, professional resource to supporting and developing student engagement, it has proved to be effective. Moreover, such resource allows student engagement not just to be about sustainable structures, but relevant and useful conversations that come out of them. By investing in student engagement, the sector has made, and can continue to make, those conversations ones that keep students at the heart of learning, teaching, quality and governance.

6.29 The challenge now is to ensure we use these resources and processes to deliver student-centred enhancements in a partnered way. Indeed, the introduction of Student Partnership Agreements[56], an outcome of the Scottish Government's post-16 review[57], will be an important development in enshrining and advancing this partnership. They will help to capture and monitor the work done on student engagement within universities and across the sector, and will prioritise work on areas still to be addressed, such as those priorities mentioned earlier in this chapter. Above all, they will ensure a focus on enhancement of the student experience and will put evidence at the heart of the process.

6.30 By continuing to draw on the strength of the sector, such as its collegiate approach, the concept of enhancement, and the strong sense of partnership between staff and students, the sector stands in good stead to face the challenges of the future.

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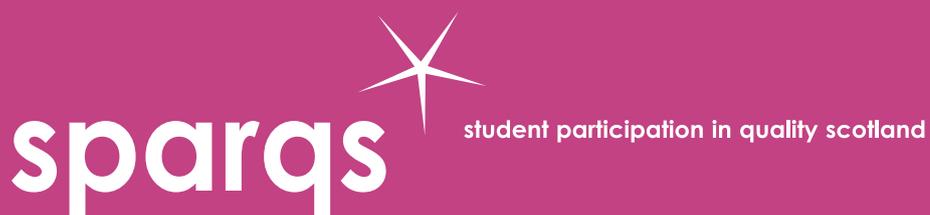
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