



**sparqs**

student participation in quality scotland



Annual  
Report 2013-14



# Contents



---

---

---

---

---

Support students to engage at all levels in enhancing their educational experience

---

Support the development of practices and activities in institutions and their students' associations that encourage and support student engagement

---

Support student engagement with national sector agencies and policy developments

---

Support the development of a culture of student engagement across Scotland

## Professor Norman Sharp OBE Independent Chair of sparqs Steering Committee

The role of sparqs as the key agency supporting the effective contribution of students in shaping the student experience in Scotland has never been more important. This is particularly true in supporting the strategies of the institutions and Scottish Government in widening access, and supporting effective transitions and partnerships between school and tertiary education, and also between college and university. I am delighted with the progress made in new areas, including work with HEA on co-creation of embedded equality and diversity in the curriculum and work on articulation with ELRAH. The focus of sparqs' support on developing effective and dynamic partnerships and enabling students to bring their perspectives and expertise to our enhancement activities is a real strength. Through this strength, the student experience will be enhanced and our institutions will be stronger in addressing national and global challenges. This year a particular focus of our work has been to support

students to contribute effectively during the regionalisation within the college sector; supporting flexible learner journeys; and, responding to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. These are all challenges where an effective student voice will continue to underpin effective and student-centred approaches to learning and teaching.

The work of sparqs this year has, yet again, been a credit to the dedication of the team and their tireless energy and professionalism, which ensures their work continues to advance Scotland's position as a centre of excellence in student engagement – widely commented on both throughout the UK and internationally. It is a privilege to be in the position, as Chair of sparqs, to thank the team for their continuing unstinting efforts, and to commend this report to you.



## Eve Lewis Head of sparqs

The team have continued to amaze me with their dedication and hard work during another busy year. The successes outlined in this report would not have been possible without their commitment and I am extremely proud of everything they have achieved.

When we reported last year on another great year for Course Rep Training, I never imagined we would be able to increase that delivery by 27% again this year whilst still maintaining such high satisfaction rates. Those 4,200 students are out there helping shape the student experience in our colleges and universities and are the bedrock of student engagement in Scotland.

The Student Engagement Framework is continuing to provide a base for student engagement, including supporting the development of strategies, helping explore new areas of work such as articulation and creating continued interest internationally. We are particularly pleased that our visit to New Zealand resulted in our hosts successfully securing funding which they hope will lay the groundwork for a sparqs type agency.

The adoption of Student Partnership Agreements (SPAs) by many institutions following the publication of our

guidance last year is encouraging. As students' associations in colleges have continued to develop, SPAs have proved extremely useful in helping to develop joint ways of working. We are delighted that continued funding from the SFC will allow us to provide in-depth support for colleges wishing to take forward SPAs and other areas of student engagement. On that note I must take this opportunity to applaud all those staff and students in colleges who have worked so hard to develop their students' associations and achieve so many successes.

As always, we are also looking forward to the next challenges and are starting to develop plans around new areas of work including the upcoming Quality Enhancement Framework review, the new QAA Student Transitions Enhancement Theme and Developing Scotland's Young Workforce recommendations to continue to ensure students remain at the heart of developments in Scotland. We look forward to working with you again next year in these exciting developments.



## Strategic plan

We are now moving into the second year of our five-year strategic plan, which takes us up to 2018. Our work over the past year sees us well underway with our new operational plan, mapping out our work areas, including several exciting new projects, and the challenges and opportunities which the next few years will bring.

Our strategic aims, while ambitious, are practical and rooted in the experiences of students and institutions; through our operational plan we will deliver meaningful,

useful support to students, colleges, universities, students' associations and sector agencies. Our work will continue to provide the resources, advice and research that can underpin truly effective student engagement and real changes and enhancements to the learning experience throughout Scotland.

You can read our strategic plan for 2013-18 in full on our website.

This annual report highlights our work during the past year, through the prism of our four strategic aims.

### Vision

Students making a positive and rewarding difference to their own and others' educational experience, helping shape the nature of learning and contributing to the overall success of Scotland's universities and colleges

Inspires



### Mission

Ensure that students are able to engage as partners at all levels of quality assurance and enhancement activities, including:

Commenting on, improving and shaping their own learning experience

Taking an active part in formal student engagement mechanisms, including quality assurance and enhancement processes and strategic decision making

Shaping the development of the student experience at a national level

Achieved via



### Strategic Aims

Strategic Aim 1  
**Supporting Students**

Strategic Aim 2  
**Supporting Institutions**

Strategic Aim 3  
**Supporting the Sector**

Strategic Aim 4  
**Developing a Culture**

Shapes

How we will work

Shapes

Our values and approaches

# How we work

sparqs is funded by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and you can see details of how that money is spent on the following page.

