



# CELEBRATING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Successes and opportunities in  
Scotland's college sector

# Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Foreword</b>  | <b>04</b> |
| <b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>   | <b>05</b> |
| <b>Background to the report</b>  | <b>05</b> |
| Background to sparqs   | 05        |
| Context of the report  | 05        |
| The report's methodology   | 08        |
| <b>The nature of student engagement</b>  | <b>08</b> |
| <b>Outline of report</b>   | <b>09</b> |
| <b>A culture of engagement: management and development of student engagement</b>                           | <b>10</b> |
| Strategic planning   | 10        |
| Staff resource for student engagement  | 11        |
| <b>Chapter 2: Elements 1 and 2 of 'A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland'</b>                        | <b>13</b> |
| <b>Element 1 – students feeling part of a supportive institution</b>                                       | <b>13</b> |
| <b>Element 2 – students engaging in their own learning</b>   | <b>14</b> |
| <b>Chapter 3: Element 3 – students working with their institution in shaping the direction of learning</b> | <b>17</b> |
| <b>Introduction to the element</b>   | <b>17</b> |
| <b>Gathering and responding to feedback</b>  | <b>18</b> |
| <b>Course representative systems</b>   | <b>22</b> |
| Overview and development   | 22        |
| Provision of training to course reps   | 22        |
| Engaging course reps at course committee meetings  | 24        |
| Course rep support and events  | 25        |
| Accreditation and reward of course reps  | 26        |
| <b>Engaging students in “hard to engage” groups</b>  | <b>26</b> |
| <b>Departmental representation</b>   | <b>27</b> |

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Chapter 4: Element 4 – formal mechanisms for quality and governance</b>         | <b>28</b> |
| <b>Introduction to the element</b>   | <b>28</b> |
| <b>Students’ associations and working with the college</b>                         | <b>28</b> |
| College boards of management   | 29        |
| Supporting College Student Governors   | 29        |
| Sabbatical funding for student officers  | 29        |
| Staff support  | 30        |
| Association evaluation and planning  | 31        |
| <b>Student involvement in formal review processes</b>                              | <b>31</b> |
| <b>Regionalisation and students’ associations</b>                                  | <b>32</b> |
| <b>Chapter 5: Element 5 – influencing the student experience at national level</b> | <b>34</b> |
| <b>Introduction to the element</b>   | <b>34</b> |
| <b>Sector-level decision-making</b>  | <b>34</b> |
| <b>Subject-based engagement</b>  | <b>35</b> |
| <b>National networking and campaigning</b>   | <b>35</b> |
| <b>Chapter 6: Conclusions</b>  | <b>38</b> |
| <b>Introduction</b>  | <b>38</b> |
| <b>Future priorities</b>   | <b>39</b> |
| Curriculum design  | 39        |
| “Representative” representatives   | 39        |
| Connected representation   | 40        |
| Student engagement in governance   | 40        |
| <b>Conclusion</b>  | <b>41</b> |
| <b>Acknowledgements</b>  | <b>42</b> |
| <b>References</b>  | <b>43</b> |

## Foreword



This is an undoubtedly challenging time for the college sector. Regionalisation\* is the biggest reform faced by Scotland's colleges in a generation and the transition to new models of governance and delivery will not be a quick or easy one. However, it presents an equally unparalleled opportunity for the development of student representation to a level which can deliver effective, informed and useful perspectives on the shaping of the quality of learning and teaching.

Therefore, it is important to reflect in two ways on student engagement in the sector.

Firstly, the sector deserves to celebrate the successes over the last ten years of student engagement, because while there are undoubtedly challenges facing everyone involved in colleges, the hard work of staff and students continues resolutely to deliver positive and meaningful results, with some innovative and exciting practice continuing to be developed around student engagement.

At a sector level for instance, student engagement is now a central element of quality – forming one of the three pillars of the Quality Enhancement Framework in both colleges and universities. Students play a vital part in college reviews and many colleges have been formally recognised

by sector agencies for their pioneering work in student engagement.

At both a sector level and within colleges, there is now a real recognition that student engagement has moved from an aspiration to a key activity, from an expectation to a requirement, and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) now speaks of a “shift from encouraging institutions with regard to student engagement to setting out expectations.”<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, the sector can look towards the opportunities presented by regionalisation to address the challenges that are often faced by those involved in student engagement. One key part of this is creating sustainable, autonomous and effective students' associations, something which is now at the heart of the vision for the college sector. The work undertaken by colleges and the whole sector through regionalisation can generate discussion around how representation can be delivered and can point the way forward as colleges share expertise, pool resources and work together to support and engage their students.

This report aims to both celebrate those successes of recent years and identify forthcoming challenges for a regionalised college sector.

**Eve Lewis, Head of sparqs**

\* The Scottish Government's reformation of Scotland's college sector by grouping colleges into regions.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### Background to the report

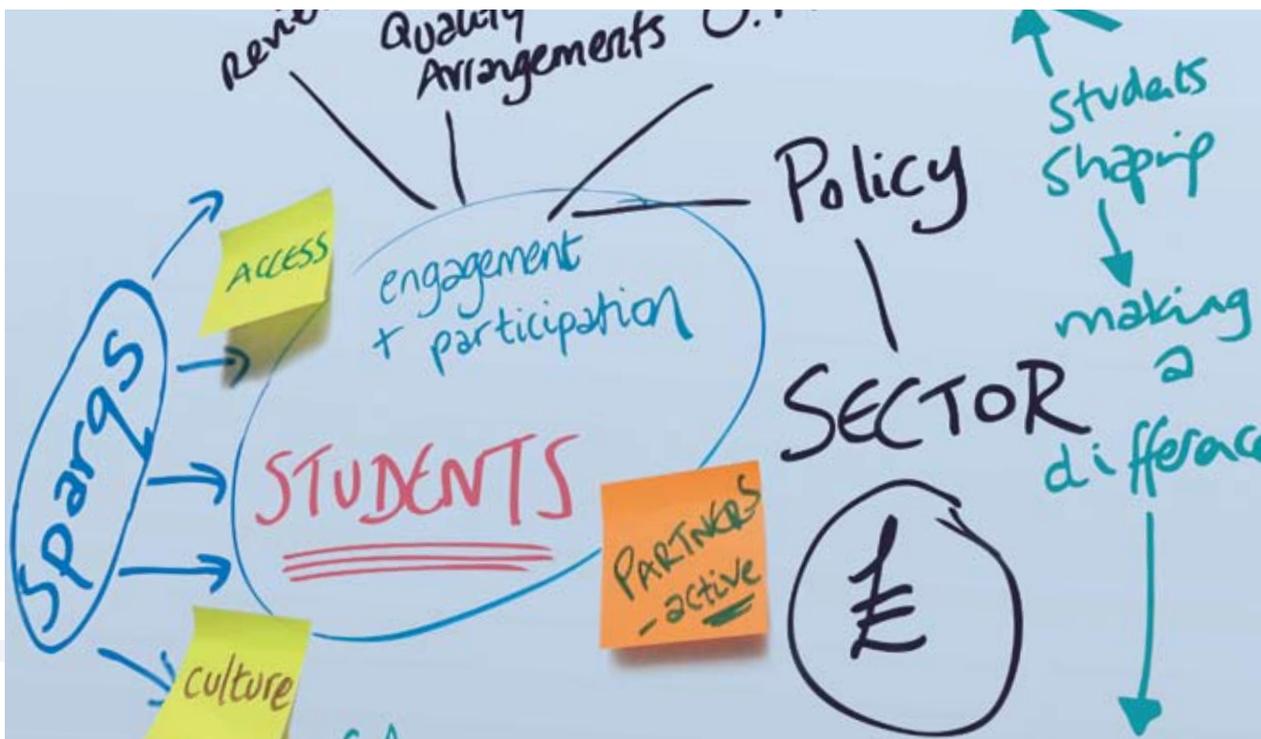
#### Background to sparqs

- 1.1 sparqs (student participation in quality Scotland) is an agency of the college and university 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 the shaping of the quality of learning and teaching.
- 1.2 With 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 college sector is published alongside a similar report for the university sector; and these follow the publication of the new Student Engagement Framework for Scotland, a new strategic plan for sparqs, and a new website at [www.sparqs.ac.uk](http://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, in both the college and university sectors, is unique and pioneering. No other country in the world enjoys Scotland's combination of a student engagement element in its key quality framework and a dedicated development agency to take this work forward. That agency, sparqs, has been working since its inception in 2003 with colleges and universities to support student engagement activities.



- 1.5** In 2007, the funding arrangements for colleges and universities were brought together by the SFC and the sector agreed a joint approach to quality, steered by the Joint Quality Review Group. Although much remained distinct between the two sectors, not least in terms of the approaches to internal and external reviews, the sector agreed on three key principles that would underpin quality arrangements in both colleges and universities.
- 1.6** These three principles are:
- High quality learning.
  - Student engagement.
  - Quality culture.
- 1.7** Student engagement therefore forms a key element of the approach to quality in the college sector, at a sector level, with Education Scotland (formerly HMIE) seeking as part of college reviews answers to the question “how well are learners engaged in enhancing their own learning and the work and life of the college?” Another key development was the pivotal role of institutional Student Team Members in college reviews. Locally too, student engagement is key, with colleges through their internal review and enhancement activities aiming to ensure students are at the heart of decisions about the design, management and enhancement of learning, teaching and quality.
- 1.8** Not only is this culture unique, but it has clearly changed over the years. For instance, there is increasing awareness of the work of student representatives and increased use of staff as direct support to students’ associations and student engagement activities. As the Learning and Skills Network (LSN) highlighted in their 2010 external evaluation of the SFC’s strategy for quality enhancement:
- “The most notable signs of improvement were observed in the area of learner engagement.... All research interviewees were highly supportive of the concept of learner engagement and usually also committed to ensuring the Learner Voice is at the centre of decision making.”<sup>2</sup>
- 1.9** There is much pioneering work in developing the role of students as partners in the enhancement of learning and teaching. Students are now engaged in a greater range of decisions than ever, either as individuals commenting on how their learning develops, or as student representatives at board level.
- 1.10** Meanwhile, Education Scotland, in a report on inspection report trends between 2008 and 2011, discovered:
- “Over the last three years colleges have grasped the concept of empowering learners with enthusiasm.”<sup>3</sup>
- and
- “Almost all colleges involve learners meaningfully and effectively in the life and work of the college.”<sup>3</sup>
- 1.11** However, 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 college and university sectors – that explored the range of ways in which students were engaged in shaping quality.
- 1.12** Recommendations for action within that report included improved engagement of work-based students and those at satellite campuses, enhanced communication within and between college students’ associations, and better support for student engagement at board of management level.
- 1.13** These recommendations were useful in shaping sparqs’ activity and its work with the sector in the following years. For instance, much work was done with college staff and students on the engagement of non-traditional students and there was substantial enhancement of the support provided to board level practitioners in the engagement of student members.

- 1.14** However, since then, much has changed in the past few years across the sector which has shaped and advanced the understanding and prominence of student engagement.
- 1.15** At a governmental and sector level, there have been significant developments. The Joint Quality Review Group, in 2006 worked to create the single framework for quality and rooted student engagement as one of its three pillars. Education Scotland (itself an example of a major sectoral change, into which Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education merged in 2011) observed in their *Trends Report between 2008 and 2011* that the moves to embrace student engagement have "required colleges to re-examine the ways in which they solicit, hear and respond to"<sup>4</sup> the student voice.
- 1.16** The renewed focus on strengthening student engagement can also be seen in three other important sectoral developments. Firstly, the Scottish Government's publication *Putting Learners at the Centre: Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 Education* called for "making student representation even more effective"<sup>5</sup> and introduced Student Partnership Agreements as a way of strengthening engagement between institutions and their students' associations.
- 1.17** Secondly, the *Report of the Review of Further Education Governance in Scotland* (commonly known as the Griggs report) called for action to remedy what it saw as "patchy [student representation] across Colleges with nonautonomous and underfunded associations a key problem".<sup>6</sup>
- 1.18** Thirdly, the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence has had a significant impact on the identification and development of attributes that create confident and engaged students. This represents a considerable synergy with, and opportunity for, the fulfilment of student engagement in colleges.
- 1.19** At a more individual institutional level, colleges themselves have seen substantial change too. Even before regionalisation, the past few years have seen a number of mergers and collaborations between colleges in the face of challenging financial circumstances.
- 1.20** The implications of all these changes have been, and will be, significant for 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 institutions it supports.
- 1.21** Therefore, it is important to research practice in student engagement once again, hence this new report plus an equivalent publication for the university sector.
- 1.22** As such, the report serves four key purposes:
1. It is an opportunity to celebrate and acknowledge the hard work and immense efforts of many students and staff in making such progress over the last ten years.
  2. Through documenting a selection of the wealth of activity across the sector, the report aims to share practice and inspire new developments.
  3. While focused on the progress made, the report also provides the opportunity to reflect on trends and identify challenges for the future.
  4. The SFC has commissioned reports<sup>7</sup> from both Education Scotland and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to provide evidence of quality enhancement over time and the impact of these enhancement activities in Scotland. This report complements these more formal commentaries on the Scottish quality arrangements.

