sparqs response to the sector consultation on the new ELIR method
November 2016

sparqs (Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland) is the national support agency for student engagement in universities and colleges. As part of that remit, we have a key role in supporting student engagement with external and internal quality arrangements in universities, including Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR). To support student engagement in the external review process, sparqs provides practical support to students and students' associations at institutions under review; we published our ELIR Cycle 3 Guidance for the sector in 2014[1]. We plan to revise and re-issue this guidance aligned to the new arrangements. We also support QAA Scotland training for student reviewers on ELIR teams.

Student engagement in Scotland has seen a marked development in the years since ELIR was established in 2003, with Scotland being widely recognised as pioneering in regard to students' role as reviewers in external reviews. Although Scotland remains at the forefront of this, 29 of 34 European Higher Education Area countries now include student reviewers on external review teams[2]. The 2015 revised European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) reflected this shift, making it explicit that student members of review teams are a requirement in external reviews[3].

Student reviewers have been successful not only in bringing a fresh perspective to external quality reviews but have also provided another layer of expertise to the process, rooted in their experience as students studying at a Scottish institution. This has contributed to enhancements in learning and teaching across the sector. It is important that in the new arrangements, the value and benefits of student engagement in reviews continues to be recognised. We must ensure that whatever changes to the ELIR method are made, the strong commitment to student engagement – both as 'reviewees' (i.e. in terms of engaging with and informing the review), and as 'reviewers' (i.e. students as members of review teams) – is maintained and developed.

Our answers below focus on student engagement in new ELIR method within the parameters of this consultation. It is worth noting, however, that this review takes place within a wider context of discussions about how the Scottish sector maintains its internationally-recognised commitment to student engagement more generally. This also includes strengthening student engagement in Institution-led Review and Annual Discussions with institutions, with a particular focus on the use of Student Partnership Agreements and engaging more students e.g. school and faculty officers with these processes.

Involvement of the whole or partial team:
1. *Should the whole ELIR team attend the planning visit?*
2. *If the whole ELIR team did not attend, what subset of the team do you think should be directly involved at the planning visit?*

Our preference would be for the student reviewer to be present at both visits, fostering familiarity and mutual trust between the student reviewer and the institution from the outset. Limiting the involvement of the whole team in the planning visit appears to be a false economy if it simply elicits further work to be done to feedback to ELIR team members who were not in attendance. Were any member of the team not to be present at the planning visit, careful thought must go into how the

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[1] *sparqs ELIR Cycle 3 Guidance*, http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/ELIR%203%20Guidance%20-%20final%20version.pdf

[2] *Bologna with Student Eyes 2015,* European Students' Union, page 33, https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/BWSE-2015-online.pdf

[3] *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, Standard 2.4 on Peer Review Experts, page 19, http://www.eua.be/Libraries/quality-assurance/esg_2015.pdf?sfvrsn=0

whole ELIR team shares information and has ownership of the agreed set of themes to be explored in the main visit. It is important that the whole review team shapes and owns the visit and outcomes; if the student reviewer were not to be present there should be careful consideration of how the student reviewer will continue to play a full role on the team.

Institution leading the agenda:

3. *Because the planning visit is a single day, we would no longer have the first morning of Part 1 where the HEI has the opportunity to lead and design that section of the programme. Do you think there would be benefit in redesigning that element of the ELIR visit so that the HEI retains the opportunity to lead the agenda on the topics/themes they have proposed for the review? Options for a redesigned version include: holding a single meeting at the start of the main review visit where a group of colleagues from the HEI outline their priorities for the ELIR; or each meeting with the ELIR team might include a short amount of time in which staff and/or students from the HEI had ownership of the agenda.*

The morning sessions offer a space for HEIs to introduce the context of their institution and draw attention to any areas of their work for particular attention. While sparqs would not have a strong view on this, it should be noted that this presents an opportunity for institutions to work in partnership with their students in setting out potential themes for review. We would like to see this collaboration between students and staff enhanced in arrangements for the new method, and we see a role for Student Partnership Agreements in facilitating this process. We will address how students engage with and inform the review as reviewees further in question 11.