The role of students in shaping learning and teaching is key to the quality arrangements for Scottish colleges and universities. sparqs supports this work, working in partnership with sector agency partners and taking direction from a Steering Committee. Chaired by an independent member, our Steering Committee includes representation from all the main

sector agencies plus student membership from both National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland and the university and college sectors.

sparqs employs ten members of staff, hosted by NUS Scotland in their Edinburgh office and by Inverness College UHI. We also employ a team of Associate Trainers – students who work for us part-time for an academic year to deliver Course Rep Training, among other work.

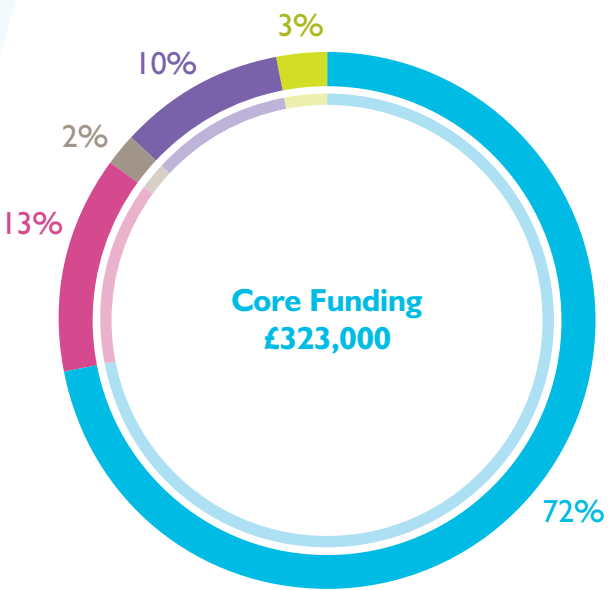
You can see details of our staff on our website.



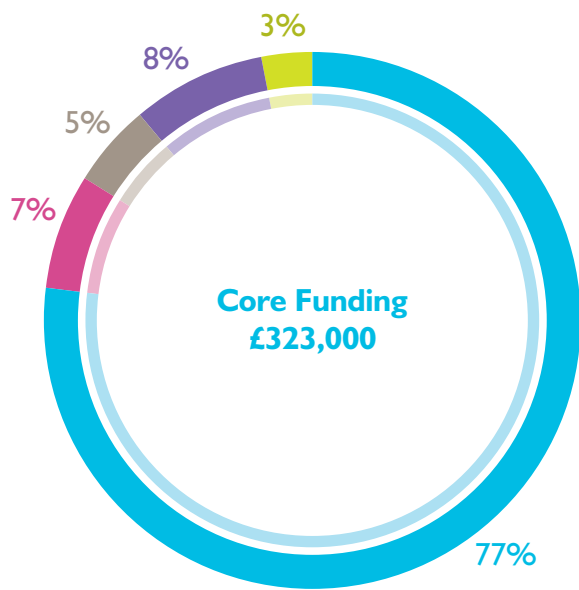
We continue to maintain a steady financial position each year, in line with our annual core funding of £323,000 from the Scottish Funding Council. Tight control of our finances, making efficiencies wherever possible, along with small amounts of external project funding, has allowed us to develop our staff capacity and respond effectively to sector needs.

One such efficiency is around our Course Rep Scheme, where we continue to reduce costs whilst increasing the overall number of reps trained – achieved through development of the Institutional Associate Trainer scheme, which allows greater flexibility and capacity to institutions, whilst maintaining high levels of quality.

2013/14



2014/15



**Key**

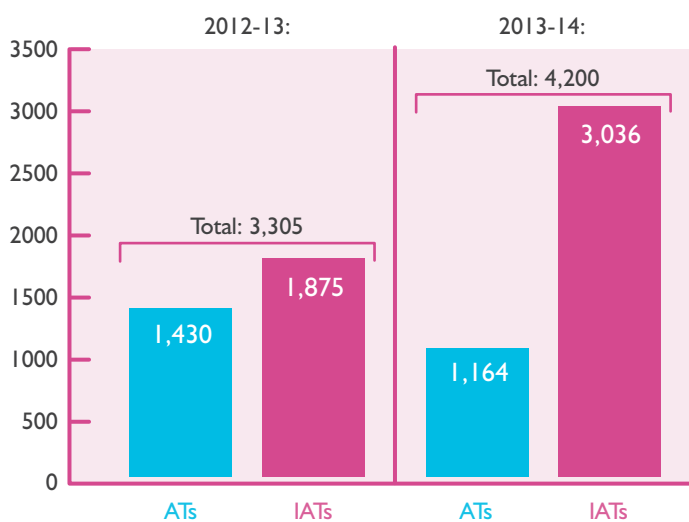
- Staff Costs
- Overheads
- Events
- Course Rep Scheme
- Media and Resources



# Strategic Aim 1 Supporting Students

## Support students to engage at all levels in enhancing their educational experience

Overall during 2013-14, a total of 4,200 reps were trained, 1,164 by sparqs Associate Trainers (ATs) and 3,036 via the Institutional Associate Trainer (IAT) scheme, which is explained further below. Numbers trained through the IAT scheme has increased this year by 62%, once again successfully increasing capacity for the institutions involved, one of the key aims of the scheme.



