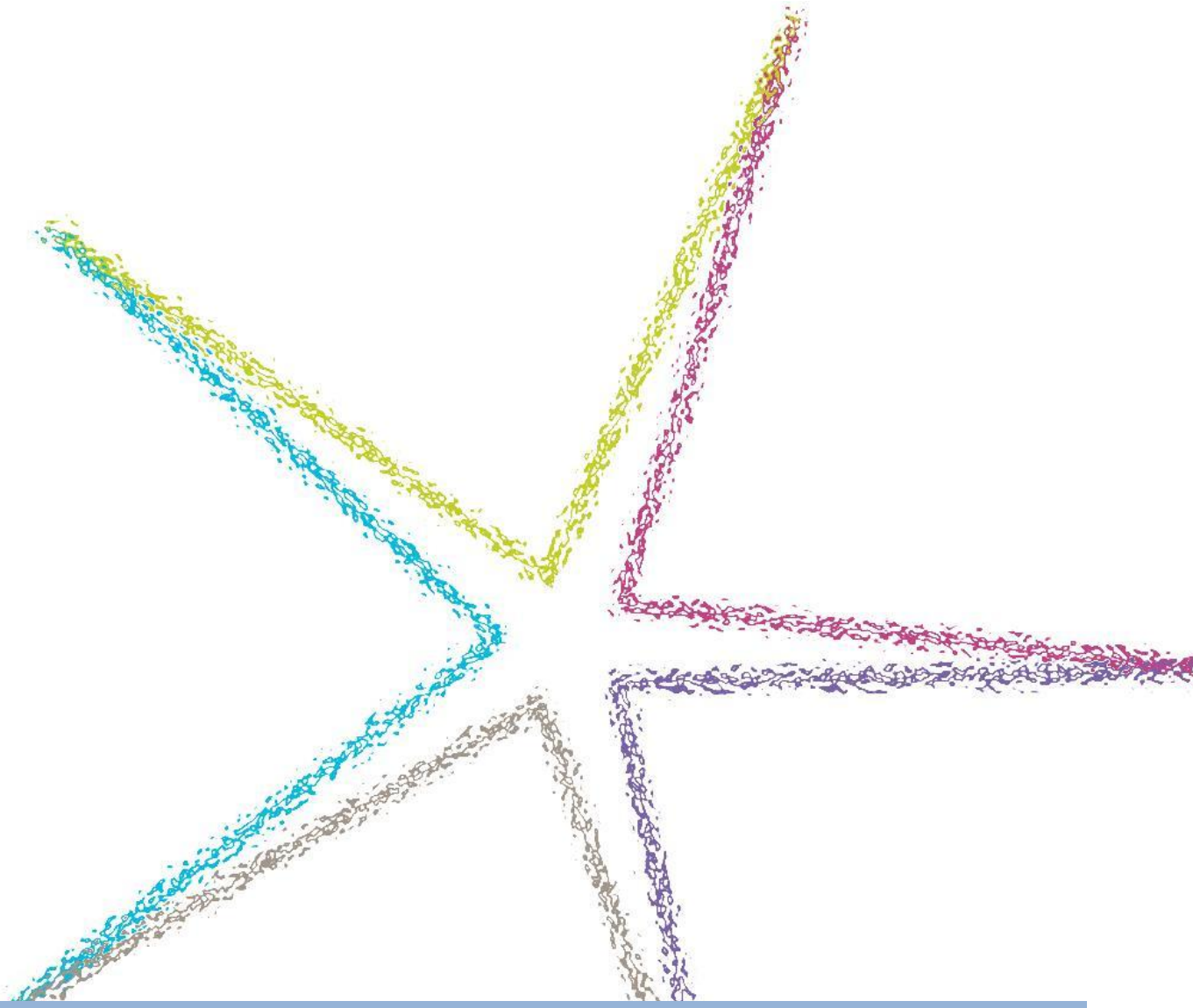

Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP) - Practical Guide to student partnership