## The report's methodology

**I.23** The findings of the report are based on two primary areas of work. Firstly, sparqs has drawn upon its ongoing engagement with colleges and their students' associations, through which it has learned much from the experiences of staff and students. In particular, sparqs' College Advisory Group – one of two advisory groups that informs the agency's work – has provided a wealth of information and evidence to support the development of this report. Furthermore, calls for input in the form of case studies issued at a sector level has yielded a range of interesting and helpful examples of student engagement in a range of areas of work<sup>8</sup>. Combined, this engagement has provided not only a large number of case studies but also the ability to identify trends that have arisen from the data.

**I.24** Secondly, this report has been informed by a review of external evidence contained in a range of reports produced across the sector in recent years. In particular, these include the twelve Education Scotland reports for 2012, the *2010 LSN Evaluation*<sup>9</sup> and the *Education Scotland Trends Report between 2008-2011*.<sup>10</sup>

**I.25** Using evidence from the above noted areas of work, this report illustrates significant strides having been taken by the sector and by individual colleges in recent years.

## The nature of student engagement

**I.26** sparqs was created to drive the SFC's emphasis on student engagement. While student engagement is a key priority throughout the sector, the term "student engagement" is often interpreted in a variety of ways and has never been fully defined.

**I.27** For instance, the SFC notes that the scope of student engagement "ranges from formal engagement and representation on

colleges structures and processes, linked also to governance, 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."<sup>11</sup> Further opinions hold that student engagement is about extra-curricular activities that create a fulfilling and rewarding atmosphere at college.

**I.28** While such variation is understandable and valid, there has been no common agreement about the existence of and interaction between those definitions in a way that can assist the sector to better understand the range of student engagement activities that take place.

**I.29** To address this, sparqs undertook a research project throughout 2011 in which it explored the interpretations of the term "student engagement" with a variety of groups in both the college and university sectors. These included teaching staff, sector-level practitioners, and students of varying levels of involvement.

**I.30** The outcomes, published as joint sector publication *A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland*<sup>12</sup>, identified five elements and six features of student engagement.

**I.31** The five elements of student engagement define the different arenas in which students may be involved, accommodating the sorts of approaches referred to above in paragraph

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.

**I.32** The six features, which guide the above 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.

**I.33** 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<sup>13</sup> 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.

**I.34** The different elements of the *SE Framework* are, of course, interconnected. Evidence suggests that when students are involved in framework elements three, four and five, this involvement can help these students develop stronger engagement in their own learning. This is why a strong leadership of the development and management of student engagement is a key ingredient to good student engagement and to a successful learning experience.

**I.35** It is also worth noting that there is even some sectoral disagreement about the word "student". While the use of "student" is widespread in describing those individuals registered on a course at a college, there is some use of the word "learner" instead. This may be on the assumption that students are often on their courses for short periods of time and as a result of their paid employment, and therefore do not primarily identify themselves as students. However, the use of "student" is widespread among college and national representative bodies

and in the names and publications of sector agencies such as sparqs or the *SE Framework*. Therefore this report uses the word "student" throughout, unless directly quoting other uses.

## Outline of report

**I.36** Given the importance of the *SE Framework* to understanding the concept, this report uses the framework, particularly elements three, four and five, as the basis for its structure.

**I.37** Chapter two provides an overview of developments in the first two elements of the framework, albeit that they are broadly beyond the remit of both sparqs and this report, and are included for a sense of context and completion.

**I.38** However, subsequent substantive chapters of the report pay more substantial attention to elements three, four and five, exploring the good practice that has been developed throughout the sector, relating as they do directly to the work of sparqs and the role of students in the shaping of quality and quality systems.

**I.39** Before moving on to these findings the rest of this chapter looks at other findings, particularly some of those related to one of the six features of student engagement 'a culture of engagement'; As the *SE Framework* explains:

“Key messages around student engagement and its importance will need to come from senior staff within the institution and be reinforced by actions and behaviours throughout the institution. In developing a culture of engagement it is important to define institutional approaches and priorities in a clear and accessible manner, provide specific forums to ensure its development whilst ensuring it is an approach that permeates activities across the spectrum.”



## A culture of engagement: management and development of student engagement

- I.40** Fundamental to the application of the *SE Framework* and to the success of student engagement generally, is a clear institutional commitment to managing and developing that engagement.
- I.41** While different approaches have been taken across the sector about the different areas of engagement outlined above, colleges have been successful in developing student engagement when taking a holistic view that is underpinned by strong leadership and commitment from senior management. For an effective ‘culture of student engagement’ that the whole college buys into, senior leadership, as well as direct resourcing of student engagement activity, is absolutely essential. Frequently this will involve senior management teams embedding student engagement within one team member’s role, providing a key strategic lead.

### Strategic planning

- I.42** While responsibility for strategy naturally lies with key cross-college committees, not least the board of management, there are many innovative ways of more informally engaging students in these decisions, and this is where student engagement is effectively being managed. Many colleges have successfully used joint away-days or conferences for student reps, senior management and governors, where participants can not only get to know each other at the start of a year but also discuss big issues in detail.

### Case study

Stevenson College undertook a major project of consultation with students and staff to obtain a sense of how student engagement can be strategically planned at the college.

The process began with a large event attended by staff and students and facilitated by an external agency, Edge (Edinburgh Development Group). This took place at an outside venue to allow participants to develop a fresh perspective.

Through discussion of various aspects of student engagement, a giant wallchart was produced as a striking means of capturing the range of views and perceptions put forward by participants. The wallchart method was first developed by Edge for use with people with learning difficulties who would be able to easily visualise future plans and goals, but was adapted for the college’s use.

Beyond the obvious impact of an increased awareness among students of the value and power of their engagement, a key outcome was that staff became more aware of student engagement as a central feature of the learning experience.

- I.43** Another widely used and increasingly common tool for strategically managing student engagement is, self-evidently, a learner engagement strategy. Through such documents, staff, students and governors can agree on and articulate how, why and where students should be engaged in shaping learning and teaching. A number of colleges have used an innovative range of activities to inform this, such as course rep training and networking events, student consultations and engagement between students and staff.

## Case study

At Banff and Buchan College, the students' association executive and college staff collaborated on the first formal learner engagement strategy and action plan. The aim of such an approach was to enhance college-wide learner engagement processes and outcomes. In addition, this development aimed to allow a closer relationship to form between the needs of the students' association and the strategic plan of the college.

Accordingly, the resulting learner engagement strategy action plan was co-developed, co-owned, co-delivered and co-evaluated by both learners and staff. A bespoke and unique programme of class representative training was delivered in-house by college staff and certificated by sparqs to provide student representatives with the tools to enable them to undertake their role in a positive and meaningful manner and to actively engage in wider aspects of college work.

## Staff resource for student engagement

**1.44** As well as strong senior management and board buy-in to student engagement, staff resource dedicated to implementing and supporting student engagement can be key.

## Case study

Clydebank College introduced the role of Learner Feedback Assistant which was initially funded externally on a temporary basis. The impact of the role was immediately recognised and valued by both students and staff and the college embedded the role within the Quality and Performance Enhancement Team. The new role of Learner Engagement Assistant supports students, class reps and students' association officers in preparation for participation in college representative forums, developing confidence and capacity for students and improving feedback into the quality of learning and teaching.

## Case study

From the start of session 2011-12, Shetland College recognised that arrangements to promote student engagement and involve learners in enhancing the work and life of the college needed to be refined. Although the college had a placement graduate during 2010-11 whose remit was student engagement, this placement unfortunately ended in April 2011. From March 2012 the college successfully recruited a Communications and Student Engagement Assistant, and this staff member is now driving forward learner engagement, building on the earlier work of the placement graduate. This staff member developed a student engagement action plan, based on the findings of a learner survey conducted in April 2012, to enhance levels of learner engagement in shaping class activities and applying skills and knowledge to enhance the work and life of the college.

Implementation of this action plan in 2012-13 helped to ensure that all staff are involved in developing learner engagement approaches, and that more learners are engaged in enhancing the work and life of the college through participation

in activities such as art shows, catering for the college's awards ceremonies, and the Construction section's shed-building event. The plan also includes approaches to help tie in learning experiences to provide opportunities to link into wider achievement and engagement opportunities.

The Student Engagement Assistant has encouraged students to become class representatives and undertake sparqs training, and is developing approaches to encourage student representation on cross-college committees. This staff member is also developing mechanisms to help ensure that students attend and engage more effectively with the college's series of learner lunchtime forums, and is encouraging all class reps to attend and participate in programme team meetings, as a means of providing feedback in relation to the effectiveness of college developments. Although at an early stage, the creation of a college webpage is providing a useful communication forum for students to convey their views and contribute to college and wider local initiatives.

**I.45** *The 2010 LSN Evaluation* found:

“Some colleges have developed Learner Engagement Officer (LEO) posts, which are viewed by staff as positive for their role in encouraging and supporting learner engagement. However, concerns had been raised... these might detract from the commitment of all staff... and undermine the role of student president.”<sup>14</sup>

It is important to note that LEO positions have been retained and/or developed during the funding cuts of the last few years, indicating the value colleges place in these roles and indeed such roles are likely to increase in number and responsibility in post regional structures.

**I.46** Generally, this range of developments in enhancing student engagement suggests that

a strategic approach to student engagement is increasingly being taken across the sector. The historic approach, which was often haphazard and varied in terms of aspects such as course rep training and support, now sees student engagement integrated fully into college processes and strategies and shaped jointly by staff and students.

**I.47** The creation of sparqs, as a result of sectoral commitment to student engagement as a key pillar of quality, has also provided external impetus for a more strategic approach, enabling colleges to support each other and learn from and share each other's experiences and models of effective practice. Also, the deeper engagement of students within the revised college review model has been greeted positively by colleges, who have responded by implementing a stronger strategic overview of student engagement.

## Case study

City of Glasgow College's Student Engagement Team work in partnership with the college's ten academic schools, guidance lecturers and support sections to encourage participation in the learner journey. The team was formed shortly after City's merger in 2010 and has five team members, led by the Student Engagement Manager.

The team works to deliver four strategic aims; learning and teaching; community, culture and partnership; communication and the learning environment; and representation. These aims are taken from the college's student engagement strategy, a document owned by the senior management team through the Director of Student Services.

One piece of work the team have been taking forward is Continuing Professional Development sessions for staff. Sessions include 'motivating every learner' and 'promoting class representation'. These sessions were well received by those who attended and contributed to the college's goals of students being able to enhance their own learning as well as the programmes and activities of the college. Another piece of work that contributes to these goals is the development of a 'Staff Guide to Representatives'.

The team also provide direct support to staff through the facilitation of focus groups to help improve engagement in the college's services and learning and teaching.

# Chapter 2

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

**2.1** The first two elements of the *SE Framework* are primarily a matter for a wide range of agencies and bodies other than sparqs. Nevertheless, it is important to see elements three, four and five – around which the rest of part one of this report is 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** Institutions have huge importance beyond the realm of learning and teaching. They are communities in which, to varying degrees, people not just learn or teach but undertake a variety of other jobs, where people reside, make friends and shape their futures in a whole range of ways. Institutions often have strong “brands” that live on in their past students and within the local community.

**2.3** As the *SE Framework* explains:

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

It begins with providing activities and approaches that encourage students to enter education at a stage appropriate for them and continues all the way to students leaving the institution having had such a good experience that they act as ambassadors for the institution.”<sup>15</sup>

**2.4** There are many instances when students have been engaged in shaping the very

start of student life, and an obvious opportunity is through existing students’ perceptions of the college’s prospectus.

### Case study

Kilmarnock College received a Gold Award for its prospectus at the Scotland’s Colleges Marketing Awards 2012, in a category voted for entirely by students and sponsored by NUS Scotland.

When designing and producing its prospectus the college needed to appeal to young prospective learners, parents, school teachers, adult learners, unemployed people, learners with additional support needs and the business community. The prospectus also had to emphasise the mission statement of Kilmarnock College, which is ‘Inspiring Achievement – Building Futures’.