### Course Rep Training

The training of course reps continues to be a major part of our activity, with 74 sessions delivered by sparqs to 1,164 course reps in 2013-14.

Our training continues to be extremely highly rated, as demonstrated by our evaluation data:

- 92% of attendees found the training useful or very useful.
- 98% felt able to participate in the training.
- 98% would recommend the training to another rep.
- 88% rated our trainers as at least very good, and 40% as outstanding.
- Prior to training, 46% of participants were unsure about their role as a course rep. This decreased to just under 4% after completing the training.
- Prior to training, 63% of participants were unsure about engagement mechanisms within their institution. This decreased to 8% after the training.



To provide relevance, our Course Rep Training continues to be delivered by a team of ATs, current or former course reps who are appointed annually and work for us on a part-time basis. Our training has a significant impact on the institutions for whom we deliver training, and just as importantly acts as a development opportunity for the ATs who deliver it. They develop a considerable range of skills in delivering training and quality systems, often going on to do further work both for sparqs and others in the sector.

“At the start of my journey with sparqs as an Associate Trainer I had no idea of the impact it would have both personally and professionally. Not only have I delivered training to class reps and college governors which has improved my self-confidence and honed my presentation skills but I went on to organise events and deliver various public speeches, including one for a 10th Anniversary Event at the Scottish Parliament in front of the Cabinet Secretary. I never imagined I would be doing that! It really has been an amazing journey and I have enjoyed it enormously.”

**Anne-Marie Docherty**  
Associate Trainer  
sparqs



## Institutional Associate Trainer (IAT) scheme

We also work with individual institutions to recruit their own Course Rep Training teams, known as IATs. We train IATs at an annual event alongside our own ATs, and have supported the work of IAT schemes in ten universities and colleges over the past year, including colleges for the first time, with Edinburgh College and City of Glasgow College joining the scheme in 2013-14. In the coming years we aim to expand the number of participating institutions. The scheme enables IAT institutions to hugely increase their delivery capacity; in 2013-14 Edinburgh College trained 672 reps and the University of Glasgow trained 830 reps!

“The IAT scheme has helped us tailor our training to make it more relevant to UWS students and our committee structures and procedures. Feedback from reps has suggested they are much more confident about stepping into student/staff meetings knowing that they have been trained to a high standard with knowledge of UWS procedures. The support provided by sparqs in terms of training our IATs and providing development opportunities through the year for them has been exceptional.”

**Claire Lumsden**  
**Student Representation Co-ordinator**  
**Students' Association of the University of the West of Scotland**

Students trained by IATs say:

“I like the fact that the training was delivered by other students.”

“I feel prepared for the role as class rep.”

Training delivered by IATs was highly rated by participants, and the proportion of course reps who would recommend it to others was extremely high, with most institutions over 90% and two at 100%.

## Developing rep training

In 2013-14 we have worked with a number of institutions and agencies to help make Course Rep Training more relevant, accessible and useful for certain groups of students.

We have produced training for college students in supported education, recognising that general Course Rep Training provision may not be fully accessible to such students. We have worked with the charity ENABLE, who work on behalf of children and adults with learning disabilities, to reach students on supported education courses. We have equipped their staff with an understanding of Course Rep Training in order that they can then go on to deliver it across the sector.



“Working with sparqs has been fantastic - our staff and the students we've worked with have really benefitted from this accessible training, and it is much needed in order to make the student representation process fully inclusive. The training has been effective, engaged the target audience well and allowed for some flexibility of delivery. Students gave very positive feedback.”

**Briony Williamson**  
**Senior Employment Coordinator**  
**ENABLE Works Glasgow**

# Strategic Aim 1 Supporting Students

In addition, we continue to offer distinct training to students on English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses.

“sparqs training is a comprehensive resource that allows speakers of other languages to use their voice. Bringing sparqs training out into our community outreach centres we were able to give students, typically shut out of the representative structures, the opportunity to communicate to the college the type of learning experience they want for themselves.”

**James Moohan**  
**Vice President Education (2013-14)**  
**Edinburgh College Students' Association**

Towards the end of 2013-14 we also commenced work on developing training for students and student reps on taught postgraduate courses, as a result of the “Mastersness” project within the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)’s Enhancement Themes’ Learning From International Practice (LFIP) work; as well as some initial work with The University of Edinburgh on materials for representatives on part-time and distance learning courses.

