

Consultancy Report 2009

Supporting Individual Institutional Agendas:
the first two years and future direction.





Introduction

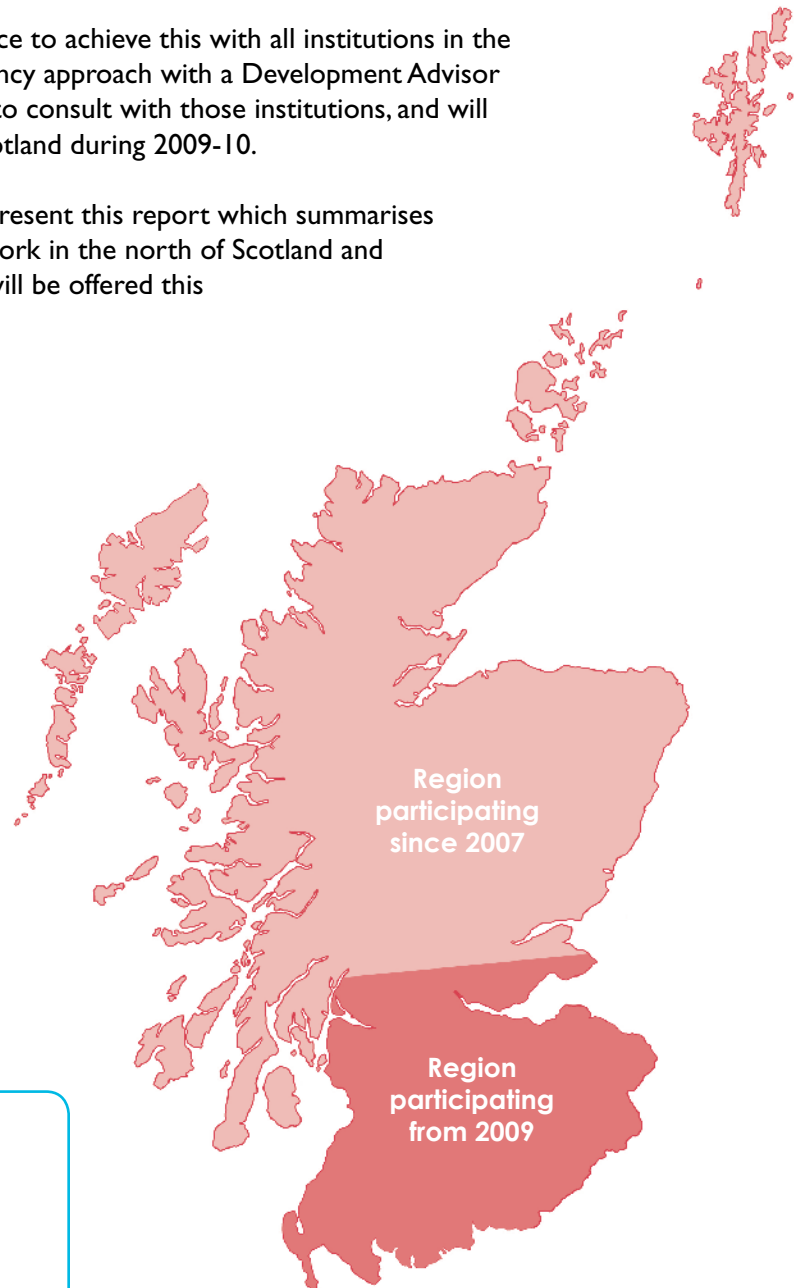
In 2007, sparqs launched a programme in the north of Scotland designed to support institutions and their students' associations to build on their own individual and diverse approaches to engaging students in the quality of their education. This was introduced following an external evaluation report from York Consulting which recommended a greater shift in sparqs' activities to this individual approach, and resulted in sparqs being placed on permanent funding.

To provide an appropriate level of resource to achieve this with all institutions in the north of Scotland, we adopted a consultancy approach with a Development Advisor based in Inverness. sparqs has continued to consult with those institutions, and will expand the programme to the rest of Scotland during 2009-10.

Now in its third year we are pleased to present this report which summarises the methodology and outcomes of this work in the north of Scotland and serves as an introduction to those who will be offered this service for the first time in 2009-10.

It contains the following sections:

1. Background
2. Approach and methodology
3. Examples of success
4. The future: 2009-10 and beyond



A university invited sparqs to conduct an external review of its new system of departmental-level representatives. After meeting with a wide range of staff and students, sparqs highlighted good practice and recommended some action points.