As part of the design and production process the marketing team engaged with learners through focus groups. Students were asked to rank the prospectus on a ‘Cool Board’ scale with ‘Very Cool’ being top and ‘Seriously Un-cool’ at the bottom. All areas scored either ‘Very Cool’ or ‘Cool’ with the focus groups describing the prospectus as colourful, easy to follow, with courses well explained, clear pictures, helpful maps and a general good layout.

This activity resulted in particularly useful and constructive feedback on the prospectus style and content. Feedback from students was also positive on the format of these events.

**2.5** It is important to note that the students which colleges are reaching out to and recruiting are sometimes completely new to post-school education, from a

disadvantaged or unsettled background and with no family history of post-compulsory education. Colleges often stress that they are very different learning environments to schools.

- 2.6** Throughout students' time at a college, there are a whole range of extra-curricular activities in which they can be engaged. Examples undertaken by colleges and students' associations include clubs and societies; community volunteering; awareness-raising work on important social issues such as LGBT inclusion and anti-sectarianism; charitable fundraising; and engaging in college outreach activities to the wider area<sup>16</sup>. Many students' associations have successfully engaged students in a variety of external political work, often building on national activities such as campaigns about student funding.
- 2.7** There are also opportunities to engage students at the end of the student lifecycle. One college, for example, responded to student feedback by introducing an awards ceremony in a particular subject area, rewarding students who had demonstrated commitment and consistent positive attitudes, values and behaviours during their studies; emphasising the importance of gaining more than just a qualification.
- 2.8** All these types of student engagement within element one have significant benefits to individual students in terms of developing key skills and attributes such as citizenship, personal confidence, teamwork, project planning and so on.
- 2.9** However, one significant implication of this element for the college itself, is that if students can be engaged in receiving and even shaping opportunities in wider college life, then this has a positive transferability to learning and teaching issues. In other words, students who

take an active and participative approach to areas such as recruitment, social action or clubs and societies, are more likely to take a similarly active role in their learning.

## Element 2 – students engaging in their own learning

- 2.10** Obviously learning is a core activity for a student, and inherent in this is the ability of students to not only successfully learn, but to also develop a sense of ownership over their education as a means of developing high achievement.
- 2.11** 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 or independent study. Overall activities will help students to see learning as something more than what is assessed and accredited.”<sup>17</sup>
- 2.12** One challenge within this element is to provide ever more engaging ways of learning and teaching. Colleges frequently demonstrate innovative use of space and materials and will frequently embed work-based activity in the curriculum. For instance, Coatbridge College's recent college review praised it for the fact that:
- “College departments have established strong and productive relationships with local employers. They use these links effectively to provide learners with work-based experiences which enhance their employment options. Approximately 60% of learners on full-time programmes have work placements.”<sup>18</sup>



### Case study

A project spanning three years is being undertaken by learners in Cumbernauld College from two different curriculum areas (art and welding), working in collaboration with Friends of Cumbernauld Park, which is working with North Lanarkshire Council to develop and deliver a community park for the 21st century.

The area in which the park is situated is rich in history dating back to Roman times, and the learners work on different themes, so far covering Roman times and the life of 18th century cattle drovers.

Art students have been carrying out research on the historical aspects and creating clay models representing artefacts relating to the period under consideration. At the end of the first semester, a selection process was undertaken and a number of clay models were passed over to the welding students, who manufactured the models in metal. A wide range of project related skills were developed by this engagement between learners who previously would not have worked together.

The one final chosen piece, judged by the Friends of Cumbernauld Community Park, is to be built up into a large metal sculpture and placed in the park, facilitated by the local council.

This project combines engagement between students in different disciplines with engagement between students and a community group.

- 2.13** Learning technology, such as virtual learning environments (VLEs), also presents an opportunity to engage students in new ways, not least for those studying off-campus or whom conventional teaching does not suit.

### Case study

Elmwood College's hospitality section recently introduced virtual learning tools Moodle and Mahara to its students. They have helped students to take more responsibility for their own learning by allowing home and mobile access to resources.

Originally trialled with a small number of students with specific learning needs, the system made learning more accessible to individual learning styles and thus improved the students' attitudes and enthusiasm. If they have any issues or want to discuss a curriculum matter, they can communicate freely with other class members or they can use it as an informal social discussion to sound out other group members.

Mahara is a system that very much allows learners to engage with their own learning on a step-by-step basis, enabling students to take control of their e-portfolios and share them with staff to gain feedback; keep a record of photographs and recipes; and reflect critically on their progress and skills.

This saves the time of both students and staff, not to mention costs for resources such as printing.

- 2.14** Many colleges have taken a holistic view of student engagement, establishing enterprises that allow for a range of activities from extra-curricular work, application of learning, and development of college life.

### Case study

In April 2012, Angus College opened a shop on its main campus, both selling college-branded goods as well as acting as a thrift shop and swap shop. The idea originated from students in late 2011 and students were fully involved in a variety of ways, from the development of the business plan, to joinery and painting & decorating students working on its construction, and developing the shop's branding to ensuring its compliance with accessibility regulations.

Fifteen student volunteers from various departments run the shop in their spare time, working on customer service, cash handling and stock management. There is a strong emphasis on peer learning, support and relationship building, with students of different abilities working together and students on ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses working with local students.

Shop volunteers are able to have their work accredited by way of an SQA qualification in retail, and gain useful experiences of a workplace environment as well as core concepts such as sustainability.

- 2.15** Often the most effective engagement, however, can take place in the classroom, with staff drawing upon student comments to change or enhance the work they do to support students.
- 2.16** The logical next step for a student who is fully engaged in the process of learning is to engage with staff in constructively thinking about how that learning experience could be enhanced. This is where element three of the *SE Framework* comes in.

# Chapter 3

## 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 framework document explains:

“At its most basic it is about responding to student comments through surveys or complaints and student committees and putting things right, ensuring that students know the actions that have been taken. At its most engaging it is about processes and activities which give students equal, if different, roles in the whole process of curriculum design and development. Importantly it is about students not just identifying problems but working with staff to develop solutions.”<sup>19</sup>

**3.3** Such activities can include individual tools such as one-to-one meetings between staff and students, and class tools such as discussions, focus groups and module evaluations.

**3.4** A further differentiation is between formal and informal tools, though they strongly complement each other.

**3.5** Formal tools, such as surveys or course rep systems, 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, course rep engagement with staff, informal discussions during or after classes, or staff perceptions of student views drawn from day-to-day teaching activities.

**3.7** This chapter explores element three by looking at four distinct areas in turn:

- The many different means of gathering and responding to student feedback.
- The work and support of course representative systems.
- Engaging “hard to reach” parts of the student profile.
- Developments in departmental representative structures.

## Gathering and responding to feedback

**3.8** Activities in the area of feedback are a clear strength of the sector. *The Trends Report between 2008 and 2011* found that out of the twelve college Education Scotland reviews during 2012, “responding to student feedback to influence learning”<sup>20</sup> was identified as a key strength in six colleges, with ten out of the twelve having good work in this area highlighted within the body of the report.

**3.9** Colleges and students’ associations engage in a wide range of surveys, from module and unit evaluation forms through to college-wide surveys or questionnaires about particular service departments of the college. These can be very useful ways of gaining significant data that can inform the development of services and the quality of the learning.

**3.10** Indeed, there has been a huge expansion in the range of ways in which colleges go about collecting student feedback. The *2010 LSN Evaluation* found that:

“learners and student presidents also recognised the positive changes, particularly in relation to the range of opportunities

now in place in colleges for them to provide feedback on learning and teaching and their wider experience of college.”<sup>21</sup>

**3.11** To achieve this, a range of other tools have been developed including questionnaires and surveys, informal student gatherings such as forums, focus groups and lunches, college-wide conferences and online forums.

## Case study

Cumbernauld College developed a method of encouraging learners to give their opinions on college-related issues in a fun and engaging way. The Learner Engagement Officer had successfully introduced the idea whilst working at Yorkhill Hospital, in order to identify the opinions of young patients.

Through the college’s Innovation Team, the concept was implemented within the college, and following a presentation at a sparqs national conference, it was adopted by a number of colleges and schools.

It is based on the ‘Big Brother’ television format. The student(s) sit in a chair (known as ‘The Chair’) with an anonymous member of staff asking a series of questions in a separate room. The student(s) are recorded by a remote video camera. To break the ice, the questioner and the student(s) engage in some light-hearted activities which may involve answering quizzes on popular culture, singing songs, and wearing hats, wigs and fancy dress costumes selected from a box in the room. In amongst the questions, students are asked for their opinions on matters relating to learning and teaching, and on college support services.

To build interest prior to the week of activities, ‘The Chair’ is displayed in a prominent position in the main college foyer, with an enigmatic sign hinting that something is about to take place.

After each session has been completed, feedback is provided verbally to support and faculty managers, and on completion of the full week of activities, a video is created and made available to staff and students.

**3.12** Such tools of engagement can, of course, be used by the students' association as well as the college itself. For instance, Forth Valley College Students' Association has successfully used 'GOATing' (Go Out And Talk) by which course reps have been able to engage students in giving their views on selected themes relating to the learning experience. These two examples have both been highlighted in corresponding HMIE review reports.

**3.13** There are also a number of successful examples of colleges engaging students in the design of questionnaires, ensuring that accessible language is used and the questions address the priorities of students. Central to this is the ability to draw out data that can impact on strategic-level discussions.

**3.14** Indeed, many effective mechanisms include strategic-level staff actually involved in the collation of student feedback themselves – such as at Perth College where 'Meet the Managers' sessions present an opportunity for senior management to receive views from student representatives and other students.

### Case study

Ayr College currently uses a combination of survey questionnaires (induction, pre-exit and post course destination), focus groups (whole class and class representative) and consultation events to gather views directly from learners. These contributions are used to evaluate existing provision. Learner views also emerge through the complaints and grievance procedure and through informal conversations with learning development advisors and class tutors.

**3.15** The development of the role of course reps has been important in this enhancement of student feedback mechanisms, because of the more in-depth way that course reps can be involved in specific tasks such as helping to shape questionnaires, participating in forums, conferences and informal lunch

meetings, and engaging fellow students in feedback. The wider role of course reps will be discussed later in this chapter.

**3.16** Focus groups have provided a vital way of engaging students in shaping their learning, and colleges have increasingly used them, not least because they present a more informal environment for students to give their views.

### Case study

Kilmarnock College developed a colourful and engaging wheel to involve staff during the self-evaluation process. This proved to be highly successful and all teams felt greater ownership of self-evaluation and engaged in professional dialogue with colleagues. The wheel has six segments illustrating the guiding principles of the college learning, teaching and assessment strategy: successful, supportive, engaging, flexible, reflective and innovative.

To build on this success a student wheel was developed for student evaluation in conjunction with the student president. Focus groups of students representing a wide range of curriculum areas and levels were carried out to gain feedback.

The student wheel has been effective in gaining structured feedback on learning, teaching and assessment. Students are asked to allocate a score against a range of questions in each of the six segments of the wheel which reflect the same guiding principles as the staff wheel. Students have found the wheel easy and straightforward to use and valuable feedback has been gained from these sessions. This valuable feedback is then incorporated into curriculum teams' self-evaluation processes and reports enabling them to compare staff scores for each of the segments against those of their learners and identify areas for further improvement and action.

**3.17** Just as earlier examples cited with student survey data, it is also important for focus group outcomes to be linked into strategic considerations.

## Case study

At Banff and Buchan College, recent changes in the board of management committee structure have resulted in the creation of a Learner Engagement Sub-Group for the college's Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC). This sub-group consists of a range of staff across all areas of the college and three student officers. The revised structure allows learners far greater engagement, from classroom to boardroom, in college quality processes and far greater influence over the quality of their own learning.