## Training for senior reps

Our training provision also extends to other student reps, such as faculty reps, and senior students’ association officers with education remits.

This year, our ‘That’s Quality!’ training, attended by 27 university education officers, also included a discrete session for students’ association staff with education remits, facilitating useful exchanges of experience and practice.

“Understanding ‘quality’ in Higher Education has given me and my academic reps the confidence and ability to challenge ideas in our university and on our courses. The sparqs That’s Quality! event encouraged us to reflect on what quality means to us and the sector, so I came away eager to change how teaching is delivered and success measured across my institution!”

**Rob Henthorn, President**  
**Aberdeen University Students' Association**

For the college sector, our work with NUS Scotland on our ‘Supporting College Student Governors’ (SCSG) training has been adapted to students’ associations’ needs in terms of their regionalisation development. This year we had 36 attendees, rising from 20 the previous year. We have contributed to a redevelopment of SCSG, which from 2014-15 is called ‘College Student Leadership’.

“I began the sparqs training feeling out of my depth and not at all equipped for the year ahead but left after two days feeling excited, inspired and raring to go. The workshop training and networking proved invaluable over my first year as Student President, and the simulation exercise, whilst challenging, worked extremely well.”

**Jules Fitzgerald**  
**President, New College Lanarkshire**



We also provide training to students involved in internal review processes, including Institution-led Review (ILR) in universities, developing the capacity of students’ associations and their institutions to support the engagement of their students in these processes.

“sparqs ILR training was delivered for the second year at Queen Margaret University in 2013-2014. Whilst providing us with a good skill-based training for our student reviewers, the session also allowed us to tailor it to our needs and practice with programme reviews at our institution. Thanks to the training, student reviewers can fully participate in the review panel meetings and contribute to quality enhancement in learning and teaching.”

**Cecile Guilloteau**  
**Welfare and Representation Co-ordinator**  
**Queen Margaret University Students' Union**

## Support the development of practices and activities in institutions and their students' associations that encourage and support student engagement

At a time of substantial change for many universities and colleges, our support is a key component in ensuring that student engagement remains a focus in the measurement of the quality of the student experience. We provide a range of support to institutions to help them plan strategically, develop and enhance student engagement activities.

This is in addition to the work with individual institutions which has come out of national initiatives such as Student Partnership Agreements (SPAs) and the Student Engagement Framework for Scotland. These are covered in the subsequent two sections of this report.

### Staff development

Enthusiastic and committed staff are a key component in effective engagement with students and we work closely with staff to develop their role. This year we are working on a number of important projects in this area.

For example, we have started work on developing an online staff induction programme for new college staff on promoting and supporting student engagement. We have also worked with West College Scotland on how staff can effectively get feedback from students, with a view to developing a resource for them.

Much of our staff development work in the college sector has been done under the auspices of the Partnerships for Change (PfC) project, particularly relating to the professional development of staff in students' associations.

### Curriculum design

We have engaged in a number of innovative projects, discussions and networks relating to the student role in the design and delivery of the curriculum (often referred to as co-creation), working with educational developers, researchers, quality staff and student representatives.

We are also involved in the Higher Education Academy (HEA)'s exciting project "Embedding Equality and Diversity in the Curriculum", which aims to embed the principles of equality and diversity in curriculum design, delivery and assessment. sparqs contributes to the project's advisory group and its programme of webinars.

“sparqs' involvement has been important to the latest phase of our project. Through membership of the steering group, it has ensured the project has not lost sight of the fundamental role of student engagement and participation in embedding E&D. Indeed, this collaboration has led to a new strand of the project on the role of student engagement and participation in the creation of curricula that embed E&D. This strand began in a sparqs-led webinar in May 2014 and will continue next academic year in an exploratory workshop on the topic that will enable us to better understand the issues and barriers to enabling/disabling co-creation of embedded E&D and so enable us to better support the sector in so doing.”

**Dr Pauline Hanesworth**  
**Academic Development Officer**  
**(Equality and Diversity), Scotland**  
**Higher Education Academy**

### Supporting institutional review

A major part of our work is in assisting students to play a full part in the preparation and actions involved in institutional review processes.

This year we published our guidance to support student engagement in the third cycle of Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR). Central to this is the idea that at every stage of the four-year cycle, all students' associations will have key roles to play, whether preparing for a forthcoming review, undergoing the review, responding to actions or sharing experiences with other institutions. This puts the national quality picture at the heart of the student officer experience.

## College regionalisation

### National context

The Scottish Government's reform of post-16 education has brought substantial change to the structure and governance of colleges in Scotland and to the way they are funded. These changes include a renewed emphasis on the value, role, and responsibilities of college students' associations, with new legal duties arising from the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013.

