

Using the Student Learning Experience (SLE) model to inform institutional strategy development #10

Transcript

0:00 Catriona Bell

Welcome colleagues and thank you for joining this sparqs podcast.

0:03 Catriona Bell

My name is Catriona Bell and I'm working with sparqs on a project focused around student partnership and staff development.

0:10 Catriona Bell

And as part of this, we've curated case studies from different Scottish colleges, universities and Higher Education institutions.

0:16 Catriona Bell

And our aim is to share practice and ideas about how you might use two key resources which have been developed by sparqs to support the Scottish tertiary sector.

0:25 Catriona Bell

So these are the new Student Learning Experience model, and Scotland's Ambition for Student Partnership.

0:30 Catriona Bell

So today we're going to focus on the Student Learning Experience or SLE model and how it's been used strategically at institutional level to inform the development of a new Student Experience Strategy.

0:42 Catriona Bell

So it's my great pleasure to be joined by Rob McDermott from Forth Valley College, and Rob, can I pass over to you to introduce yourself, please?

0:50 Rob McDermott

Hi, my name is Rob McDermott. I am Head of Learning and Quality at Forth Valley College.

0:57 Rob McDermott

My responsibility is wide-ranging, as it says, learning and quality, but one of the main focuses we've got is working very closely with the Students' Association, round about partnership working, and the main focus for myself and my team is really to promote a good, positive student experience.

1:16 Catriona Bell

Great stuff.

1:16 Catriona Bell

Thanks, Rob, and thanks for your time this morning.

1:18 Catriona Bell

We really appreciate hearing from you about how you've been working at Forth Valley College recently with the SLE model.

1:24 Catriona Bell

So I wondered if we could start with just a one-minute overview of how you've used the SLE or Student Learning Experience model in your work, please.

1:32 Rob McDermott

So...

1:34 Rob McDermott

I'll fess up to this one.

1:36 Rob McDermott

I'm involved in the Joint Advisory Group at sparqs, so therefore I was very kind of au fait with the development round about the Student Learning Experience, and I had quite a lot of commitment to it and had been involved in the development of it.

1:49 Rob McDermott

So it's something that was in the forefront of my mind, and something that we, I, understood very well.

1:55 Rob McDermott

We had recently been tasked as a team, myself and led by the Vice Principal Student Experience, Learning Student Experience, Sarah Higgins. We'd been tasked to relook at a new strategy, a new learning, a student strategy or Student Experience Strategy.

2:12 Rob McDermott

Myself, the Head of Inclusion and the three Directors of Curriculum across the college, we've been asked to look at.

2:22 Rob McDermott

Re-looking and revisiting the strategy around about student experience, and actually the learning student experience strategy that has come from sparqs, was a model that fitted beautifully into this conversation.

2:36 Rob McDermott

My question to them was, Why do we reinvent the wheel when there's something that's been done?

2:41 Rob McDermott

Sector-led, sector-developed with lots and lots of student input in it that we would probably never have had the time to deal with.

2:49 Rob McDermott

So therefore it was...

2:50 Rob McDermott

I hate to use the phrase, but it was a kind of nearly oven-ready and a little student experience.

2:57 Rob McDermott

Maybe we shouldn't, maybe we won't use that phrase, but anyway, so it was oven-ready in that sense.

3:01 Catriona Bell

Okay.

3:02 Catriona Bell

That's great, because I was going to ask you what made you choose the SLE model as the basis for your strategy development, but I think you've just touched on that.

3:08 Catriona Bell

Is there anything else that added into the mix for you?

3:11 Rob McDermott

I think it gave us the breadth of the things that we were looking for, but it also gave us an opportunity to perhaps tease out some of the things that we were looking for and actually maybe didn't quite fit into Forth Valley College model, perhaps not into the college model.

3:27 Rob McDermott

...in the sense that there were elements in there that perhaps, remember, that I suppose it's been designed to cover all of the different tertiary institutions in that sense.

3:38 Rob McDermott

So, you know, it's oven-ready to a certain extent, but yet there are little bits that we perhaps we would probably add to or maybe take out that make it Forth Valley.