For example, students' association executive officers have been working closely with college senior managers on enhancing the quality arrangements for learning. They have done this by conducting peer-led feedback sessions using the elements of the sparqs "Student Learning Experience" diagram as a framework to capture valuable, qualitative information from learners about their educational experience. As part of

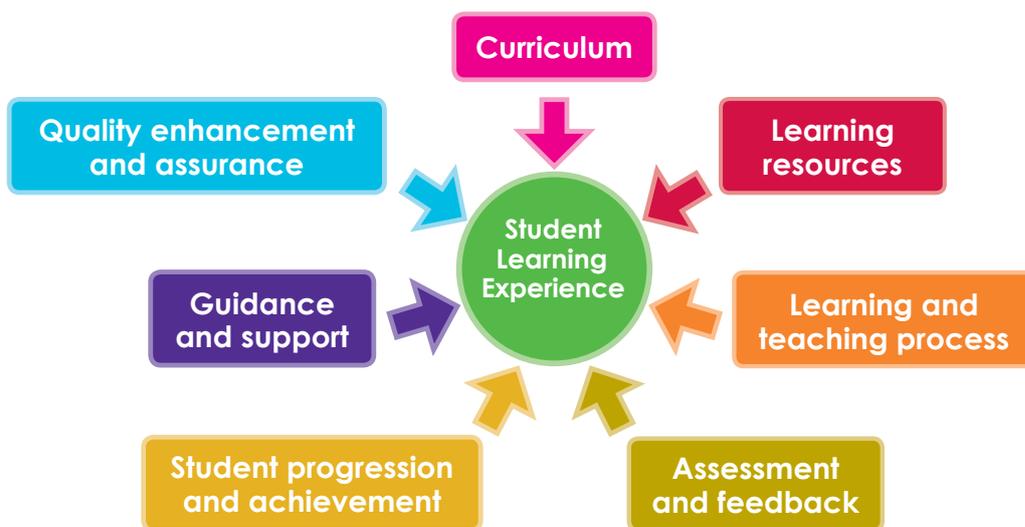
the revised quality arrangements and in line with the college's continuing commitment to improve the learner experience, the focus groups are held with learners from various courses.

Student officers, supported by the college Student Engagement Officer, conduct the sessions and produce reports (after confirmation of accuracy from participants) for the senior management team and the LTC Learner Engagement Sub-Group. Managers then discuss and share the outputs from the sessions with course teams and plan appropriate actions to address learner-identified issues.

Participating students said they prefer this mechanism to provide feedback to the college. The use of this model has provided staff and students' association executive officers with high quality feedback that has allowed actions to be taken to improve and enhance the learner experience.

**3.18** Complementing this range of ways in which student feedback is gathered (and the mechanisms are designed) is an increase in the effectiveness of processes for responding to that feedback. Such means of 'closing the loop' have been increasingly effective as advertisements for how effective student evaluation can be.

**3.19** 'You Said, We Did' is a widely used and very successful tool whereby colleges have drawn students' attention to the real difference that feedback can make on learning and teaching, thus increasing students' confidence in further participation in feedback mechanisms.



The Student Learning Experience.

- 3.20** Often, of course, colleges are not able to fully deliver on particular requests, or there are very good reasons not to. In such instances, staff and student officers report that messages that explain why certain action wasn't or couldn't be taken also have value, because they help students understand more about the different processes and priorities that shape their learning experience.
- 3.21** 'You Said, We Did' has been highlighted by an Education Scotland aspect report as an example of colleges "becoming increasingly effective"<sup>22</sup> at providing feedback to students on their views.
- 3.22** Part of the value of 'You Said, We Did' is that it does not immediately require students to get involved in high-level representative activities or to think about strategic questions that may in the first instance seem quite

abstract. Instead, its strength lies in the fact that it can advertise the positive consequences of students engaging in very grounded, real aspects of their everyday learning experience.

- 3.23** Obviously, the process of enabling, gathering and responding to feedback is only a means to an end and there is strong evidence that feedback really is being used to make a meaningful difference to the student experience.
- 3.24** Reviews regularly point to colleges using this feedback effectively and point to a wide range of changes in practice, including: numeracy teaching practice; developments in IT strategies; changes to learning and teaching approaches and assessment schedules; major changes to programme content and delivery; and library and VLE developments.

## Case study

The following examples are extracts from 'You Said, We Did' posters at Cumbernauld College, demonstrating how the college has communicated its actions arising from student feedback.

**YOU SAID:** It would be great if we didn't always have to go to the Learning Centre to type up work or research.

**WE DID:** We now have Wi-Fi in the beauty rooms so you can bring in your own laptops or use college netbooks.

**YOU SAID:** We feel that the competition was too early in the year. We would prefer to build our skills and have the competition in semester 2.

**WE DID:** We have changed it so the competition is now held in May instead of January as in previous years.

**YOU SAID:** Rather than using switches can we not use motion sensors to control the lights in every classroom?

**WE DID:** Initial outlay for this is high, but we think this is a great idea and they are being implemented as rooms are refurbished.

**YOU SAID:** We would like to get a better understanding of what employers want.

**WE DID:** We invited employers and partners into the college to provide an insight into their working practices. We also arranged talks from the voluntary sector to incorporate volunteering within 'Get Ready For Work'.

**YOU SAID:** We need more study space.

**WE DID:** We have set aside Room 317a with computers and media equipment, soft seating, study desks and two iPads that can be used as devices to support study.

**YOU SAID:** We would like more relevant Moodle pages and pages for Higher subjects.

**WE DID:** We have created more Moodle pages including Higher English. Learners within the Amnesty International Student Group are now in charge of their own page as editors on the Moodle site.

## Case study

Over the past couple of years, the Creative Services Department of Kilmarnock College have been using post-it notes to gather student feedback. Students are encouraged to post any comments they have on the back of the door at the end of each class. The lecturer will gather them in, and if the points relate specifically to the learning and teaching that has happened in the class the lecturer would usually pick them back up the next time they have the class or at a course team meeting if it was a more general point. The post-its have been useful and enabled lecturers to alter their teaching approach, and the informal aspect of the post-it note system is appreciated by students.

## Case study

At Cardonald College, staff support enabled the holding of forty focus groups, which focused solely on learning and teaching, carried out across a wide selection of courses ranging from Access to HND Year 2 level.

The feedback gathered directly affected delivery and future planning, as staff used the findings to make improvements, some examples being the replacement of units which students disliked, the introduction of more practical/less theory in some courses and a shift in timing of assessments to decrease assessment burden at specific times during the academic calendar.

## Course representative systems

### Overview and development

**3.25** There is a vital role for course reps in giving views on learning and encouraging all other students to do the same. They are a key conduit between students and staff and can help both formally through course committees, and also informally by working with staff and students on issues relating to learning and teaching.

**3.26** Encouragingly, there is clear evidence that course rep systems are an area of improvement in recent years, with a better focus on learning and teaching matters. Recent college review reports from Education Scotland variously describe colleges' course reps as "well trained", "effective", "enthusiastic" and "motivated". In 2012's college review reports, two colleges have their course rep systems identified as a key strength and a further six are described as having effective systems.

**3.27** Indeed, such is the importance of course rep systems to student engagement, that in one recent review report that stated a caveat relating to student engagement in 2012, this in part seemed due to problems in getting course reps to attend training and thus carry out their role effectively. Therefore, an effectively managed course rep system is absolutely crucial to student engagement and thus to quality in general.

**3.28** While that clearly indicates that there is still work to do, it is a dramatic improvement on the findings of the 2005 sparqs' college sector mapping report, where it discovered that:

“around half the college staff ...commented that there was difficulty in getting course reps to discuss learning and teaching issues around their specific curriculum areas.”<sup>23</sup>

**3.29** In contrast, staff members on the sparqs College Advisory Group commented that they had seen an improvement in this respect, with one member noting “a significant move from discussions around toilets and car parks to excellent learning and teaching discussions.”

### Provision of training to course reps

**3.30** Supporting course reps in their role is a hugely important way of ensuring their value and colleges have continually enhanced their approach to training. The number of course reps trained across Scotland's colleges and universities by sparqs each year, since its inception, has risen consistently to over 2000

- delivered through its Associate Trainer scheme, whereby students are trained and employed by sparqs to deliver its training.

**3.31** sparqs' training content itself strongly reinforces the role of course reps as commenting on and working to find solutions relating to the student learning experience, with widespread assertions 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 instance, in 2012-13, 91% of participants found the training useful and over 90% rated the trainer as very good or outstanding and would recommend the training to others.

**3.32** However, sparqs' direct training of college course reps forms a decreasing proportion of those trained in total throughout the sector. This is because sparqs continues to support institutions on a journey to develop, deliver and manage their own institutionally-relevant course rep training materials and student training teams. Twelve colleges have delivered sparqs 'tailored' or adapted training over the last three years and a further thirteen colleges now deliver their own training, with support and materials offered by sparqs. This has been a major strategic consideration for colleges, ensuring that training is being delivered in a managed, resourced and effective way that draws on both internal and sectoral developments.

**3.33** Over the years, therefore, colleges have moved from a situation where training was rarely or sporadically provided, to embracing the national support from sparqs to deliver effective training to a standard across the country. As a result, they are now developing the resources and confidence to start to adapt, develop and extend training to suit their own circumstances.

**3.34** Colleges are working to address the needs of a diverse student population in this respect, including adapted training from sparqs

and a few other examples of part-time, evening student engagement. sparqs has also developed resources for course reps who have additional learning support needs.

### Case study

In 2011-12, sparqs worked with Stevenson College to develop materials for course reps with learning difficulties in supported education; materials which were later piloted at Cardonald and Clydebank Colleges.

The project was informed by a focus group at the college, which aimed to establish what students felt, based on their experiences, course reps should be doing.

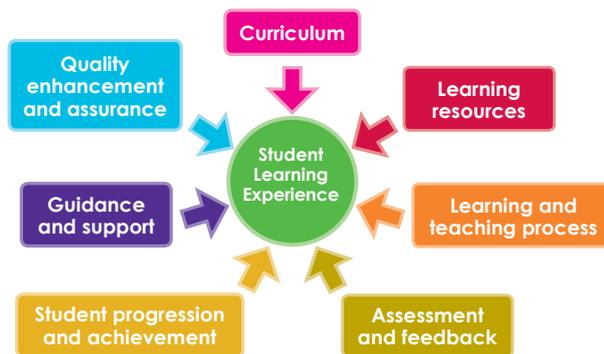
To develop materials, sparqs worked with both academic and guidance staff, as well as receiving external input from People First who provided advice on user-led processes. This work created training materials and supporting resources for a two-hour session about quality and the role of the course rep. The handbook for participants was written in an easy-read, high graphic format, involving the explanation of concepts as simply as possible with accompanying pictures. Supporting resources were also produced for the students' association to help them engage course reps and students from supported education.

The training was developed for course reps from supported education courses, but it was found that they worked very well with all students on these courses too, so delivery was expanded.

The project intended from the outset that training should be developed with a strong focus on its outcome – namely, not just the training itself, but enhanced student engagement in broader quality activities, such as review preparation. It was also recognised that this enhanced engagement would require to be supported by the college, for instance in terms of briefings to representatives prior to meetings and support during meetings. This is now being provided, and the training continues successfully at Edinburgh College's Sighthill campus following Stevenson College's merger.

## Engaging course reps at course committee meetings

- 3.35** Of course, a successful course rep system cannot be delivered simply through training. Much also rests on the quality of engagement course reps experience from the staff they work with, and particularly the committees they sit on. Typically called course committees or student liaison committees, these are the bodies where course-specific decisions are taken and course reps have a key role to play.
- 3.36** Course committees in years past have often struggled to engage students in conversations about learning and teaching, and a classic problem for staff has been seeking input beyond simply complaints about the cafeteria or car parking, issues for which course teams are not directly responsible.
- 3.37** A number of innovations, therefore, have significantly enhanced the engagement of students at these meetings. One major step forward, for example, has been to structure the agenda around headings relating to the Student Learning Experience, such as curriculum, assessment and feedback, or guidance and support. This thereby enables detailed conversations between staff and students about how to enhance the learning experience, backed up by student research on these issues.
- 3.38** Developed by sparqs in the early years of its existence, the Student Learning Experience was inspired by elements from the previous college review framework, where specific headings were used as the basis for reviews<sup>24</sup>. These were felt to be appropriate ‘bite sized’ chunks of the learning experience which course reps could learn to analyse and gather evidence on, and so became a key part of the training sparqs provided. Over time this model was extended to its university sector course rep training, and the elements of the diagram modified and simplified a number of times over the years, resulting in its current format.



The Student Learning Experience.

- 3.39** The Student Learning Experience is a key element of sparqs’ course rep training, mentioned previously in this chapter, which in turn is a key area of the agency’s work and an established feature of the vast majority of colleges’ annual cycles.
- 3.40** Crucial to successful engagement of students in course committees, however, is their treatment as full and equal members. Training is an important part of ensuring this partnership; and sparqs’ course rep training has been accompanied by its continually revised staff workshop, through which teaching staff can consider how best to engage students, particularly course reps.
- 3.41** There has been a move from simple ‘box ticking’ that checks there is a space for student membership, to developing mechanisms that allow those students to be active and effective in their contributions to meetings. At one college, there is even a rule that course committees are unable to take place without at least one student member present.
- 3.42** Several colleges have reviewed their meeting formats to engage students more widely in productive discussions, with action including advertising agendas more widely and in advance; structuring students’ association council meeting agendas around the Student Learning Experience used in training; and diversifying the types of meetings, including informal lunch-time meetings, conferences and focus groups.