“Students' associations are part of the fabric of university and college life, for socialising, for sports and for other activities. But they also play a key role in representing students in times of difficulty, both academically and personally. It is vital, therefore that the students of all institutions have an effective body to represent their interests, support them and help them integrate into further or higher education.<sup>1</sup>”

**Michael Russell**  
**Cabinet Secretary for Education & Lifelong Learning (October 2013)**

In 2012 the SFC funded sparqs and NUS Scotland to deliver a two-year project called Partnerships for Change to support the merger of college students' associations. It has focused on supporting student engagement throughout the regionalisation process and the development of effective, autonomous, sustainable and appropriately funded students' associations.

A key driver for this work which has emerged this year is the “Strategic Dialogue on Developing Strong, Effective College Students' Associations for Scotland”. This Strategic Dialogue has been led by a working group made up of the Scottish Government, the SFC, NUS Scotland, and a college Regional Chair. The group was established after the SFC was asked to work with NUS Scotland to take forward Recommendation 23 of the Griggs Review of Scottish College Governance, with the aim that “Student participation and representation become a commitment across

the College Sector. Students' associations should be strengthened and become appropriately funded, autonomous and sustainable.”<sup>2</sup>

A series of four Strategic Dialogue events have been held across Scotland, with contributions from over 150 delegates, including sparqs. As a result of the feedback from the events, a framework for effective college students' associations is being developed and is due to be published and presented to the sector towards the end of 2014.

### Support to regions

Alongside colleagues in NUS Scotland, sparqs has provided individual consultancy support to each college region, to assist them with structural and organisational developments as they merge or federate within a region. This has involved a huge range of work such as creating customised training programmes for officers, promoting partnership between students' associations, college management and regional boards, assisting with applications for SFC transformation funding and developing effective democratic structures.

- We have supported the successful completion of nine students' association mergers, and the development of regional representation structures in multi-college regions. For example, in Glasgow Region we supported the creation of a regional executive committee.
- We have supported students' associations to increase their resources and capacity. For example, there are now approximately 51 paid student officers across the college sector, up from 19 before the beginning of the project.
- We have provided targeted support to regions to enable them to develop and progress. For example, we supported Edinburgh College Students' Association to develop a block grant proposal which secured them £274,677. In Lanarkshire Region, we supported the student officers to develop and delivering training to college staff on the role of students' associations.

1. <http://news.scotland.gov.uk/News/New-guarantee-for-student-associations-501.aspx> - Last accessed 31.7.14  
2. R.Griggs, Report of the Review of Further Education Governance in Scotland (January 2012)

“ In this time of major change PfC was able to give guidance and support to our student leaders. This assisted greatly in their participation and contribution to the complex merger processes which have taken place in Lanarkshire over recent months and was to the advantage of both the changes themselves and the change process. The Lanarkshire students’ associations continue to contribute positively to the Federation agenda. ”

**Linda McTavish**  
**Regional Chair**  
**Lanarkshire college region**

“ SRUC’s merger has been a complex one – with one higher education institution and three colleges merging not due to geographical proximity but on a subject basis. This has meant that finding a democratic structure that meets our needs has been a major undertaking for all students and staff involved. However, PfC’s facilitation of this process has been sensitive to our institutional context, very knowledgeable and supportive, and focused on the partnership we need to develop with our college. It stands us in good stead for the coming year. ”

**Cameron Law**  
**President (2013-14)**  
**Scotland’s Rural College Students’**  
**Association (SRUCSA)**

## Sector-level activity

Working with NUS and others, we have developed national approaches through Partnerships for Change to enhance student engagement in the college sector.

Part of this has involved working closely with other sector agencies, not least the College Development Network (CDN) which has been developing resources and guidance to support work in college governance. We have contributed to this through reflections on the experience of student governors and a series of articles in CDN’s monthly regionalisation newsletter.



We have also worked nationally to develop options for the governance and support of students’ associations. With NUS Scotland we have delivered an information day for students’ associations interested in creating trustee boards; established a network for staff working in students’ associations to share their experiences and develop an understanding of their role; and are working with an employment law firm to develop guidance on the employment status of sabbatical officers and students’ association staff.

Support has also been provided to the single-region colleges (Borders, Dumfries and Galloway, Forth Valley and West Lothian) who, although not going through a merger process or federalisation seen elsewhere in the sector, have nevertheless been keen to enhance their students’ associations and student representation. The Partnerships for Change project co-ordinated the development of a successful application to the SFC for funding of £142,000 per college, over two years, to increase their students’ association officer and staff capacity. This work is now underway and good early progress has been reported. sparqs are providing support to the colleges in working with their boards, and developing their student officers and new support staff.