3:49 Catriona Bell

Okay.

3:49 Catriona Bell

OK, that's really good to hear.

3:51 Catriona Bell

And what helped in persuading your colleagues to see the value in this approach?

3:55 Catriona Bell

Did you need to persuade them at all?

3:57 Rob McDermott

No, not at all.

3:58 Rob McDermott

I think the interesting thing, as I suppose, as the person who probably leads on Student Experience, and actually having that ability to sit on external groups, you know, I become the expert to a certain extent in the room because I'm engaged with a lot of this, you know, a lot of the thinking round about it, working with sparqs themselves.

4:19 Rob McDermott

And working as, I suppose, also part of the quality group and been involved in the TQER, the review, the framework.

4:27 Rob McDermott

In many ways, what it does is, I'm kind of probably steeped in that more than perhaps some of my other colleagues are because they are very operational, they're very much curriculum based, whereas myself and perhaps Sarah Tervit, who's the Head of Inclusion and Student Services, very much sees a whole student experience thing

4:44 Rob McDermott

So it was an easy win, because it was something on the table that they all want.

4:49 Rob McDermott

I recognise that.

4:52 Rob McDermott

This is what we want.

4:54 Rob McDermott

And that was to their benefit.

4:56 Rob McDermott

Plus, it saved us a bit of time, to be honest.

4:58 Catriona Bell

Yeah, absolutely.

4:59 Catriona Bell

Yeah.

5:00 Catriona Bell

And as you say, sector-led and co-created with students as well.

5:03 Rob McDermott

Absolutely.

5:03 Rob McDermott

All of those elements are really important.

5:05 Rob McDermott

And that was the convincing thing.

5:07 Rob McDermott

I think I've already said, we would never have the time to really workshop it the way sparqs has, and actually say this has been rubber stamped by...

5:18 Rob McDermott

...a student-focused organisation that goes across the sector.

5:22 Rob McDermott

That was another winner as well for us.

5:25 Catriona Bell

Yeah, really important points.

5:27 Catriona Bell

Thank you and helpful for anybody else in other institutions who's...

5:30 Catriona Bell

...who's listening to this, definitely.

05:31 Catriona Bell

So in terms of then developing your own strategy at Forth Valley, how did you get started with that?

05:36 Catriona Bell

What were the kind of steps you went through?

05:38 Rob McDermott

I suppose the strategy has come as a response to a strategy, a whole college strategy.

05:44 Rob McDermott

We've got a new Principal.

05:45 Rob McDermott

We've got a whole college strategy that they've just brought, the Principal and the Senior Management Team, have brought in, which kind of revisits some of the historical stuff, develops some of the historical stuff further.

05:56 Rob McDermott

So we were ripe for a new strategy.

05:59 Rob McDermott

We also had got to the end of our kind of Student Experience Strategy, which had a bit of a focus more on digital skills and developing digital skills and breadth.

06:08 Rob McDermott

But we felt as if perhaps we maybe need to go back to some more basic stuff round about, you know...

06:14 Rob McDermott

...the student experience, what we're noticing also as well as the changing learner, the changing learner and that element within those learners, perhaps we needed to go back and really go back to some basics and the Student Learning Experience allowed us to do that.

06:29 Rob McDermott

So in many ways we were tasked to put together a five-year strategy that met the requirements, recognising the changing climate we're in, recognising the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework...

06:42 Rob McDermott

...and actually recognise the fact that we're living in quite a dynamic changing world and our learners are changing, and perhaps a refocus, a good refocus, really concentrating on supporting and developing and really considering what we do in terms of student experience was very valuable.

07:03 Catriona Bell

Thank you, Rob.

07:04 Catriona Bell

No, that's so, I've heard that a lot from a lot of different colleagues across the sector that the changing learner is really critical right now and...

07:11 Catriona Bell

...so many things have happened in the world over the last few years, which may have influenced that, but our learners have changed, definitely.

07:17 Rob McDermott

And we're actually, within education, we're at the front line.