January 2026

Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework

sparqs
student partnerships in quality scotland

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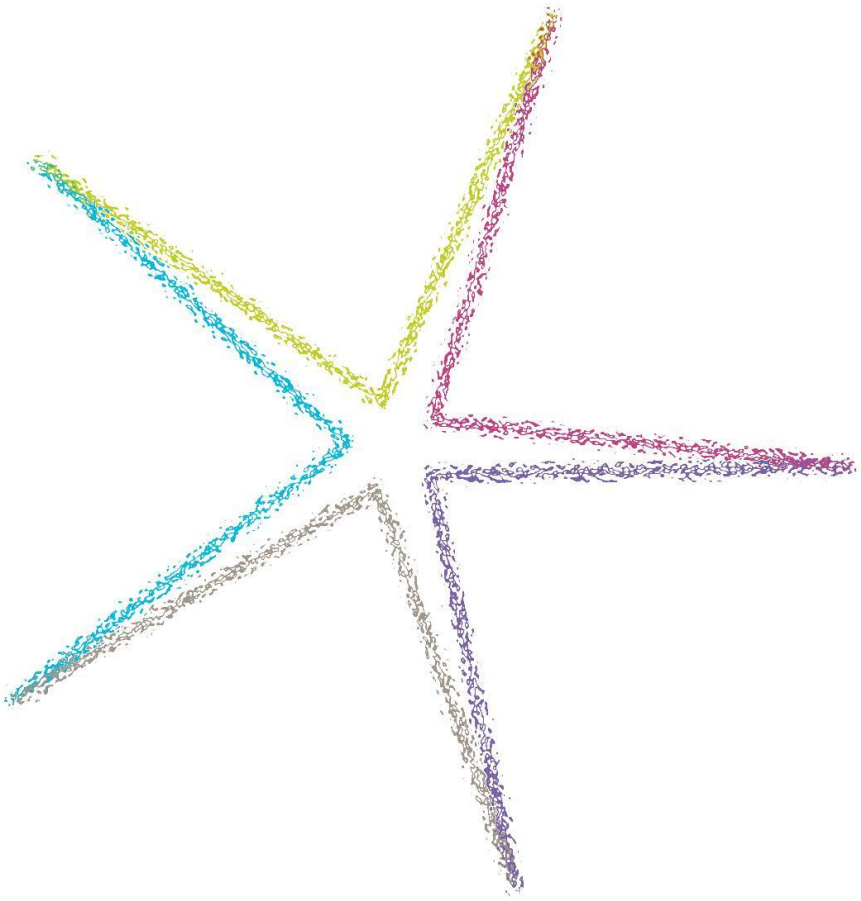


Purpose of this resource

The purpose of this resource is to provide information about Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP) and to support meaningful student engagement and partnership throughout the process. This resource has been produced for students' association representatives and staff in colleges and universities. Student engagement and partnership is one of the six principles in Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF) and is essential when developing and delivering STEP and its associated projects.

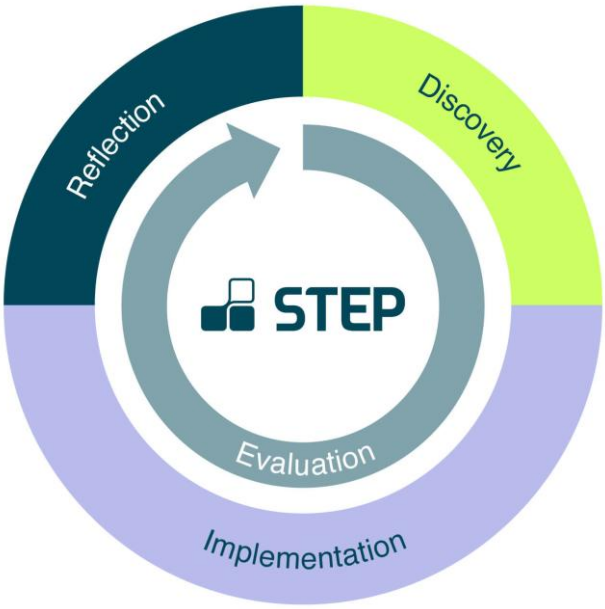
We recommend that students and institutional staff involved in STEP read through this resource and consider how they will contribute to, and facilitate, student engagement and partnership throughout the full STEP cycle.

This document should be used in conjunction with the official guidance from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland and the College Development Network (CDN) on the STEP website. If you have a specific query relating to STEP at your institution, you should get in touch directly with your Institution Quality Contact.