Most recently, additional funding of £300,000 for a two-year project to further develop college students’ associations has been agreed with the SFC. The project, which is still at the planning stage, will involve sparqs and NUS Scotland in the provision of tailored support to students’ associations to enable them to become fully autonomous and sustainable.

# Strategic Aim 3 Supporting the sector

## Support student engagement with national sector agencies and policy developments

Hand in hand with student engagement at the institutional level is the idea that students are engaged in national decisions – through sector committees and agencies – and have the skills and knowledge to participate and contribute effectively. We also ensure that the students are involved in shaping and leading national projects.

### Sector committee engagement

The role of students on national committees in the university and college sectors is increasingly important, and sparqs has been at the heart of its development. Working with NUS Scotland, we support the Education Network, comprised of all students who sit on national committees, including senior officers of NUS Scotland, providing advice and guidance to assist them in their tasks. During 2013-14, 16 student officers from institutions and 3 NUS officers were supported across 22 committees, the majority of which meet quarterly and 15 of which included representation from sparqs and/or NUS Scotland staff, who also contributed to 5 ongoing sub-groups throughout the year.

### Sector conferences

We also directly engage at a sectoral level ourselves, through participation in national conferences run by both sector agencies and individual institutions. In the past year we have spoken at or attended dozens of such events, on topics that range from accreditation to articulation, and from equality to curriculum design. Many examples of this work form part of projects highlighted throughout the rest of this report, not least events relating to the Enhancement Themes and our international engagement.

Such opportunities not only raise the profile of sparqs and our work across the sector and beyond, but ensure that we remain aware of and responsive to the main debates and trends within universities, colleges and students' associations.

We aim to continue our engagement with sector agencies and their conferences in the coming year.



### National quality and review arrangements

The student voice remains a key pillar of college and university reviews and other national frameworks, and sparqs has been at the heart of discussions in advancing this and engaging students fully in decision-making processes.

For instance, we have been working with Education Scotland, Regional Chairs and others in the college sector in discussions about the future shape of the college review framework. We shadowed a review with a view to better understanding the role of Student Team Members and how the views of students are heard, and are working with Education Scotland on how these aspects might be developed going forward.

Meanwhile, we have used Chapter B5 of the QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which focuses on student engagement, to engage universities and their students' associations in conversations about institutional approaches to quality, often linking into SPAs.

## Student Partnership Agreements (SPAs)

The 2011 Scottish Government report *Putting Learners at the Centre – Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 Education* introduced SPAs. Over the past year, we have worked with the sector to publish a guidance report on the development and implementation of an SPA, for use by colleges and universities.

The published guidance supports colleges and universities to hold an institutional conversation about the nature of the relationship between students and their institution and set out a plan of work to be agreed and implemented in partnership with their students' association. Since our guidance was published we have worked with several institutions on developing SPAs; 7 institutions now have them in place, 4 are actively developing them and many more are asking for advice and guidance.

Activities committed to across the sector include a wide range of academic aspects. SPAs have proved a great tool to institutions in the planning of student engagement.

“RGU was pleased to be an early adopter of the SPA as it helped us formalise what had become emerging practice within the university in working with students in addressing challenges. Overall the experience in the first year has been extremely positive and we are already discussing plans for developing the next SPA. sparqs guidance for the document was extremely useful.”

**Hilary Douglas**  
Academic Registrar and Secretary to the Board  
The Robert Gordon University

## Enhancement Themes

In the university sector, the Enhancement Themes are a key part of both institutional and national quality activity, producing useful sector-wide outcomes and the sharing of good practice. Students have a key role in this development work.

At a national level we have worked closely with QAA Scotland in supporting student members of institutional Enhancement Theme projects.

Work this year has included:

- Support to the Enhancement Themes Student Network which brings together lead student officers from across the university sector to develop ideas and make suggestions for projects. We supported a major presentation of their activities over the past year at the Enhancement Themes Conference in June 2014.
- Contribution to the planning of QAA Scotland's major International Enhancement Themes Conference in 2015, to enable student engagement.
- Support to QAA Scotland in their work to develop a resource that defined the characteristics of Masters-level study and the tools that can support students to progress to that level. We were represented on the project's advisory board and contributed to the resources.
- Support to individual institutional teams in their Enhancement Themes activity. As an example, we delivered a seminar to a conference at the University of Strathclyde in March 2014 that explored students as partners within STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) subjects.
- Contribution to work with Professor Murray Saunders of Lancaster University on a new set of 'Enhancement Descriptors' commissioned by the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC). The purpose of these descriptors is to articulate what is meant by the 'enhancement ethos' which is so prevalent in the Scottish sector, and to attempt to create a qualitative measure of the impact of that ethos.