07:20 Rob McDermott

Our school partners are at the front line and they are now coming into our, you know, our environment and I'm sure the university sector is the same.

07:29 Rob McDermott

The learners have changed and with those changing learners have brought lots and lots of changing interactions with the people we work with.

07:40 Catriona Bell

OK, OK.

07:41 Catriona Bell

So you've now got your new Student Learning Experience Strategy for the next five years.

07:47 Rob McDermott

I have indeed.

07:47 Catriona Bell

Where have you got to in your journey with it?

07:49 Rob McDermott

So in that sense, we have presented it, well...

07:53 Rob McDermott

...we came away with the strategy and then went round various groups for scrutiny and then got presented to the Board.

08:03 Rob McDermott

So the Board of Management who endorsed that.

08:07 Rob McDermott

What we've also done is we are very much, I think sometimes strategies especially, I think strategies quite often can be quite global.

08:15 Rob McDermott

And what we decided to do was, was to, the model kind of does it already asks certain questions of itself.

08:24 Rob McDermott

And what we then did is we took those questions and put some smarter objectives in there.

08:29 Rob McDermott

So in many ways, what we've done is we've tiered that up and actually our Principal is very, very keen on measurables.

08:39 Rob McDermott

So what we can actually do is we've been tasked to see how are we achieving this?

08:44 Rob McDermott

How are we gathering the student voice?

08:46 Rob McDermott

What does partnership look like and how is that measurable?

08:49 Rob McDermott

So we've now got a kind of, we've got the strategy, we've got the questions that come from this learning experience within that strategy, but then also what we've got, is we've got targets, right?

08:59 Rob McDermott

And those targets are based on, are very much based on what we think are very much based in Forth Valley, you know?

09:07 Catriona Bell

OK.

09:07 Rob McDermott

And are they achievable?

09:11 Rob McDermott

The world's changing very much right now, but they may be achievable.

09:14 Rob McDermott

But I think we're keen to test them and see where we get to on that one.

09:20 Rob McDermott

And some of these targets are this year, next year, five years' time.

09:24 Catriona Bell

Right, so you've got different timeframes.

09:25 Rob McDermott

So we kind of scanned across, and we scanned across the five years of the strategy.

09:33 Catriona Bell

And have you got any examples of targets that you could just share just to give an idea?

09:36 Rob McDermott

Well, an interesting one is we want to see our Class Reps increase by 10%.

09:43 Rob McDermott

So those are the elements and that's within a year.

09:47 Rob McDermott

So that would then be tasked with working, the Students' Association in conjunction with my team, to make sure that you know the importance of Class Reps, training Class Reps.

09:57 Rob McDermott

That's shared with the Students' Association who really, they drive it, but actually there has to be buy-in from managers and academic teams on that one.

10:03 Rob McDermott

And that's going to be driven by the Directors of Curriculum.

10:06 Rob McDermott

So those are two ones.

10:08 Rob McDermott

Student Satisfaction Engagement Survey, well, Student Satisfaction Engagement Survey, we don't get the best returns on that one.

10:16 Rob McDermott

So that again, that would be another maybe 10, 15% increase on that.

10:23 Rob McDermott

So I suppose it's targets to achieve, targets that are measurable.

10:29 Rob McDermott

And we can then justify why we didn't, why we didn't, why we, why we did or why we didn't.

10:35 Rob McDermott

I think that's quite important.

10:37 Catriona Bell

Yeah, and you're measuring incremental change?

10:39 Rob McDermott

Yeah, we are measuring incremental change.

10:41 Rob McDermott

Yeah, but we're data rich, the colleges and universities are data rich.

10:44 Rob McDermott

So these are the kind of things.

10:45 Rob McDermott

And actually what it does is it justifies my existence, it justifies the Students' Association's existence, it justifies...

10:51 Rob McDermott

...all the things that we want to happen, to perhaps a Board that may be not as granular in their understanding of the organisation.

11:00 Rob McDermott

That might be, no, and I think that's correct.

11:02 Rob McDermott

The Board themselves have got a very, very strategic...