Size and composition of the ELIR team:

4. *Would you support greater flexibility to vary the size and composition of the ELIR team?*
5. *Do you agree with the minimum and maximum team sizes specified? Or would you prefer for there always to be more than one academic reviewer?*
6. *Are there other ways in which the ELIR team composition could be more flexible? for example, is there other expertise ELIR reviewers should include such as professional services colleagues?*

It is fundamental that student reviewers are retained regardless of the size and composition of the review team. If the size of the team is changed, we would urge careful thought into how the student reviewer is supported to undertake their role in an effective manner. Whilst the intuitive viewpoint would be that a smaller team enhances the role of a student reviewers (being one of three team members affords greater influence than being one of six), sparqs' view is that – first and foremost – the priority is for the team to be large enough so as to be robust. The voice of a student reviewer is better heard within a robust and legitimate ELIR team rather than one that is under-sized. Specifically, a team that is too small could have negative implications for the role and value of the student reviewer e.g. the fewer the team members, the greater responsibility and pressure put on the student. Similarly, as students are used to being the junior partner in a hierarchical relationship with academic staff, they may feel less included to challenge the views of academic staff in a smaller review team and it may serve to undermine the collegiate nature of the process.

Taking this into consideration, we would suggest that the team is no smaller than four members. We would like to see consideration given to the gender balance and diversity of the review panel, recognising the benefits a diverse panel can bring to the review process.

If the composition of the review team is to be more flexible then the idea of opening up the process to professional services staff seems sensible. It would be worth giving consideration to the idea of the option of having more than one student reviewer on teams where this might bring additional value or expertise e.g. a postgraduate student.

ELIR reporting:

7. Do you think that introducing recommendations as well as areas for development and commendations as well as areas of positive practice is a useful of way of providing greater differentiation of ELIR outcomes?

8. Would you favour introducing website statements as an additional way of introducing more celebratory language to ELIR reports? Is this something HEIs would find useful as an outcome from ELIR?

9. Do you have other suggestions for introducing more celebratory language to ELIR reports?

We understand the motivation for introducing more celebratory language and some amount of differentiation in ELIR reporting. In principle, the idea of celebrating what the Scottish sector does well is welcome. However, we are concerned about the potential negative unintended consequences. One of the key strengths of the sector is its collaborative and open nature. Whilst it is important for institutions to be able to contextualise their ELIR outcomes, we would urge serious consideration of whether increased 'differentiation' could become 'comparison', thereby potentially threatening the collegiality and the open and honest reflection required in the ELIR process. This would have adverse effects on student engagement. If greater differentiation to review outcomes were to be introduced, it would important that any potential commendations and areas for positive practice were signalled early in the process by the HEI, allowing them to be actively investigated with students during the main visit.

We remain unconvinced about the idea of introducing website statements linked to ELIR outcomes. If only the commendations and areas of positive practice were to be publically displayed to current and prospective students, this would provide an unbalanced perspective of the institution. It is also difficult to see how technical information on the HEI's processes and procedures would be presented in a useful way to students. We do think, however, that ELIR outcomes should be transparent and accessible.

ELIR Follow-up:

10. *Do you have suggestions for the way in which ELIR Follow-up activity could be conducted? One option is to retain the current model where three institutional teams participate in an event. Another option is for each HEI to work with QAAS officers to develop an event to address their ELIR outcomes and to invite other HEIs to participate. We welcome suggestions for other options.*

It would be interesting to explore the option of organising ELIR follow-up activity on a thematic basis e.g. institutions with similar areas for development may wish to participate in a thematic event on a discrete topic. We would welcome efforts to ensure student partnership in these activities.

Other:

11. *Are there other comments you would like to make about the proposals for ELIR 4?*

As indicated above, it is essential that students at the institution are engaged as partners in all aspects from the outset of the ELIR process. With this in mind, thought should be given to how students are meaningfully engaged in the initial discussions between the QAAS officer and the HEI 12 months prior to the review. This would ensure that the decisions made about broad themes for review and the ELIR team composition are owned by students at the institution. Moreover, we would like to see Student Partnership Agreements included in the sources of information that inform the themes for review at this stage. We would also welcome consideration into how student engagement in the development of the Advanced Information Set and Reflective Analysis might be further strengthened.

If you have any questions regarding this response, please contact Hannah Clarke (Hannah.Clarke@sparqs.ac.uk)

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