# Strategic Aim 3 Supporting the sector

## Public Information

The idea that the public – including prospective and current students – should have access to information about the colleges and universities that they propose to study at, or are currently studying at, has long been a feature of both sectors in Scotland.

sparqs has recently undertaken a number of projects that explore how students can be involved in shaping that provision of information, across both the university and college sectors.

We have been assisting students and students' associations in Scotland to contribute to a review of the National Student Survey (NSS) carried out by HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England), as well as contributing to this review ourselves. We suggested that the NSS should be more like the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and the review appears to have taken this view into account.

Last year in the college sector we proposed to the SFC Thematic Group on quality that there should be a national survey of college students, to provide students' associations with benchmarkable data which can be used to campaign for change. As a result of this work, the SFC has begun a consultation process about creating a common set of questions to be included in colleges' existing student surveys. We are participating actively in this process and assisting students' associations to do the same.

## Other national projects

We engage in a variety of additional project work at a national level in partnership with a range of sector agencies. For example:

### e-Assessment

Over the past year sparqs has been working on e-assessment with colleagues from the college sector, including college staff, Jisc, CDN and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). We have been participating in the Colleges e-Assessment Group, as well as a sub-group looking at e-portfolios, and a project board for the Jisc-funded CIT-eA

project which aims to increase the prevalence of e-assessment practices through a series of workshops with learning technologists and teaching staff. Our aim throughout this work is to improve student engagement on e-assessment nationally as it is something that will become more prominent in the coming years. This is a new area for sparqs and we are forging new links with colleagues in this area, particularly SQA and Jisc.



### Articulation

We have started work exploring student engagement in institutional articulation by taking part in a new project with the Edinburgh, Lothians, Fife and Borders Regional Articulation Hub (ELRAH). The project aims to work with students and staff to strengthen the student voice in decisions made about articulation in the region. As part of this work, sparqs contributed to ELRAH's conference and will facilitate a student group on articulation and will support institution staff to identify and share good practice of student engagement in this area.

### Education Scotland External Review

In partnership with Education Scotland, sparqs ran an event for colleges facing an external review, supporting members of the students' association and those staff with a remit of supporting student engagement. The event helped participants to understand and plan for involvement in the review process, develop skills to enable effective engagement with learners, and understand the role of the Learner Engagement Questionnaire.



## Strategic Aim 4 Developing a culture

### Support the development of a culture of student engagement across Scotland

Developing a culture of student engagement in many ways underpins all our other activities. We aim to promote and develop a culture whereby institutional commitment to student engagement is demonstrated by active student partnership in decision-making processes and the enhancement of learning and teaching and the student experience.

#### Student Engagement Framework

A core part of this work involves promoting Scotland's Student Engagement Framework. Although owned and endorsed by all of our sector agency partners, the framework was developed initially as a result of sparqs' leadership and research, and we remain at the forefront of promoting engagement with, and use of, the elements and features of the framework.

Over the past year we have used the framework as a basis for exploratory conversations, reflection on and strategic planning of student engagement. We have presented it to staff and students in institutions across Scotland, and a number of institutions have used it to plan their work – including as a structure for a student engagement strategy. We have also had interest from international practitioners, from South Africa to Slovenia, who have been keen to find out how best to use the framework in their own work.



“While the Student Engagement Framework is comprehensive, it's also very accessible. Its features and elements are very natural headings for self-evaluation, so we've used them as a basis for creating our college's new Student Engagement Strategy. The framework also helped us to focus our commitment to student engagement and inform the work we need to plan in order to achieve the objectives set out in the College Strategic Plan and Outcome Agreement.

The questions the framework raises, and sparqs' ongoing guidance and advice in this process, have both been invaluable and extremely helpful in developing our strategy. The team at sparqs have been responsive, professional and committed to building a relationship with us that has been very supportive throughout the process.”

**Myra McCabe**  
**Head of Student Services**  
**Edinburgh College**

#### Celebration Reports

In late 2013 sparqs published two major reports celebrating the progress in the development of student engagement across Scotland's colleges and universities.

The full reports contain a wealth of examples of good practice and trends that have developed in student engagement in recent years, and highlight a range of useful case studies from across the sectors. They have highlighted a great many successes, as well as the challenges still facing institutions, and suggested the forthcoming areas of focus that student engagement practitioners and sparqs should address in coming years.

# Strategic Aim 4 Developing a culture

## Website

We are continuing to develop our website to ensure it provides up-to-date, practical and thought provoking resources. The new site, launched at the beginning of 2013-14, is proving to be very popular. Statistics show that more users are returning to the site and finding what they need in a few clicks. Visits have doubled with the Student Engagement Framework and the Resource Library being the most popular. After the UK, our second biggest audience is the USA, with other places such as the Philippines and Brazil in the top ten. We are continuing to add new resources and along with our newsletter articles and headlines are providing regular updates and articles to stimulate discussion.