## Course rep support and events

**3.43** As well as engaging with their own teaching staff, course reps also need to learn and share with fellow course reps across their college. To this end, students' associations have for many years run councils, often called course rep meetings or students' representative councils, as a key part of their democratic structure and which aim to inform the students' association of matters across the college.

**3.44** Often meeting monthly or fortnightly, these can allow spaces for course reps to come together to share perspectives on learning and teaching, develop other areas of students' association activity, hold senior officers to account, and discuss key learning and teaching issues with invited members of college staff.

**3.45** As with the college-run course committees, course rep councils have also frequently benefited from using the sparqs' Student Learning Experience as a basis for meetings. The headings have been a means of steering conversation towards learning and teaching matters and away from agendas purely focused on facilities concerns and social activities – topics which, while perfectly valid items of business, have frequently been discussed at the expense of learning and teaching.

### Case study

At Cardonald College, class rep meetings were advertised in advance to encourage a higher turnout of students as well as implementing a structured agenda which was available prior to the meeting via the student intranet. The agenda was focused around learning and teaching and encompassed the seven elements of the sparqs' Student Learning Experience.

From the feedback given by students, the agenda was successful in focusing on the more important aspects of their studies, for example learning and teaching.

**3.46** Increasingly, colleges are providing course reps with a broad suite of support beyond the regular course rep meetings. Such tools include a range of resources and events that help them learn and share from each other and develop their understanding and approaches to their role. Large scale events such as conferences for course reps – and other students – to engage with staff, senior management and board members on major areas of the learning and teaching process are increasingly important.

### Case study

An annual Learner Voice Conference is held at Cumbernauld College in order to provide an opportunity for learners and staff to interact and to identify emerging issues relating to a particular theme. The conference takes place over a single afternoon, and involves around fifty learners and seven staff member facilitators.

In addition to matters arising from the theme of the conference, other issues may be identified and one of the outputs from the event is an action plan, to implement improvements.

The focus of the 2012 Learner Voice Conference was based around the four capacities of Curriculum for Excellence. Following a review of previous conferences and other specific learner engagement events, emphasis was put not only on the things that the college could do better, but also on facilitating a reflective experience which encouraged learners to identify the things that they could do better in order to improve their learning experience.

Prior to the event the delegates meet over a buffet lunch, and then the conference begins with an introduction and an ice breaker activity to get the learners talking to each other and breaking off into groups with others from different classes. They engage in interactive activities around strands from the main theme and learners feed back to their peers as part of the main group.

Learners report having enjoyed the experience, and from the staff members' point of view, this event provides an opportunity to engage in a two way dialogue on issues which have been identified as crucial to successful learning.

## Case study

Coatbridge College launched 'The Pledge' in 2011, an annual event aimed at gathering staff, board members and students to explore and act upon the views of students across the college.

The Pledge 2013 event aimed to look at six areas across the college: Facilities; Regionalisation; College Life; Communications; Progression; and Equality and Diversity. The Pledge attendees were split into groups where innovative and captivating discussions addressed the topics at hand.

Students from every curriculum area of the college were involved and a number of pledges were created to enhance different aspects of the learning experience, the fulfilment of which the board will play a role in monitoring.

## Case study

At Ayr College, course reps are entitled to key college information sources, so they can access the same quality data and reports as teaching staff. This enables course reps to carry out their role consistently and thoroughly, by understanding both contemporary data and historic trends relating to their programme.

Also, not only are course reps members of programme team and board meetings, but also those meetings cannot take place unless the student members are in attendance.

- 3.47** Ongoing communication between course reps is also vital, and many colleges and students' associations provide chat facilities, message boards, social media groups or text messaging services to keep course reps in touch with each other.
- 3.48** Inverness College's dedicated online space for course reps also includes all the information reps will need, such as downloads of the course rep handbook and job description.<sup>25</sup>

## Accreditation and reward of course reps

- 3.49** Colleges are also increasingly exploring a form of accreditation to demonstrate clearly the learning and development they have undertaken. For instance, a number of colleges have explored the use of SQA modules that relate to citizenship, research and personal development. Clydebank College has piloted an 'Elected Representative Accreditation Programme', which allows course reps to gain a CMI Management Communication Unit for their course rep work.

## Engaging students in "hard to engage" groups

- 3.50** It is perhaps not helpful to talk about "non-traditional" students in the college sector. Colleges recruit and engage a wide variety of individuals, such as work-based students, mature students who have been out of education for many years, international students, and students on short courses or evening class programmes, in addition to school leavers.
- 3.51** However, at a sectoral level substantial progress has been made in engaging students in commenting on and shaping their learning from sectors of the student population that might have in the past been seen as "hard to engage". One example is the development of course rep training for students with learning difficulties in supported education, developed at Stevenson College, which was outlined in the case study earlier in this chapter.
- 3.52** Also at Stevenson College, however, sparqs has developed materials to engage students on ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses. This was done with Stevenson College's ESOL Department and led to the creation of four one-hour sessions designed to be included in the curriculum. By drawing on key concepts such as citizenship and democracy and with a strong focus on language needs, students

learned about student engagement and its important role within the college. During the final session participants elected their course rep. Anecdotal evidence from the college's ESOL Department suggested this approach led to higher levels of engagement by ESOL students in a broad range of quality matters, including conversations with course reps and better individual student feedback on learning.

- 3.53** These two projects at Stevenson College have demonstrated that students whose communication abilities and needs differ from other students, can still be engaged in the core activity of commenting on and shaping the learning experience.

## Departmental representation

- 3.54** Clear communication between course reps and senior students' association officers is one of the most important ways to ensure that student engagement at the institutional level is informed, authoritative and effective.
- 3.55** Course rep councils are mentioned earlier in this section as a tool to achieve this. However, such mechanisms can be difficult to make successful in large colleges where there may be several hundred course reps, often split between buildings or campuses.
- 3.56** An increasingly popular mechanism, therefore, is a team of departmental representatives, serving the middle level of decision-making which colleges often call sections, faculties, schools or curriculum areas. Such representatives can work with a more manageable number of course reps in similar subject areas, and also work as a coherent team to provide evidence to inform students' association campaigns and activities on learning and teaching. Often, departmental representatives can have formal roles in college faculty committees and in Borders College they have even taken the chair of these meetings.<sup>26</sup>

## Case study

Following a joint students' association and board of management away-day at Dundee College, a new 'Lead Rep' was introduced for each of the college's six Centres.

With over three hundred course reps, it was felt that a smaller team of lead reps would help represent the views of students and ensure that common "big messages" are brought to the attention of the college more quickly. In the first year this team listened to and worked with both the course reps and key curriculum staff.

Current feedback suggests the system is very much a 'work in progress', but that in a number of Centres there is an enhanced relationship between curriculum teams and learners; additionally, the common views and issues of learners are more effectively brought to the attention of the students' association, senior management and board of management.

- 3.57** sparqs has recently produced a *Toolkit on Developing Departmental Representation*<sup>27</sup> that supports institutions looking to introduce or develop departmental representative teams. This includes a variety of good practice from both sectors and includes guidance on how to support officers, course rep forums and departments themselves in further engaging students.
- 3.58** As colleges become increasingly more effective at co-ordinating and engaging their course reps, and of course in the light of regionalisation, there is increasing awareness and exploration of the value of departmental representative systems.

# Chapter 4

## Element 4: formal mechanisms for quality and governance



### Introduction to the element

- 4.1** Element four 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 course reps, departmental reps or executive officers with academic remits.
- 4.2** The *SE Framework* explains:
- “It is about ensuring elected representatives can deliver a considered student view point based on hard evidence, democratic processes and due attention to meeting the needs of all students. It therefore must link with the activities of students involved in commenting and shaping the direction of learning.”<sup>28</sup>
- 4.3** This chapter outlines the progress in the last few years in this element, exploring how students’ associations’ work with colleges has developed; the role of the student board member, student officers and staff and the extent to which association planning is incorporated into college strategic planning; and student engagement in college review activities. However, it is important to recognise that whilst significant progress has been made, Griggs reported student representation to be

“patchy across the sector with non-autonomous and underfunded associations a key problem.”

Progress discussed in this chapter needs to be read with this major challenge in mind and the chapter comments on these issues as well as discussing a response to the issue through the SFC funded project ‘Partnerships for Change’, which is incorporated throughout.



### Students’ associations and working with the college

- 4.4** Key to this element is a students’ association which has the capacity and resources to engage meaningfully with the college. Out of the twelve college reviews carried out in 2012, two colleges had key strengths related to their students’ association, with a further five having positive comments within the commentary. Comments often refer to “strong”, “effective” presidents and sometimes refer to a wider executive student team.

## College boards of management

- 4.5** One of the areas that benefits greatly from senior officers being sabbatical is the college board of management, where the students' association president almost without exception automatically takes on the role of student member of the board.
- 4.6** Just over half of the college staff interviewed in the research for the *2005 sparqs' Mapping Report*<sup>29</sup> indicated that attendance by student representatives at such committees was poor and the report also identified there being major gaps even in the existence of student places on major college committees
- 4.7** However, students are now engaged in a wide range of committees at the college level, dealing with a variety of strategic issues from learning and teaching through to estates, equalities and library facilities.
- 4.8** In the *Trends Report between 2008 and 2011*, Education Scotland found "effective systems for representatives at faculty level as well as on major cross-college boards and committees."<sup>30</sup> sparqs' College Advisory Group members have also commented on the improved attendance, effectiveness and professionalism of student board members.
- 4.9** The Forth Valley College 2012 Education Scotland review found, for example:
- “The Board of Management values learner contributions highly ensuring appropriate action is taken promptly to issues raised by learners. Through the Student Union executive, learners are represented well on, and make valuable contributions to, the Board and its sub-committees, raising important learner issues.”<sup>31</sup>
- 4.10** Indeed, it is at the level of the board itself where student engagement is of paramount importance yet by nature the most acute challenge. Although students are statutorily engaged, the business is often extremely complex. The requirement, therefore, for thorough training, support and research to support student engagement at this level, is significant.

## Supporting College Student Governors

- 4.11** The National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland and sparqs' Supporting College Student Governors programme exists to provide sector-level support for student engagement at the board level.
- 4.12** In recent years, the pre and post summer training events have allowed for training in key concepts around management and governance, the work of the board, and engaging in meetings. It has also been a chance to meet staff from key college sector agencies. The events have been extended and developed in recent years, and in 2012 fifty-six student officers participated in the events.
- 4.13** The programme also includes a toolkit which supports boards, students' associations and senior management to consider how they can develop appropriate mechanisms to support student members and ensure that systems and cultures of engagement at this level work in appropriate ways to ensure effective engagement.
- 4.14** As the student governance toolkits mentioned above suggest, it is the support provided internally by the college that can really make the difference in terms of the effectiveness of student engagement at the strategic level. As such, a number of mechanisms have been developed by colleges and boards, including improved approaches to induction, briefings before and after meetings by the committee clerk or chair, mentoring from a fellow committee member, and support on the writing and presentation of papers.

## Sabbatical funding for student officers

- 4.15** A key ingredient in this effective engagement, from board level downwards, is the ability of senior student officers to dedicate time to their responsibilities separately from study commitments. The provision of sabbatical funding for students' association posts is a crucial enabler and as a tool has become more widespread in its use.

**4.16** Numbers of student officers being paid as sabbaticals have risen since 2005 when there were seven full-time and three part-time sabbatical officers. sparqs estimates there were around eleven full-time and eight part-time, funded sabbatical officers in 2012-13. Whilst this increase was not dramatic, colleges frequently attribute improvements in the effectiveness of students' association activity to these posts, alongside dedicated staff support.

**4.17** For instance, full-time sabbatical officers are clearly more likely to have time to attend formal meetings, prepare for them and research relevant agenda items more thoroughly, than if such responsibilities compete with academic commitments. Such full-time officers can also devote more time to training and development opportunities, informal contact with staff, involvement in ad hoc and informal project work with management, and supporting and learning from course reps. As such, they can more quickly become more effective experts, delivering a sustained and authoritative quality of engagement to college managers and governors, than if only devoting a few hours a week to the post.