11:05 Rob McDermott

So actually what we can say is, yeah, this is working because of, and there's a good measurement.

11:09 Catriona Bell

Yeah, and we can demonstrate it and evaluate it.

11:11 Rob McDermott

Absolutely.

11:12 Catriona Bell

Yeah.

11:13

And our new Chair of the Board, again, our Chair of the Board is very keen on measurables so that we can then go to them and say, this is what success looks like.

11:22 Catriona Bell

Interesting.

11:23 Catriona Bell

So you've got that governance angle coming in as well at the highest level.

11:26 Catriona Bell

Yeah, really interesting.

11:28 Catriona Bell

And so it sounds like you've made massive progress in a relatively short space of time.

11:32 Catriona Bell

Have you got any reflections on what worked and what didn't work as you went through the process at all?

11:41 Rob McDermott

I think we always need to, with any strategy and something like this, it's about continually drip feeding it to people.

11:49 Rob McDermott

It's about continually referencing it and saying, well, actually...

11:53 Rob McDermott
...this is what we said we would do.

11:55 Rob McDermott
This is what this looks like.

11:57 Rob McDermott
And then also making sure that if that's, if the student experience, is the core of what we do right at the centre, then everything else should fall in round about it.

12:08 Rob McDermott
So we went back and revisited our own self-evaluation process round about the student experience.

12:16 Rob McDermott
We will be asking those questions.

12:18 Rob McDermott
How have we achieved this?

12:19 Rob McDermott
Again, the measurables, but also in terms of, say, programme review, we've looked at the Student Learning Experience within the context of revisiting programme review.

12:30 Rob McDermott
Are we asking the right questions at programme review?

12:33 Rob McDermott
Are we demonstrating true partnership work in that programme review?

12:37 Rob McDermott
Are we? Yeah, so that's one part.

12:40 Rob McDermott
We also gather in the college, we also gather something which is called Listening to Learners.

12:47 Rob McDermott
Where it's a survey like the Student Satisfaction Engagement Survey, but it asks more questions and those questions will reference or will be based on the actual Student Learning Experience Strategy that we've created.

13:03 Rob McDermott
And that again will be a measure that says, you know, these are the kind of questions we should be asking.

13:09 Rob McDermott
And that then feeds into our own self-evaluation process, which will then feed into our SEAPs, which will then feed into...

13:16 Rob McDermott

...that our returns to the Funding Council, and actually will build for our seven-year cyclical process.

13:23 Rob McDermott

So in many ways it's a core document that should seep into everything round about us, you know, and it's convincing people that here is a core document.

13:34 Rob McDermott

You know, here is a core document that is really all about the student and is really all about why we're here.

13:40 Rob McDermott

And that's always a conversation you need to have with the Finance guys and the Janitorial staff.

13:45 Rob McDermott

And do you know what I mean?

13:47 Rob McDermott

It's that idea that this is core.

13:49 Rob McDermott

You need to understand this because all the other stuff doesn't matter if we're not getting that student experience right.

13:55 Catriona Bell

Yeah, no.

3:56 Rob McDermott

And that's a challenge. There is a challenge.

13:58 Catriona Bell

Yeah, no, but it's such a powerful insight.

14:01 Catriona Bell

I think that if you get the student experience right and that's at the core of everything, then everything else builds from it but you've articulated that so powerfully.

14:10 Catriona Bell

I was going to ask you if you have any tips or reflections to share with colleagues in the sector, but I think you've just shared a pretty massive one with us there.

14:16 Catriona Bell

Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

14:18 Rob McDermott

I just think sometimes this is a big commitment here from us to the learning experience, a big commitment here.

14:27 Rob McDermott

We've kind of, we've tore it apart.

14:30 Rob McDermott

We've not got four or five bubbles and that means that are very strategic and actually this is something that's fairly concrete.

14:37 Rob McDermott

That's what I liked about the Student Learning Experience in the first place.

14:40 Rob McDermott

And I think our strategy should be something that can be, and we can be, held up against that strategy to say we have achieved X, Y & Z.