## Resource Library

This year saw the launch of our Resource Library, an area of our website which houses over a hundred resources around effective practice in student engagement from across the country and beyond. Case studies and examples are regularly submitted by institutions, students' associations and sector agencies, and range from effective job descriptions through to relevant and challenging research reports.

## International engagement

Scotland continues to be a world leader in student engagement and is the subject of much interest from across Europe and beyond. We are frequently contacted for advice and information, and receive many invites to conferences and events beyond Scotland. In responding to these requests, there is much for us to learn as a team, as an agency and as a sector in terms of the approaches taken in many other, often very different countries. By both learning from beyond Scotland and sharing our expertise, we continue to place Scotland in a leading position in international networks of universities, colleges and agencies.



- With partner agencies, we completed the 'QUEST for Quality for Students' project, with much learnt about student engagement across Europe, practice shared and resources created for those engaged at the national level, including a student handbook on quality. The project culminated in an amazing opportunity for sparqs' ATs and staff, who delivered tailored training in Latvia, Portugal, Slovakia and Ireland, using the quality toolkit to upskill and develop student quality experts.
- We have begun work as partners in two European-funded projects, one to create a national Students' Union in Kosovo and the other to develop student engagement in the Quality Assurance process in Armenia.
- We were invited to contribute to a conference of New Zealand's polytechnic sector in April 2014, where we also took the chance to meet with various other sector and governmental agencies to learn from New Zealand's approaches and share some of our work in Scotland around quality at the national level.
- We participated in the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) conference in 2013 in Gothenburg, Sweden and are delivering a workshop around curriculum design, jointly with HEA Scotland, at the 2014 conference in Barcelona, Spain.
- Responding to individual requests, we have presented seminars and training at a variety of institutions beyond Scotland.

“ We greatly appreciated having sparqs visit and participate in our Student Voice Summit. We learned so much and it has laid the foundation for the development in the near future of an independent student-led agency to support student voice across Aotearoa/New Zealand. We have already incorporated elements of what we learnt into our training and our discourse, and the enthusiastic reception that we get every time we mention that we are working with sparqs opens new doors for us every day.”

**Dr Alistair Shaw,  
Executive Director  
New Zealand Union of  
Students' Associations**



## Sharing across the UK

Scotland's approach to student engagement has been the subject of much interest within the rest of the UK. Recent developments in England particularly have put student engagement to the fore, not least in the university sector.

The creation of a HEFCE-funded Student Engagement Project in England's higher education sector has allowed us to contribute our expertise, learn from practice in England, and develop meaningful professional relationships with what is now one of the only comparable agencies or projects in the world.

We have engaged with the Welsh Initiative for Student Engagement (WISE), including participating in their annual conference in June 2014. We also accepted an invitation to present at the 2014 course rep conference at the University of Ulster.

We have attended a number of UK-level conferences, including discussions around the QAA UK Quality Code, and a number of HEA events. We have developed good links with the student engagement practitioner network RAISE (Researching, Advancing & Inspiring Student Engagement), meeting with their co-ordinators and preparing contributions on the planning of student engagement at their Autumn 2014 annual conference.

## Linking research with practice

On a very practical level, sparqs draws upon the experiences of the sector to identify, research and develop practice in areas of priority to universities and colleges.

We undertake periodic research, publishing both short and more substantial reports into various aspects of student engagement, informed by both our contact with institutions and keeping abreast of the wide range of literature and research into student engagement domestically and internationally.

Our engagement with institutions is crucial to this, and all of our work with colleges, universities and students' associations continually shapes and enhances our understanding of the common challenges and opportunities facing the sector.

We have enjoyed regular engagement with the college sector through our Partnerships for Change work, and we conduct Annual Support Visits (ASVs) with the university sector. ASVs allow us to understand where universities and students' associations are at with their student engagement work, identify where we can best support them, and learn from their practice and developments.

By continuing to work with institutions closely in this way, we aim to deliver meaningful, informed and constructive support to the sector in the coming academic year and beyond.



Visit the sparqs website to find out more about all the areas of work mentioned in this report. The website contains a range of materials and resources to assist your student engagement activities, including our Resource Library.

Details of our staff and Associate Trainers can be found on the 'Our staff' page under the 'Home' menu. You can also sign up to receive news articles about our work and emerging practice in student engagement.

w: [www.sparqs.ac.uk](http://www.sparqs.ac.uk)

Contact us at:

1 Papermill Wynd  
Edinburgh, EH7 4QL

t: 0131 622 6599

textphone: 18001 0131 622 6599

e: [info@sparqs.ac.uk](mailto:info@sparqs.ac.uk)

Follow us on Twitter to get up to date information about what the sparqs team is doing across Scotland.

[www.twitter.com/sparqs\\_scotland](http://www.twitter.com/sparqs_scotland)