**4.18** There is now a general impression of strengthening and more effective activity by senior officers. The *2010 LSN Evaluation* found:

“There were more examples of active and effective student presidents and students' associations who were known to learners and who interacted with class representatives.”<sup>32</sup>

**4.19** The work of the 'Partnerships for Change' project will lead to a more significant increase in sabbatical officers from 2013-14 with an estimated forty-five paid student officers in post across the thirteen college regions – twenty-four of them full-time sabbaticals. This represents a significant opportunity for strengthening students' associations in the future.

## Staff Support

**4.20** As discussed in chapter one, there has been an increase in staff support for student engagement within colleges with the recruitment of specific student engagement officers and staff student liaison officers as well as more senior posts having clear responsibility for student engagement.

**4.21** Often such posts will have responsibilities for directly supporting the students' association, managing the students' association office, supporting the course rep system and being a permanent point of contact for staff and student officers.

**4.22** In terms of working with students, such posts can undertake research for senior student officers, aid officers' understanding of the 'big picture' of committee deliberations, assist in the comprehension of complex board papers and provide continuity and succession planning for committee membership. At Banff and Buchan College, for example, the student board member is actually accompanied at board meetings by the Student Engagement Officer (staff post), as an observer.

**4.23** However, these posts are often part time, or part of a wider remit, quite junior positions and unclear in methods of reporting and accountability.

College employed staff posts can and do raise questions about the autonomy of a students' association. As earlier quoted the *2010 LSN Evaluation* found:

“Some colleges have developed Learner Engagement Officer (LEO) posts, which are viewed by staff as positive for their role in encouraging and supporting learner engagement. However, concerns had been raised in other colleges that such posts might .....undermine the role of the student president.”<sup>33</sup>

**4.24** Nevertheless, there is a clear correlation between the provision of such staff posts and the success of the students' association. The challenge for the future in building strong students' associations will be to develop further appropriate staff support for management and governance whilst ensuring the independence of the student voice and students' association autonomy.

### Association evaluation and planning

**4.25** Several students' associations, including Aberdeen, Forth Valley and Elmwood Colleges, carry out a self-evaluation as part of the college's overall learner engagement self-evaluation. There are also examples of students' associations carrying out their own strategic planning, e.g. at Dundee College Students' Association planning is developed at away-days involving the students' association, senior staff and members of the board of management. These plans are incorporated into the overall college strategic plan.

### Student involvement in formal review processes

**4.26** Following changes at the sector level, students have become more heavily involved in reviews, both as contributors of the student perspective to review teams, as well as forming a part of review teams.

**4.27** Students have become effectively engaged in their own college's individual preparations for external reviews, plus in the regular internal review activities that colleges themselves operate.

**4.28** Colleges are increasingly considering how they can engage students in reviews at course, department or section level, processes which can draw on perspectives gained from both mass survey results and more engaged representatives acting as

reviewers. The challenge has been to ensure that these processes receive the input of more honest feedback from students.

### Case study

In 2010-11 at Dumfries and Galloway College, a number of the students' association executive were invited to be part of the Learner Review Team. The student president and five members of the executive team expressed an interest in becoming student reviewers.

Feedback from the student reviewers who joined the Learner Review Team in session 2010-11 was very positive and each had valued their experience and the opportunity to meet with students from a different curriculum area.

Following the pilot, the college built this into the review process for every year.

**4.29** The role of students has increased not only in terms of internal review, but also in preparation for colleges' external review too. The Learner Engagement Questionnaire is a key development in this, enabling a formal mechanism for students' associations to demonstrate to review teams a better understanding of the views of their membership.

**4.30** This accompanies the confidence statements and review framework elements relating to the engagement of students, and this therefore now sees student engagement rooted at the heart of colleges' approaches to quality, governance and learning and teaching.

**4.31** Following reviews, there is also scope for students to be engaged in the reflection on and response to action points. This has been done particularly effectively at Dundee College following their 2009 review, in a way that was highlighted as Sector-Leading Innovative Practice<sup>34</sup>.

## Case study

At the annual Students' Association Residential, student representatives at Dundee College discussed the main findings from the college's 2009 review, and formulated their response. The students involved represented a range of vocational programmes and subjects from all levels of study and were joined by board members.

The HMIE report was presented to student representatives who provided feedback in relation to the four confidence statements and supplementary dialogue. That feedback was later collated into the Learner Report. The report was endorsed at the board's Quality Enhancement Committee and presented at the board of management.

The approach not only promoted understanding of the importance of learning and teaching, and the role of HMIE and its approach, but also helped student representatives in the development of their own operational plan.

- 4.32** There is more scope for students to engage in quality processes but this is often limited by the capacity of the students' association, not least the professional staff support for the development of their education work. There are echoes here of the value demonstrated by staff in the support of senior student engagement at board level.

## Regionalisation and students' associations

- 4.33** The Scottish Government's announcement that it would be reforming Scotland's college sector by grouping colleges into regions has been nothing short of a game-changer. The ramifications will be wide, although exploring them in full is beyond the remit of this report.
- 4.34** Specifically, though, regionalisation poses a significant opportunity for student engagement. As this report has highlighted,
- there are many great successes in terms of students' associations and student engagement in the college sector. However, there are nevertheless some areas for improvement and there has often been significant debate among colleges and students' associations about the most appropriate nature and operation of a college student body.
- 4.35** Regionalisation has put students even further at the heart of the national sector. When Griggs reported student representation to be "patchy across the sector with non-autonomous and underfunded associations a key problem"<sup>35</sup>, the Cabinet Secretary's response was that "Student participation and representation become a commitment across the College Sector" and that "Student[s]' Associations should be strengthened and become appropriately funded, autonomous and sustainable",<sup>36</sup> a commitment to be included in future ministerial guidance to the SFC.
- 4.36** There are early indications that new regional structures will feature increased resources for sabbatical officers and staff posts within students' associations, as well as more effective strategic planning for students' associations themselves. 'Partnerships for Change', the SFC-funded project aimed at engaging students in the process and outcome of regionalisation, has supported students' associations and colleges to think about how best to engage students, firstly in the discussions around regionalisation and secondly in the post-regionalisation structures. This has allowed a range of staff and students to work together to shape how regionalisation affects their colleges, and has helped bring a strategic perspective and sense of joint ownership over student engagement.
- 4.37** One key outcome in recent months has been the creation of project plans for students' associations within regions, by which they have aimed to create sustainable models for operation. Part of this has involved both

project funding from SFC as well as core college funding to create full-time posts and student ambassadors to research and develop new structures. This has seen new staff resources created in four regions, with discussions ongoing in other regions at the time of writing.

### Case study

At Edinburgh College Students' Association, funding was secured for four sabbatical posts, consisting of a president and initially one vice-president for each of the campuses on which the three former colleges were based. As the college has successfully evolved, however, the new students' association decided to replace the three campus-based remits with three college-wide thematic remits.

Accompanying this has been a member of staff at each campus, with moves to create an overall manager for the association to lead its strategic development. The level of staff resource as a core function has been pivotal in securing the stability and effectiveness of the students' association in its early years. Key to this, in turn, has been the college board's willingness to support the association's vision.

**4.38** Meanwhile in the Highlands and Islands, where college regionalisation has taken place within the context of a federal university model, SFC funding has enabled the creation of a two-year project involving the employment of two full-time posts and a part-time student research team.

# Chapter 5

## Element 5: influencing the student experience at national level



### Introduction to the element

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

“Whilst it is focused on the contribution students make to national developments it is also concerned with the opportunity this affords students to develop an understanding of issues and provide a context for their contribution at a local level. It helps create student “experts” able to comment on not only their own experience but also able to place that in context of the wider educational experience.”<sup>36</sup>

**5.2** The chapter begins by exploring the engagement of students in sector-level decision-making, then subject-level discussions, and national networking and campaigning.

### Sector-level decision-making

**5.3** College students contribute effectively in a number of sector-level decision-making bodies. Student representatives sit on committees within the SFC, Skills Development Scotland, and SCQF among others. However, there is no formal representation on key committees in a number of other sector agencies, although the board of the College Development Network has recently introduced a student member. As such, the opportunity for sector agencies generally to engage with national student leaders can often be limited.

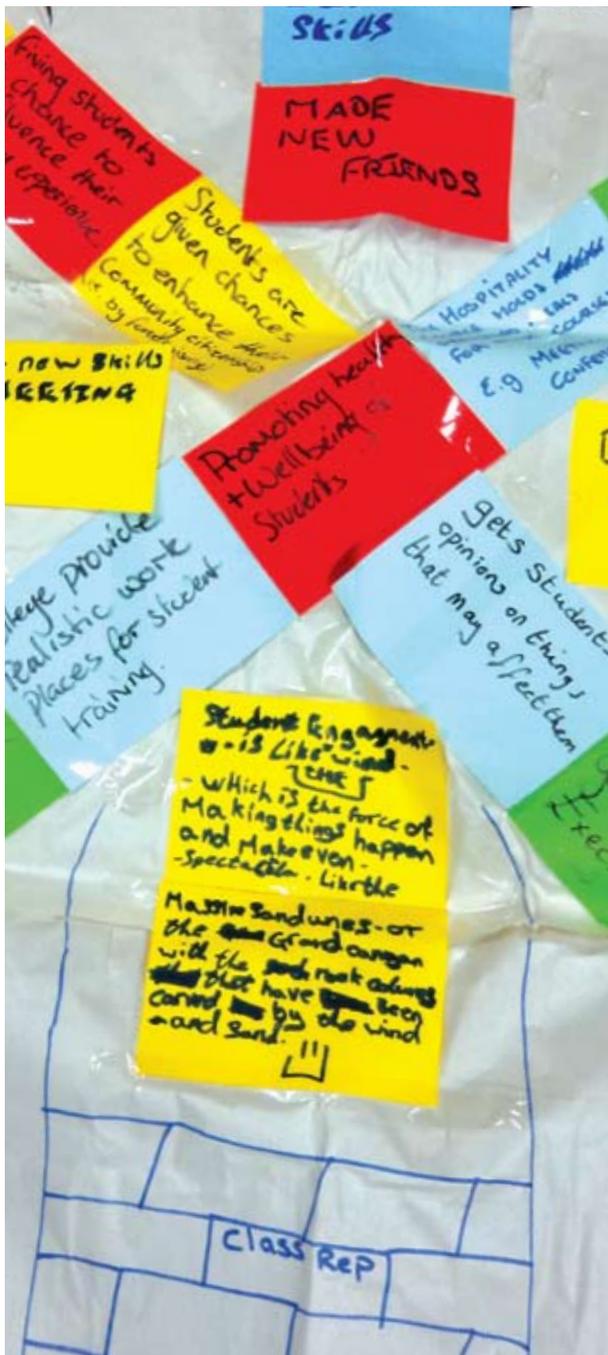
**5.4** However, where engagement does take place, impact has been significant. For instance, student members on the

SFC’s Quality Working Group have been instrumental in enhancing the learner engagement focus in the external indicators of college reviews; while student membership on the SCQF Quality Committee has contributed to the recent harmonisation of SQA and SCQF credit values. The creation of Student Partnership Agreements is also another output of student engagement at national level.

**5.5** Senior officers in colleges and NUS Scotland have been instrumental in development of work regarding regionalisation through sector committees and lobbying, and an NUS Scotland officer served as a member of Griggs’ panel.

**5.6** While the development of the idea of regionalisation represents a good example of student engagement at the sectoral level, the process points to the future directions for student engagement, and this is something to be picked up on in the conclusions of this report

**5.7** Another important example of student engagement in sectoral activity has been the creation of the Student Team Member (STM) in college reviews. While, of course, undertaking a review role rather than being any sort of sector decision-making representative, STMs have been a widely valued new part of reviews since being piloted in 2008-09. The position has allowed increased access for review teams to the student population at the reviewed college. The training, networking and perspectives of STMs by Education Scotland, and its predecessor HMIE, have also raised the profile of student engagement activities and the role of students as a consideration in enhancing quality mechanisms.



## Subject-based engagement

**5.8** Besides the college reviews, Education Scotland also conducts aspect reports, in which subject areas or themes are explored across the sector. Students are among those met by reviewers at the sample of colleges visited, although unlike college reviews there are no STMs, which is perhaps a future area for exploration.

**5.9** There is also no formal scope for students or student representatives from different colleges in similar subject areas to engage with each other, to build a national picture of student views of their subject areas. Given colleges' shared experiences of aspect reports and SQA module provision, there would seem to be clear scope to do so in the college sector.

## National networking and campaigning

**5.10** Students' associations have not only worked locally on matters relating to the student experience within colleges, but have also focused increasingly effectively on national campaigning. This has been especially the case in issues relating to matters such as college funding or student finance.