14:49 Rob McDermott

I've worked with strategies in the past.

14:50 Rob McDermott

We've all worked with strategy in the past that are so global that actually nobody, people go, what does that actually mean?

14:57 Rob McDermott

Do you know?

14:58 Rob McDermott

What does that actually mean?

15:00 Rob McDermott

Whereas I don't think this is, this is a very clear, this is what this means.

15:05 Rob McDermott

And I think maybe as colleagues across the sector, let's look to our strategies, let's make it measurable, let's make it something that the Board can understand, the Senior Management Team can understand, students' association can understand, the students themselves can understand, the lecturing staff can understand, everybody can understand and they can hang their hats on.

15:25 Rob McDermott

And that's what I think we've tried to do.

15:29 Catriona Bell

Yeah, no, that is powerful stuff, Rob, definitely.

15:32 Catriona Bell

And I'm just reflecting on what you've shared with us over the last few minutes.

15:35 Catriona Bell

So we've started talking about a Student Experience Strategy that you've built around the sparqs Student Learning Experience model.

15:42 Catriona Bell

But you've touched on, we start with student partnership.

15:45 Catriona Bell

We've talked about strategy development.

15:47 Catriona Bell

You've talked about how it embeds with quality and the SEAPs and the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework.

15:52 Catriona Bell

You've talked about it being endorsed by the Board and governance at the highest level of the of the college, that it needs to be measurable and impactful.

16:02 Catriona Bell

And it's the core document that hinges everything together for Forth Valley College is what I've heard from you.

16:09 Catriona Bell

But is there anything else that you wanted to add before we wrap up at all?

16:14 Rob McDermott

No, I think that's it.

16:16 Rob McDermott

I think it always helps that somebody else has done all the hard work and we just added to it.

16:20 Rob McDermott

I love that.

16:21 Rob McDermott

Do you know that? That's effective collaboration. Do you know?

16:25 Catriona Bell

Absolutely.

16:26 Rob McDermott

And I have had the benefit of being engaged with sparqs round about this one.

16:32 Rob McDermott

And that in itself has been really, really useful.

16:35 Rob McDermott

You know, and you know, gives, I suppose, for me, as I've already mentioned, gives a certain amount of kudos to my thinking round about this.

16:44 Rob McDermott

It's not coming out of the blue this stuff.

16:45 Rob McDermott

This is stuff that's been tried and tested across lots and lots of, with lots and lots of colleagues, students' associations, college students, you know, sabbatical officers, the whole kit and caboodle.

16:56 Rob McDermott

So in many ways, you know, it works and it's tried and tested as an approach.

17:05 Rob McDermott

I think maybe we need to come back in five years' time and really review it and reflect on it.

17:11 Rob McDermott

Five years thing is a long time in college, isn't it?

17:16 Catriona Bell

Well, even you've got your impact and your measurables coming in even after a year.

17:20 Catriona Bell

So we'll be able to revisit, hopefully, and catch up with you and see how it's going.

17:24 Catriona Bell

But thanks so much, Rob, for your time, for sharing such valuable insights.

17:28 Catriona Bell

And I think this possibly wasn't a use of the SLE model that sparqs had anticipated, but it's really fascinating and powerful to capture it.

17:37 Catriona Bell

And as you say, you've got a co-created, sector-led reference that you've used as your starting point and accelerated your strategy development from that.

17:46 Catriona Bell

So thank you.

17:48 Catriona Bell

Congratulations to you and your colleagues on what you've achieved in a pretty short space of time.

17:53 Catriona Bell

Thanks for your generosity in sharing it with us.

17:56 Catriona Bell

Anything you want to add just as a final point before we go?

18:00 Rob McDermott

No, I think I've spoke, I've said everything I want to see, which is not something I don't normally say.

18:06 Rob McDermott
I've got to that point.

18:09 Catriona Bell
Thanks ever so much Rob.

18:10 Catriona Bell
We'll sign off here, but look out for other case studies and podcasts from sparqs and thanks again.

18:15 Catriona Bell
Bye Rob.

18:16 Rob McDermott
Bye.