What is Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP)?

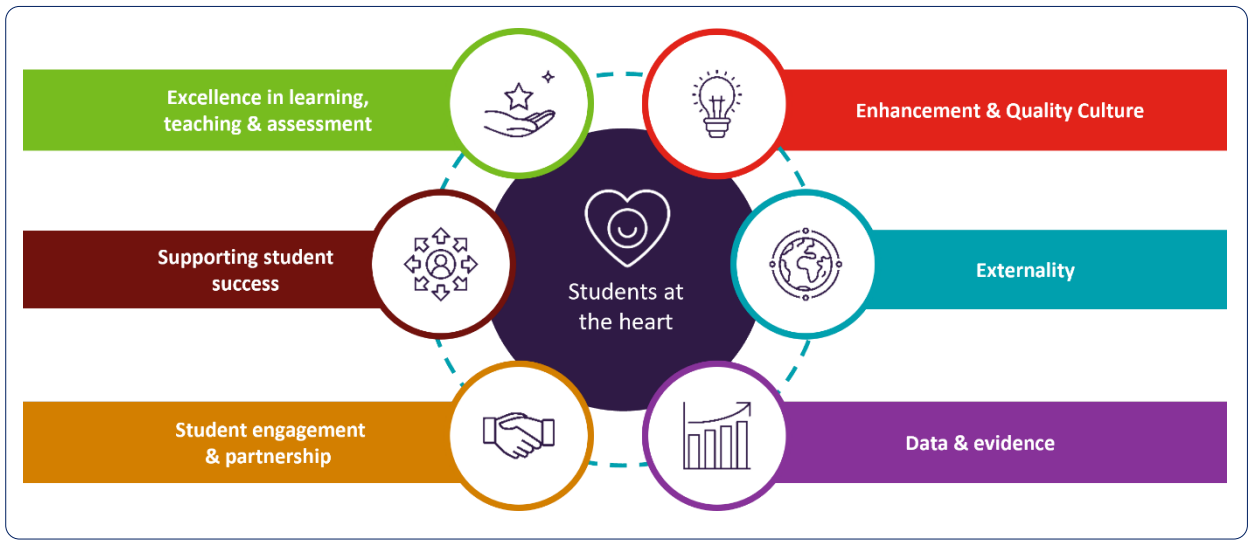
STEP is the national enhancement programme for Scotland's colleges and universities. It is designed to enable the Scottish tertiary sector to work together collaboratively to improve learning, teaching, the student experience and staff development.

Every four years, the sector chooses a **topic** and works on **projects** related to that topic together. The four-year STEP cycle has three distinct stages.



1. **Discovery phase**. In the first year of each STEP cycle, the sector designs a set of national projects related to this topic.
2. **Implementation phase**. In years two and three, students and staff deliver these projects collaboratively.
3. **Reflection phase**. In year four, project teams will reflect on their completed projects and will share outputs with the wider sector.

STEP is based on the six principles of the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF):



How is STEP run?

STEP has three governance groups. QAA and CDN have created this helpful image which explains the three levels:

The STEP Network is the largest of the three groups. Every college and university nominates one student and one staff member to be a part of the STEP Network.

The students' association at each institution should be a key part of the process of selecting the STEP Network Student Member. Staff should also be part of the support system for the student in this role throughout the year.

STEP is governed by four sector leads – two students and two staff members (with both colleges and universities represented). STEP Topic Staff Leads are appointed for the duration of each STEP cycle (four years) and Student Leads will be in place for at least one year.

The STEP Topic Leads for 2025-26 are:

- Student Topic Lead (university) – Adelayo Adebayo, University of Stirling
- Student Topic Lead (college) – Emma MacIsaac, North East Scotland College
- Staff Topic Lead (university) – Professor Steve Tucker, University of Aberdeen
- Staff Topic Lead (college) – Dr Derek Robertson, City of Glasgow College

What you need to do

Work with your institution to select a STEP student network member

Institutions should work in partnership with their students' associations to select their STEP Network Student Member. It is expected that in most cases the role will be undertaken by the elected student officer with an education remit. First refusal for the role should therefore be offered to the person in this position. In some students' associations, this remit is held by a dedicated post, such as a Vice President Education, while in others the remit is held by the President. If the elected officer does not have the capacity to take on the role, the students' association should identify an appropriate deputy to take on the role. For example, this could be another student officer or a senior student rep (such as a School or Department Rep).