“sparqs brings externality and cross-institutional knowledge which is useful as a lot of the issues and challenges are being experienced by several institutions”

1. Background

sparqs piloted a programme in 2007-2008 with twenty institutions in the north of Scotland. The aim of this programme was to provide customised development support to help institutions address specific priority areas in their student engagement. sparqs offered five days of individual consultation to each institution.

This consultancy work now forms the fourth of sparqs' four key products offered to institutions across Scotland. Information can be found on our website about all four service areas which are: Training and Support, Events, Sharing Practice, and Consultancy.

The twenty institutions involved at first included thirteen colleges and seven higher education institutions in the highlands and islands, the north-east and northern Fife:

- 1. Colleges:** Shetland College, Orkney College, The North Highland College, Lews Castle College, Moray College, Inverness College, Sabhal Mor Ostaig and Perth College (all academic partners of UHI Millennium Institute); and Banff and Buchan College, Aberdeen College, Angus College, Dundee College and Elmwood College.
- 2. Higher education institutions:** UHI Millennium Institute, Scottish Agricultural College, the University of Aberdeen, the Robert Gordon University, the University of Abertay Dundee, the University of Dundee and the University of St Andrews.

Initial meetings at each institution were held around the start of the academic year or soon thereafter, attended by between four and eight key staff and student representatives. These variously included Assistant Principals or other appropriate members of senior management, quality managers, students' association presidents and other office-bearers, and other staff involved in student engagement in quality or the support of the students' association.

These meetings featured an interactive exercise, during which participants discussed their views on various definitions, outcomes and tools of student engagement. From this exercise areas were identified which institutions would be seeking to introduce or enhance, and these areas formed the basis for the individual consultancy workplans.

sparqs then prepared outline proposals based on the initial meeting, and the consultancy work began following discussion and agreement with key contacts within the institutions.

In two colleges sparqs has helped create new dedicated committees of the students' association for class reps to meet and exchange perspectives purely on the learning experience. This has led to both staff and reps gaining a better understanding of the class rep role, and better quality feedback being fed to college committees.



2. Approach and Methodology

Our consultations with institutions in the north of Scotland to support their individual agendas have manifested in a variety of ways, but broadly the work has consisted of the following:

- a. **Within the institution** – training, workshops or meetings take place within the institution, usually no more than an hour or two in length and involving a variety of relevant staff and student officers. sparqs can either travel to the institution for a face to face meeting or use video conference.
- b. **Research** – at the request of institutions, sparqs has conducted research throughout the sector and beyond on key priority areas, with reports submitted to the institution (often to a relevant committee) for consideration.
- c. **Preparatory time** – in order to develop appropriate new materials for each institution's face-to-face work, some time is normally devoted to planning and preparation, conducted by sparqs away from the institution.

One key guiding principle is “less is more” – sparqs has found that the consultation approach works best when institutions focus on a specific area of work rather than a broad range of topics or student engagement as a generality. The ability to examine situations, provide focussed research and deliver demonstrable enhancements is easier when a number of days are spent on one issue throughout the year, as opposed to a day or so each on a number of issues. Also, with smaller numbers of participants representing all the relevant constituencies of the institution, these are usually more effective than larger gatherings.

A second guiding principle is that of partnership. As with the broader student engagement agenda, the partnership between staff and students within an institution is of huge importance to the effectiveness of the consultancy. Therefore, consultations work well when students' association officers are fully involved alongside institutional staff in the decisions and activities.

A third guiding principle is that of the institution's priorities. The service is very much demand-led, and it is important that institutions are fully honest about where sparqs' assistance might be most effective – and where it might not. We also seek to meet institutions' demands in terms of timing, by working with institutions throughout the year, both in and out of term time, and often stretching across academic years where this is most helpful.

In one college, sparqs delivered a series of workshops on four key stages of the student feedback process, including identifying the student voice and closing the feedback loop. It allowed class reps and teaching staff to reflect on their practice and procedures, consider examples used in other institutions, and identify future challenges.



“the opportunity to have objective comments, from an informed third party, on the further development and enhancement of aspects of student representation and the University was particularly helpful to us”

3. Examples of Success

Through this targeted work, sparqs has assisted institutions in a variety of different ways. This section outlines some of the types of work sparqs has undertaken, and how it has benefited institutions.

The class representative role – during their allocation of support days, a number of institutions have focussed on the training, support and structure of class representation. One institution reflected specifically on the job description, benefits and typical “year in the life” of a class representative to help staff and student officers to better plan for and manage the class rep system. In another example, sparqs helped the institution embed class rep training by providing more tailored and relevant content which can be delivered by local staff or students.