**5.11** One example of effective campaigning has been co-ordinated, nationwide work by college students' associations on the Scottish Government's 2013-14 spending plans. Following a range of activities organised by college students' associations, including lobbying of MSPs through meetings and literally thousands of emails from students, cuts to college sector funding was minimised. This was built upon afterwards by NUS Scotland who were able to work with the Scottish Government to ensure that extra money was spent on priority areas such as student support and the funding of extra places for women and part-time students.

**5.12** Another recent campaigning success involved college students' associations encouraging their principals to sign up to a commitment to engage and support students' associations through the regionalisation process. The effect of this campaign can be seen in the extent to which colleges have engaged their students in the major decisions of the process.

- 5.13** Historically, national student representative gatherings, usually under the auspices of NUS, have been the main arena of sector-wide activity for students and students' associations. There is an inherent value for local activities in engaging in this work, in that the facts, ideas and experiences gained from the national stage better inform local representation.
- 5.14** There is evidence to suggest that the impact of this work both nationally and indeed locally is strengthening. The range of support offered by NUS Scotland has increased over recent years, including its major networking and training event The Gathering, and a changed format for its democratic conferences.
- 5.15** There has been a clear improvement in national student engagement at ministerial level, in no small part due to increasing engagement in national issues by college students' associations. This has enabled NUS Scotland to develop close links with the Cabinet Secretary's office. The increasing maturity of engagement is such that students are now prominent in influencing ministerial decision-making and ministerial guidance on matters ranging from widening access through to student funding and regionalisation. For instance, the Letter of Guidance of 28 March 2013 informed SFC that:
- “as mergers progress, I should like you to have closely in mind the need for strengthened students' associations, consistent with our commitment in response to recommendation 23 of Professor Griggs's work. You should continue to work with NUS (Scotland) to that end.”<sup>38</sup>
- 5.16** In 2008-09, SFC funded a project managed by NUS Scotland to support national student engagement. Originally called the Student Learning Enhancement and Engagement Committee, this has since evolved to become NUS Scotland's Education Network.
- 5.17** The Education Network allows students to share experiences and keep informed of national developments in learning and teaching, including issues as wide-ranging as the teaching of core skills modules and the development of IT. Such discussions, supported by staff from both sparqs and NUS Scotland, help to equip student officers better for discussions on these issues within their own colleges. These conversations also shape NUS Scotland's own policy-making.
- 5.18** One area of work the network has explored is the introduction of a college national engagement survey, whereby colleges could ask standard questions of their students to create comparable data across the sector. Crucially, this could allow students' associations full access to meaningful data about student views of their learning experiences. This initiative is also being explored as part of the SFC Thematic Group's exploration of Outcome Agreement indicators, in which students were fully involved.
- 5.19** 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 college and university sectors together, enabling a useful sharing of practice and developments between the two sectors.
- 5.20** This work has been instrumental in developing student representatives' input into national decision-making, for instance through campaigns on college funding and student bursaries, as well as contributing to the increased ability and focus of reps on making a difference to college life.

## Case study

The students' association of John Wheatley College has transformed its level of activity from an organisation with very few people involved or even aware of its existence into a powerful agent for engagement with both the college and the communities it serves. It recently conducted an active community-based campaign as part of the NUS 'Our Future Our Fight' campaign which actively opposed Scottish Government cuts to funding for students and further education colleges.

With college staff, the students' association identified the key players in the local communities (local politicians and community activists in the east of Glasgow) served by John Wheatley College and engaged them in the campaign through email, phone calls and visits to connected partner learning centres. This communication (particularly the visits) was conducted by class representatives and members of the executive committee working with trade unions to support a community-based petition. Local press and businesses were also engaged and a Q&A event was organised that reached out to campus-based college students, community-based students, local community representatives, staff trade union representatives and local elected members to address the issues arising from the campaign. Chaired by the student president, the format of the session was to pose questions to a panel made up of Members of the Scottish Parliament and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning.

The campaign has encouraged wider engagement between campus and community-based students, helping community-based learners identify more closely with the college and its aims. In addition, the local community now clearly recognises the potential impact and threat of educational cuts on their personal lives. The students' association's campaign has helped to rally local residents and create positive community engagement.

# Chapter 6

## Conclusions

### Introduction

- 6.1** The achievements of the sector are clear and impressive. Students have moved over the years from a peripheral role in learning and teaching, quality, and governance, to a significantly more involved one. This has been a considerable journey for the college sector in the light of the many challenges it has faced, and is a tribute to the staff and student officers who have made this happen.
- 6.2** However, in the *Trends Report between 2008 and 2011*<sup>39</sup>, 25% of colleges had main points of action relating to improving arrangements to enable learners to enhance the work and life of the college. Yet, these findings are from the first round of the new review method. Our enhancement approach means colleges are constantly reviewing their progress and addressing a range of complex issues, meeting new challenges along the way. Given the other pressures on the sector

during this time, the progress that has been made is a testament to the commitment of many students and staff and to the real value students have added to quality processes, paving the way for continued development to meet the challenges.

- 6.3** With the willingness evident throughout the sector to put students at the centre of everything colleges do, this is a firm foundation from which to further develop student engagement as a key tool in learning and teaching.
- 6.4** A key challenge is to ensure that the sector can realise the full potential of working in partnership with students. To do so, the sector will need to consider further developments that will enhance the role of students from contributors of views and opinions through to shapers and owners of the systems of managing the learning experience, where the onus to provide and



develop solutions is as much on students as on the staff. A key ingredient for this is strong and effective students' associations with clear focuses on learning and teaching matters.

## Future priorities

- 6.5** Based on the evidence of this report and the ongoing work sparqs undertakes with colleges, it is suggested that four key challenges face the sector in the near future. These priorities stand alongside regionalisation, though of course they will require viewing and developing through the regional prism. They are:
1. The further engagement of students in curriculum design.
  2. Supporting representatives to be truly “representative” in the light of continuing “hyper-diversity” of the student population.
  3. Representative structures that are well-connected and where intelligence can flow smoothly from the “coal face” to the strategic level.
  4. Full and effective engagement of students in the changing and increasingly vital level of governance, including at the regional level.
- 6.6** These have long been challenges within the college sector, and the fact that many of these mirror the recommendations of the 2005 sparqs' *Mapping Report* into student engagement in the college sector suggests that resources are a key factor in providing sustainable, lasting solutions for key priorities.

## Curriculum design

- 6.7** There is a sense across the sector that students are being increasingly effectively engaged in all elements of the Student Learning Experience, but that curriculum is one where traditional models of staff-led design remain 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 control rather than simply sit back and experience.

- 6.8** By drawing together the experiences of staff development managers, student officers, heads of college curriculum areas 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 learner.
- 6.9** Of course, strong students' associations are central to this, because of the need to draw together student representatives from different curriculum areas and equip representatives with appropriate skills to engage with such discussions.

## “Representative” representatives

- 6.10** “Hyper-diversity” is a word often used to describe the extremely varied nature of the student profile, and it is a good phrase with which to challenge student representatives. How can they ensure that their decisions are informed by experiences across the student population, from school leavers to mature students, from learning centre to work-based students, and from those studying on-campus to those on distance learning, part-time, evening and even postgraduate courses? How can representatives treat such views not as exceptional or unusual cases but as core elements of the student body?
- 6.11** Key to delivering this are students' associations who are able to effectively engage and represent the diverse student profile that forms their membership. One challenge for students' associations here is partly about the knowledge and skills of its lead representatives, where good training

and ongoing support built into its structures can help reps to understand and respond to the diverse needs of an often hard to reach student population across different learning modes, campuses, age ranges and so on.

- 6.12** Another challenge, though, is for students' associations to be equipped with the resources and infrastructure that enables this to happen. This includes research toolkits to help officers explore key concepts, professionally managed training and support programmes, paid senior officers who have time to devote to their duties, and good administrative and technical support to free up officers to be effective in their roles.

### Connected representation

- 6.13** Student representation works well when it is joined up. A senior student officer in a students' association will only be able to speak authoritatively at a board meeting about matters of strategic importance if their contributions are informed and shaped by detailed knowledge of student experiences from across the institution. Similarly, ordinary students will only be willing to engage in commenting on and shaping their learning if their views are seen to be taken seriously by staff and student officers at all levels.
- 6.14** Ensuring that representative structures are well-connected, therefore, is a vital consideration in developing a students' association. An ordinary student should know their course rep and how to contact them, and should see them or hear from them on a regular basis. That same course rep should have a good basic knowledge of institutional structures, should know who their faculty rep or main students' association executive contact is, and should be in regular touch with course reps in similar subject areas to learn and share perspectives. In turn, faculty and more senior representatives should be able to

liaise with each other to understand and articulate the student view across the institution, and present it authoritatively to the college at the highest level. Anecdotal evidence from across the sector's students' associations suggests that this is not uniformly the case.

- 6.15** The priority, therefore, is to ensure that students' associations are supported with good training programmes and enabled by professional staff support, which in turn, is well-connected, well-supported and continually developed both institutionally and at a sector level.

### Student engagement in governance

- 6.16** The challenge of engaging students at board level in issues of strategy and governance is a substantial one and regionalisation accentuates this considerably. Students' associations have a huge responsibility in the coming years to play a part in the success of regionalisation, ensuring that new college and regional structures are effective, student-focused and fully-informed about the views of students.
- 6.17** Knowledge and skills required at this level include not just the facts of how decisions are made, but also effective communication and diplomacy to ensure those structures can be fully utilised in what is always a busy, challenging and intense year of office.
- 6.18** Student representatives at strategic decision-making levels therefore need to be fully supported in understanding how institutions work and how decisions are made, the potential impact they can have as representatives, and the sources of help available to them in their role. This is a challenge not just for the individual officers, but for the sector, for students' association staff, and a range of senior college staff and board members, in terms of supporting student officers and ensuring that they themselves are fully cognisant of the issue and priorities of students.

## Conclusion

- 6.19** Whilst outside the remit of this report, it is important to note the growing partnership between individual student and college. Many reviews comment on the effectiveness of this relationship, with students increasingly being able to shape their individual learning experience. It is difficult to visit a college without meeting a student who can tell you about the transformational effect college has had on their life.
- 6.20** These achievements sit alongside those of colleges in gathering and responding to student feedback where there has been significant progress and much excellent and innovative practice, widening the role of students in this regard.
- 6.21** Students have seen their role have a real effect on the college experience and student representatives and officers have developed to take on more significant roles at the college level. They are contributing student views effectively in a range of areas and working with college quality and student support staff to develop activities which enable students to contribute effectively to the work and life of the college. What is evident amongst the sector is that this is an area where colleges have achieved success and take great pride in the work they have done with their students. What is also evident is that colleges have seen the value of student engagement in helping to provide an experience that students will value, will create effective learning and will support student and college success.
- 6.22** Yet challenges still remain. Students' associations, often historically weak throughout the college sector, are facing unparalleled demands on their time, resources and expertise, and are necessarily being engaged in ever more complex discussions about enhancements to the learning experience and of course the process of regionalisation. The need for

them to be well-resourced, professionally supported and effective as decision-makers has never been more important.

- 6.23** Building on the great successes of the college sector in recent years to meet the current and future challenges depends very substantially on resources. While student engagement is in no small part enabled by the skills and capabilities of student officers and staff, the provision of resources to professionally and sustainably facilitate student engagement is absolutely vital.
- 6.24** In financially challenging times this is nevertheless possible, thanks to the opportunities for pooled resources through regionalisation, and the new strategic direction of sparqs that can allow it to more effectively support colleges and students' associations to ensure that student engagement remains at the heart of the learning experience and decisions made in colleges.

## Acknowledgements

The production of this report, much like all the ongoing work of sparqs, would be impossible without the support of the sector and the staff and students within colleges who support and promote student engagement.

In particular, sparqs would like to thank its College Advisory Group for the guidance and advice it has provided in the creation of this report. Also, a variety of staff and student officers throughout the sector have provided invaluable assistance through the submission of case studies and the sharing of effective practice.