What is the current STEP topic?

The topic for the first cycle of STEP (2024-2028) is **Supporting Diverse Learner Journeys**.

The topic has 4 priority areas:

- Supporting transitions and navigating pathways.
- Strengthening engagement, community and belonging.
- Developing skills and capabilities for learning.
- Delivering tailored, targeted and personalised support.

What are the STEP projects?

Following the discovery phase of STEP, the sector has identified a number of collaborative projects which will be delivered over the next two years. These projects bring together colleges, universities, students' associations and sector bodies to tackle shared challenges and enhance learner experiences across the tertiary sector. These are all related to the current topic of supporting diverse learner journeys.

Check out the STEP website to see who leads the projects and which colleges and universities are involved in them.

The current projects are:

Appreciating Belonging and Enabling Change: From Strategy to Practice
This project focuses on strengthening student belonging and mattering, translating high-level strategies into practice informed by evidence and data.

REACTS: Regional Enhancement and Collaboration in Tertiary Scotland
REACTS will design and test a framework for stronger regional networks, piloting studies in two regions and sharing findings as case studies to encourage collaboration in tackling geographically linked challenges.

Supporting Access, Progression and Successful Outcomes in Disabled Student Communities (SAPSO)
SAPSO examines attainment gaps for disabled students and aims to improve outcomes by highlighting both success stories and barriers. The project puts the student voice at the centre, with five student representatives shaping the work.

Strategies to Support Student Engagement and Partnership in a Time-Poor and Cash-Poor Student Population
This project explores how financial and time pressures affect student engagement. It will pilot approaches to make student voice and representation more accessible, creating sector-wide resources for learners before arrival and during induction. This project is led by sparqs.

Transforming Assessment Policy and Practice in Scotland (TAPPS)
TAPPS reimagines assessment policy and practice to better support diverse learners, building an evidence base, producing case studies, and creating resources to influence policy and promote inclusive, innovative assessment approaches.

Staff Development for Diverse Learner Journeys
This project will map current practice, identify future priorities, and highlight high-impact activities, shaping strategic approaches to professional development and enhancing the student learning experience.

What you need to do

Support STEP projects

Each institution's STEP Network Student Member will join one of the current project teams. These teams will involve and support their partnered student(s) as well as engaging more broadly with other students as part of their work. Students' associations and institutions may be invited to contribute to some projects, particularly those focused on student engagement. If your institution's students' association is interested in any project, you can reach out to the project lead to offer support or to explore collaboration opportunities.

Why is STEP important to student officers and students' associations?

STEP is concerned with improving the student experience in Scotland's colleges and universities, a goal shared by students' associations. STEP is a key opportunity for students' association officers to work collaboratively with students and staff from other institutions on big challenges.

Students' associations also play a big role in the current theme of 'supporting diverse learner journeys'. Many of the projects related to this theme will rely on the student voice, and students' associations represent crucial perspectives from their diverse student bodies.

Each STEP project also seeks to engage and partner with students across Scotland. Students' associations can play an important role in helping each project engage and partner with students.