Staff development – sparqs has helped institutions to work with staff, including student advisers, lecturers and course committee chairs, on how they engage students as learners and as representatives. Such work has included helping staff to identify where and how they capture and share intelligence gained through teaching and how student reps are involved fully in committees; while effective practice from across the sector is also shared. Often institutions include such work in their staff development programme for the year.

External support and research for key areas – some institutions have asked sparqs to provide independent perspectives on their key priority areas in student engagement. This work typically involves sparqs meeting informally with staff and students to gain an understanding of the particular issue, conducting research into similar practice elsewhere, and reporting back to the institution on the strengths and potential areas of improvement.

Departmental-based approaches – where institutions are aware of departments or sections with particular concerns or ambitions in their student engagement, the consultancy can see sparqs work in a focussed way with lecturers, managers and student reps within that particular subject area. This is often the case where certain sections are facing distinct challenges, or where institutions are keen for student engagement to be embedded within section or department operational plans.

Sharing good practice – where institutions have expressed interest in similar areas, sparqs has been able to put staff and student representatives in contact with each other, and has often organised joint events on particular topics for institutions participating in the programme.

In two universities, sparqs has developed sets of toolkits to be used by staff and students at departmental level, which will allow action and development in student engagement to vary according to the priorities, cultures and structures of each department.



4. The Future: 2009-10 and beyond

Following internal and external evaluations of the consultancy sparqs provides, the Scottish Funding Council has agreed to fund the expansion of this work beyond the north of Scotland to include institutions throughout the rest of the country.

In the coming academic year, sparqs will continue to undertake a wide variety of activities with institutions that add further value to work being done on student engagement.

Institutions who are new to the programme are now invited to contact sparqs to arrange a meeting to discuss how sparqs might also work with them.

Many institutions, in their own work, may have already identified a way in which sparqs might help through this consultancy approach, and a meeting can be arranged to discuss the way that sparqs might usefully be involved.

For other institutions, sparqs is happy to hold a broad-ranging discussion with a number of key staff and student officers in which the challenges and opportunities of student engagement in the institution can be explored and the reflective card sort exercise mentioned in Section I (Background) this report could be run.

In such a meeting, perhaps around half a dozen participants is suggested. This should include a selection of the following people:

- a relevant member of senior management
- the head of quality
- the students' association president and other senior student officers
- students' association staff members with quality or academic remits
- staff engaged in leading learning and teaching or staff development strategies
- any other people the institution and students' association feel can help present an institution-wide perspective.



In a small college, sparqs has helped staff to reflect on their student engagement activities at curriculum area level, conducted research, and allowed curriculum teams to present their individual progress, successes and areas for further development to each other.



“It got strategic discussion going and, given the growth in the size of the student body, and its increasing diversity, that discussion is more significant than ever”

After beginning work with a wide range of institutions, sparqs will be in a position to identify themes, common challenges and successes across the sector. This will help to inform the content of sparqs’ nationwide events this year and the examples of effective practice contained in the Clearing House on the sparqs website, which is our new online directory of examples of effective student engagement around Scotland and beyond.

Once the institution begins working towards its substantive activities, sparqs will work to a plan in each institution which outlines the training, events, workshops or research that should be undertaken, as agreed by the institution and sparqs.

While sparqs will be able to offer institutions around five days each academic year, there is flexibility in the start, end and delivery dates. Indeed, some institutions will wish to see plans run for fewer days over just half a year, or perhaps more days over a period longer than an academic year.

sparqs will seek to identify one or two key individuals who can be the regular point of contact between it and the institution. However, it is anticipated that the individual plan will see sparqs work with a range of staff and student officers to achieve the agreed objectives. sparqs will provide ongoing and final reports where agreed. It is encouraged that such reports are shared with a relevant institutional committee which can have ownership of the consultancy engagement. This committee may also usefully oversee the consideration and implementation of action points which arise from the completion of the work.

At the end of the year, sparqs will seek to create a summary of projects resulting from our consultancy work across participating institutions, and submit successful models or approaches developed through the programme to its Clearing House. In doing so it will continue to help institutions learn and share from each other in the development of successful student engagement in learning, teaching and quality.

For further details of any of the information contained within this report, or indeed to make an appointment, please contact the sparqs team on 0131 622 6599, or visit our website www.sparqs.ac.uk

In one university department, there is a very high proportion of students around the world studying part-time in online postgraduate courses. sparqs is developing specific online training materials that will be relevant to class reps on these courses.

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