- **Katie Anderson,**  
Learner Engagement Officer, Angus College
- **Ian Beach,**  
Assistant Principal for Estates and Quality, Dumfries and Galloway College
- **Fiona Birse,**  
Quality Manager, Banff and Buchan College
- **Carol Borthwick,**  
Academic Development Manager, SRUC
- **Alison Boyle,**  
Guidance & Inclusion Manager, Elmwood College
- **Kate Byford,**  
Partnerships for Change Project Co-ordinator, NUS Scotland
- **Helen Canning,**  
Learner Services Development Manager, James Watt College
- **Mike Day,**  
Direction of Nations, NUS Scotland
- **Scott Dorman,**  
Learner Feedback Assistant, Clydebank College
- **Susan Dubois,**  
Student Engagement Officer, Banff and Buchan College
- **Jean Duff,**  
Student Services Manager, Forth Valley College
- **Sheila Dunn,**  
Head of Learner Enhancement, Kilmarnock College
- **Robert Foster,**  
Vice President Education, NUS Scotland (2013-14)
- **Graeme Kirkpatrick,**  
Vice President Education, NUS Scotland (2011-13)
- **Mhairi Laughlin,**  
Principal & Chief Executive, West Lothian College
- **Charlotte Lawley,**  
Development & Training Officer, NUS Scotland
- **Elizabeth MacDonald,**  
Quality Officer, Dumfries and Galloway College
- **Gordon Maloney,**  
President, NUS Scotland (2013-14)
- **Francis McGeachie,**  
Faculty Director, Coatbridge College
- **John Muir,**  
Assistant Principal (Curriculum & Quality), Ayr College
- **Robin Parker,**  
President, NUS Scotland (2011-13)
- **Irene Peterson,**  
Acting Principal, Shetland College
- **Christina Potter,**  
Principal, Dundee College
- **Al Powell,**  
Head of Development & Charitable Services (maternity cover), NUS Scotland
- **Diane Rawlinson,**  
Principal & Chief Executive, Ayr College and chair of sparqs College Advisory Group until November 2012
- **David Scott,**  
Head of Learner Services, Dundee College
- **Alan Sherry,**  
Principal, John Wheatley College
- **Jenny Stalker,**  
Quality Manager, West Lothian College
- **Heather Urquhart,**  
Acting Principal, Cumbernauld College
- **Gill Watt,**  
Director of Support Services, Clydebank College

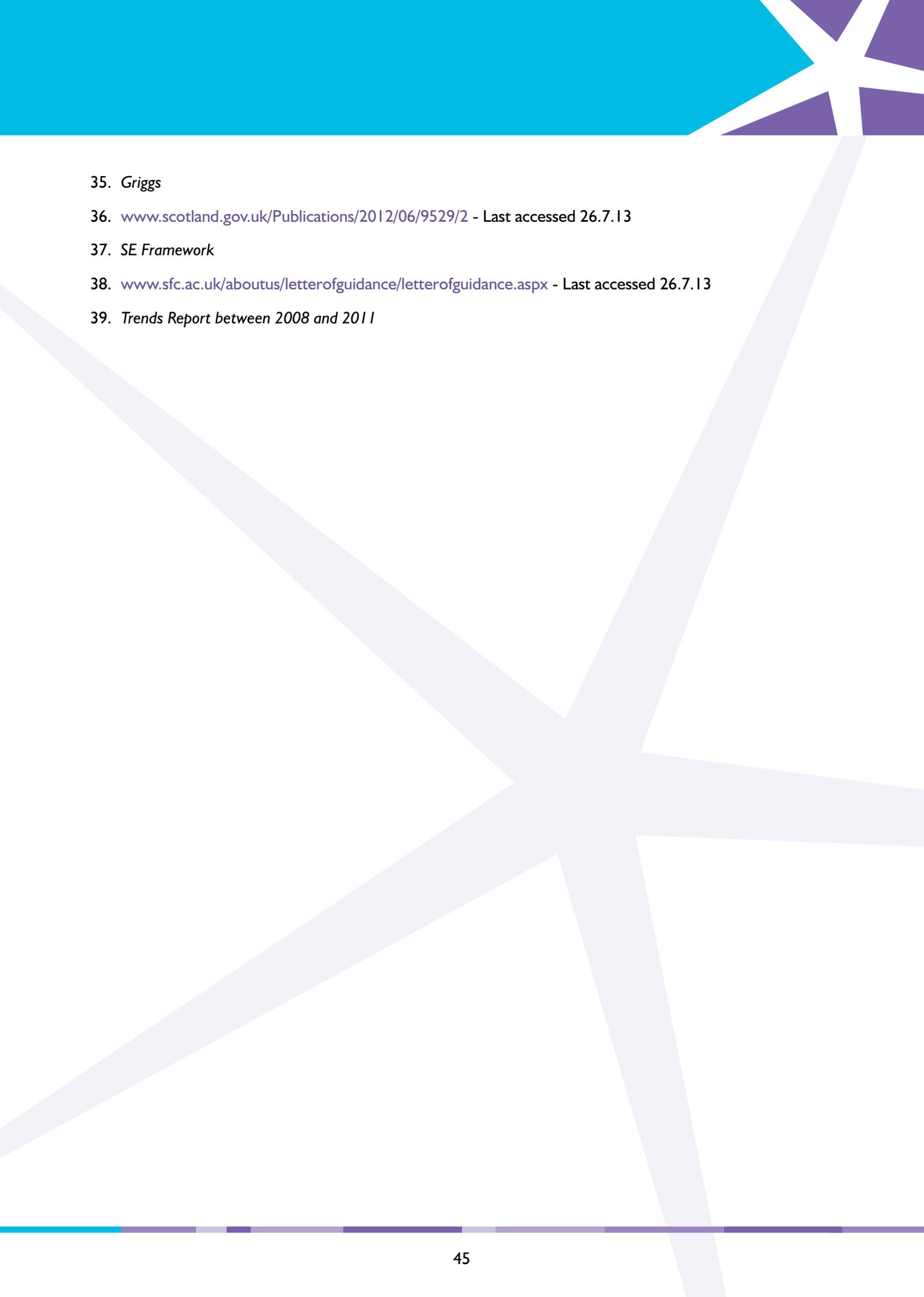
NB: some roles and college names have changed since the time of the research.

**Date of publication August 2013**

## References

1. *Council Guidance to Colleges on Quality from August 2012* (Scottish Funding Council, August 2012)  
[www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Circulars\\_SFC132012/SFC132012.pdf](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Circulars_SFC132012/SFC132012.pdf)
2. *Evaluation of the Scottish Funding Council's Strategy for Quality Enhancement in the College Sector, Annual Report: Year Two* (Prepared by LSN for the Scottish Funding Council, September 2010). Cited hereafter as *2010 LSN Evaluation*  
[www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Effective\\_Institutions/Second\\_annual\\_evaluation\\_of\\_the\\_SFC\\_quality\\_enhancement\\_strategy\\_in\\_the\\_college\\_sector\\_-\\_Extended\\_summary\\_%7B226878124%7D.pdf](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Effective_Institutions/Second_annual_evaluation_of_the_SFC_quality_enhancement_strategy_in_the_college_sector_-_Extended_summary_%7B226878124%7D.pdf)
3. *Quality and Improvement in Scottish Education: Trends in Inspection Findings 2008-2011* (Education Scotland, 2012). Cited hereafter as *Trends Report between 2008 and 2011*  
[www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/QISE\\_tcm4-722667.pdf](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/QISE_tcm4-722667.pdf)
4. *Trends Report between 2008 and 2011*
5. *Putting Learners at the Centre – Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 Education* (The Scottish Government, September 2011)  
[www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/09/15103949/3](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/09/15103949/3) - Last accessed 26.7.13
6. R. Griggs, *Report of the Review of Further Education Governance in Scotland* (January 2012). Cited hereafter as *Griggs*.  
[www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/UniversitiesColleges/17135/CollegeGovernanceReview/FEGovernanceReport](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/UniversitiesColleges/17135/CollegeGovernanceReview/FEGovernanceReport) - Last accessed 26.7.13
7. *Education Scotland Report for SFC: Report on Progress in Quality Assurance and Enhancement Over Two Cycles to July 2012* (Education Scotland, November 2012)  
[http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/CMP\\_QEGPCCommittee29November2012\\_29112012/QEGPC12\\_35\\_ES\\_EIGHT-YEAR\\_REPORT\\_FINAL\\_14\\_NOV\\_TO\\_SFC.pdf](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/CMP_QEGPCCommittee29November2012_29112012/QEGPC12_35_ES_EIGHT-YEAR_REPORT_FINAL_14_NOV_TO_SFC.pdf)  
*Enhancement in the Scottish University Sector 2003-12: QAA Analysis and Review of Progress in Quality Assurance and Enhancement in the University Sector Over the Two Cycles to July 2012* (QAA Scotland, November 2012)  
[http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/CMP\\_QEGPCCommittee29November2012\\_29112012/QEGPC12\\_33\\_QAA\\_Enhct\\_two\\_cycles\\_univ\\_sector\\_final\\_18\\_Nov\\_12.pdf](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/CMP_QEGPCCommittee29November2012_29112012/QEGPC12_33_QAA_Enhct_two_cycles_univ_sector_final_18_Nov_12.pdf)
8. It should be noted that all case studies were correct and relevant at the time of their collation, and in many cases this was prior to regionalisation. Some changes, for instance in the detail of the practice and of course in the current name of the college in question, may have occurred since then.
9. *2010 LSN Evaluation*
10. *Trends Report between 2008 and 2011*
11. *Council Guidance to Colleges on Quality from August 2012* (Scottish Funding Council, August 2012)  
[www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Circulars\\_SFC132012/SFC132012.pdf](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Circulars_SFC132012/SFC132012.pdf)
12. *A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland* (sparqs, Education Scotland, The Higher Education Academy Scotland, NUS Scotland, Quality Assurance Agency Scotland, Scotland's Colleges, Scottish Funding Council, Universities Scotland, December 2012). Cited hereafter as *SE Framework*.  
[www.sparqs.ac.uk/SEFScotland](http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/SEFScotland)

13. sparqs Strategic Plan 2013-2018 (sparqs, December 2012)  
[www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/STRAT%20PLAN%20Final%20version.pdf](http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/STRAT%20PLAN%20Final%20version.pdf)
14. *2010 LSN Evaluation*
15. *SE Framework*
16. Langside College's review of 2011, for instance, highlighted the culture of volunteering created among the student population  
[www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/LangsideCollegelns20110826\\_tcm4-704555.pdf](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/LangsideCollegelns20110826_tcm4-704555.pdf)
17. *SE Framework*
18. [www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/CoatbridgeRev06072012\\_tcm4-726006.pdf](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/CoatbridgeRev06072012_tcm4-726006.pdf)
19. *SE Framework*
20. *Trends Report between 2008 and 2011*
21. *2010 LSN Evaluation*
22. *Self-Evaluation and Internal Review: An Aspect Report on Provision in Scotland's Colleges by HM Inspectors on behalf of the Scottish Funding Council* (Education Scotland, September 2011)  
[http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/SEIR020911\\_tcm4-712953.pdf](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/SEIR020911_tcm4-712953.pdf)
23. *Report of the Further Education Mapping Exercise of Student Involvement in Quality Assurance & Improvement Processes* (sparqs, 2005). Cited hereafter as *2005 sparqs' Mapping Report*  
<http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/FE%20Mapping%20Report.pdf>
24. See *Standards and Quality in Scottish Further Education: Quality Framework for Scottish FE Colleges*, May 2004, Scottish Further Education Funding Council and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education  
[http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/sfecframework\\_tcm4-712646.doc](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/sfecframework_tcm4-712646.doc)
25. [www.icmyvoice.co.uk/icsa/class-reps/](http://www.icmyvoice.co.uk/icsa/class-reps/)
26. Find out more about Borders College's Faculty Councils at  
[www.borderscollege.ac.uk/current-students/faculty-councils/](http://www.borderscollege.ac.uk/current-students/faculty-councils/)
27. Toolkit on Developing Departmental Representation (sparqs, February 2012)  
[www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/DPREP%20toolkit.pdf](http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/DPREP%20toolkit.pdf)
28. *SE Framework*
29. *2005 sparqs' Mapping Report*
30. *Trends Report between 2008 and 2011*
31. [www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/ForthValleyRev250512\\_tcm4-721624.pdf](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/ForthValleyRev250512_tcm4-721624.pdf)
32. *2010 LSN Evaluation*
33. *2010 LSN Evaluation*
34. See Education Scotland's SLIPs at  
[www.educationscotland.gov.uk/inspectionandreview/sharingpractice/colleges/](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/inspectionandreview/sharingpractice/colleges/)



35. *Griggs*

36. [www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/06/9529/2](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/06/9529/2) - Last accessed 26.7.13

37. *SE Framework*

38. [www.sfc.ac.uk/aboutus/letterofguidance/letterofguidance.aspx](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/aboutus/letterofguidance/letterofguidance.aspx) - Last accessed 26.7.13

39. *Trends Report between 2008 and 2011*



1 Papermill Wynd  
Edinburgh  
EH7 4QL

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

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

t: 0131 622 6599

: [@sparqs\\_scotland](https://twitter.com/sparqs_scotland)