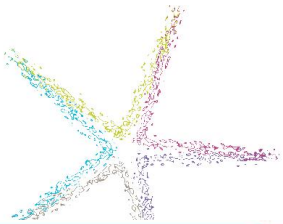
What you need to do

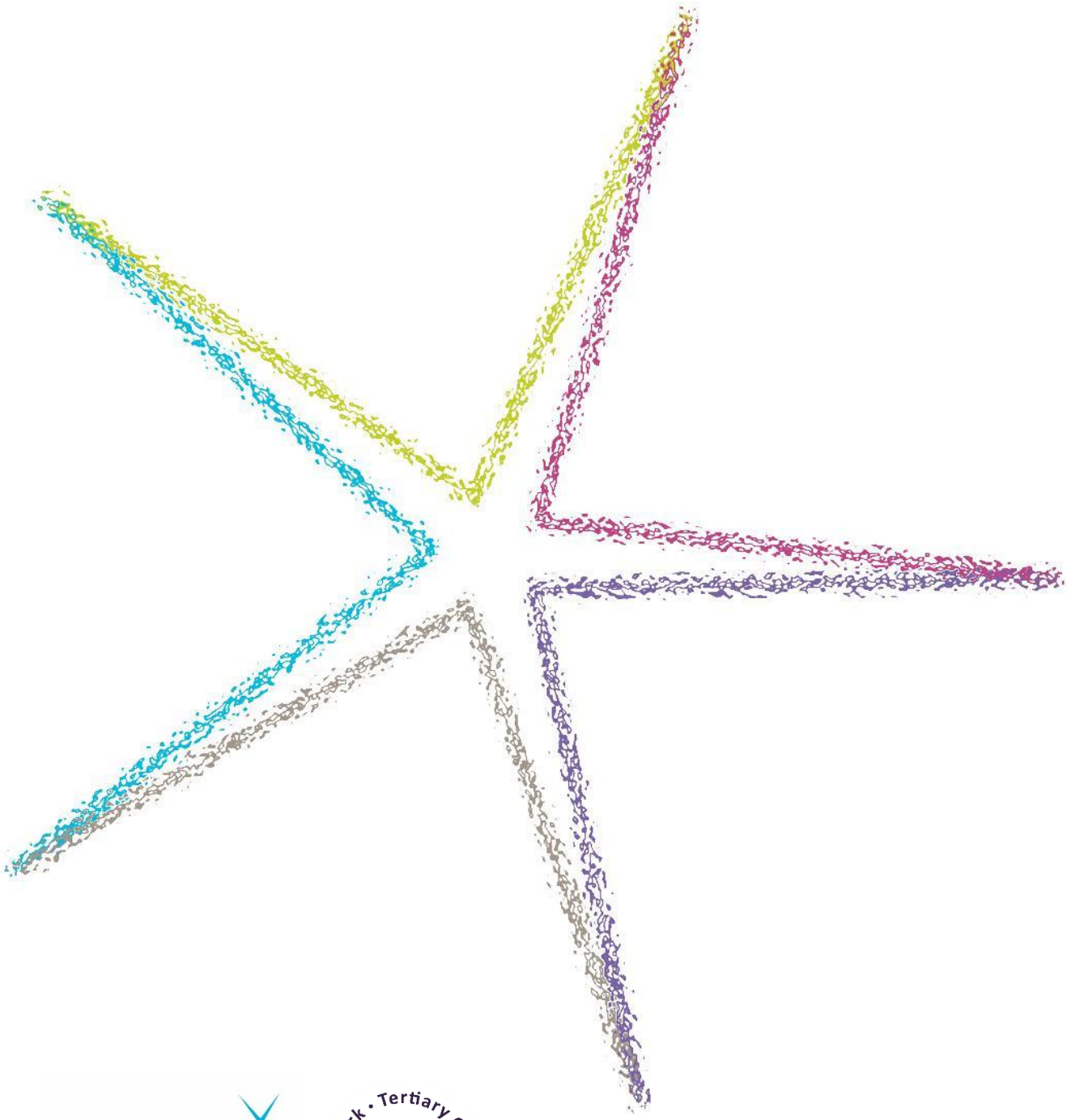
Provide students' association support for the STEP Network Student Member

Students' association staff members have a key role to play in supporting the STEP Network Student Member to understand their role and to engage successfully in STEP activities, including the project to which they are aligned. Students' association staff should support the officer to engage the wider student body in STEP-related activities, such as opportunities to take part in pieces of work related to the projects. If the student selected to be the STEP Network Student Member is not an officer, then a clear line of communication should be established and maintained between the officer and the network student member, with opportunities for regular communications throughout the year.

Ensure STEP is part of the handover between student officers/STEP Network Student Member

In most institutions, the STEP Network Student Member will change over the summer. Where the role is moving from one elected officer to another, this should be embedded as part of the students' association's handover and induction process for officers. Where either or both of the outgoing and ingoing STEP network student members are not elected officers, handover process should be put in place. Ideally, this should involve a face-to-face meeting. At the very least, the outgoing student network member should provide a written summary of their time in the role and the key things the incoming student network member should know.





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