**sparqs Transnational Education project**

**A summary and proposal**

**Background**

Based on sectoral and institutional conversations, sparqs has committed to undertaking work to explore student engagement in the quality of Transnational Education (TNE) arrangements in which universities in Scotland participate.

Conversations relating to this project so far have taken place with staff or student officers at Heriot Watt University, Edinburgh Napier University, The University of the West of Scotland, the University of Glasgow, Strathclyde University, and Glasgow Caledonian University, and also with QAA Scotland.

TNE is of significant importance to the Scottish sector, with an increasing number of arrangements involving a growing number of universities in Scotland, and there is a considerable body of literature exploring learning, teaching and quality in TNE.

One recent report produced by HEGlobal, for instance, provides a good UK-wide picture of TNE provision (including online and distance learning activity), and this report includes case studies from Scottish universities.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Meanwhile a recent project by QAA Scotland has drawn together and explored research and practice in TNE as part of a wider focus on collaborative activity across Scotland’s universities.[[2]](#footnote-2)

From initial conversations between sparqs and the universities named above, however, it remains clear that there are considerable challenges and questions about how students and students’ associations are involved formally and informally in shaping the quality of TNE provision, and that forms the focus of sparqs’ work in this area.

There is evidence of substantial and exciting good practice in student engagement from all the universities so far engaged in this project, but also a consistent level of uncertainty about where, in what ways and how effectively students are engaged in shaping quality.

This is due to not only cultural and political factors that so define TNE generally, but also questions around the remit and capability of students’ associations in Scotland to engage with the conversations and structures of quality within TNE providers, the resourcing and training of representatives at TNE sites, and the scope or support for management structures to engage students in turn. These questions form the basis of this project.

**Definition and scope**

Many definitions of TNE – such as in the HEGlobal report mentioned above – include provision to students studying through online and distance learning (ODL). However sparqs distinguishes between the two in its current work: while there is clear overlap, separate conversations with universities across Scotland have led to the initiation of a distinct project on student engagement in the quality of ODL courses, which of course include students studying within Scotland and the wider UK as well as in the rest of the world.

Therefore, sparqs’ TNE project defines and explores TNE provision as being based on either campuses in other countries directly managed by a Scottish university or arrangements between a Scottish university and a provider in another country that create accredited learning and teaching in that country.

A general overview of the two projects can be found on the sparqs website.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Elements of student engagement**

Scotland’s sector-approved Student Engagement Framework[[4]](#footnote-4) sets out five key elements of student engagement:

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 the national level.

As sparqs’ remit and expertise lies within elements 3, 4 and 5 it is not within the scope of this project to explore TNE students’ engagement in their own learning or the wider life of the institution, and other practitioners and agencies are better placed to support this. Instead, sparqs’ interest lies specifically in the engagement of TNE students, and others such as Scottish based students’ association officers, in conversations and structures around quality.

From sparqs’ useful and informative initial discussions with sector practitioners, including staff in teaching, quality and management roles and students’ association officers and staff, some early conclusions can be reached about the types of questions this project could explore, and some potential case studies of practice to explore more deeply.

These have been grouped in the following sections under elements three, four and five of the Student Engagement Framework.

**Element 3: Students working with their institution in shaping the direction of learning**

Questions arising within this element include:

1. How effectively can TNE students give feedback to staff (both foreign campus-based and Scotland-based, as relevant) about the quality of their learning experience, and work with them on suggestions for enhancement?
2. How can students work with staff in partnership to co-create their learning experience, including specific projects such as dissertations?
3. How are students on TNE courses involved in regular processes such as annual monitoring, (re-)validation or periodic review?
4. How do students develop partnership with staff through different forms of delivery, such as permanent local staff or flying faculty?
5. Where course representative structures exist, what training and support is provided to ensure their effectiveness? And where they do not, how are alternative and equivalent mechanisms developed?
6. How can the views of students and representatives on TNE courses link into the work and structures of Scottish-based students’ associations?

**Element 4: Formal mechanisms for quality and governance**

Questions arising within this element include:

1. How are students’ associations engaged in conversations and structures relating to the creation and development of TNE arrangements?

***Case study****: Edinburgh Napier University has a Collaborative Provision Committee which is responsible for such arrangements, and there is students’ association representation on this committee.*

1. What impact does the principle and practice of student engagement have on staff development policies within TNE provision?
2. What responsibilities do Scottish-based representative structures have for the learning experience and representative or feedback activity at TNE sites?
3. How can students’ association staff and officers be best supported and equipped to undertake responsibilities relating to TNE?

**Element 5: Influencing the student experience at the national level**

Questions arising within this element include:

1. How are students’ associations engaged in enhancement conversations and sector agency business relating to the national picture of TNE provision?

***Case study****: QAA Focus On event, 19 May 2016, at which a number of presentations, many involving students, were delivered as part of the Managing Collaborative Actvity project:* [*http://enhancementthemes.ac.uk/focus-on/managing-collaborative-activity*](http://enhancementthemes.ac.uk/focus-on/managing-collaborative-activity)

1. How do students’ associations learn and share through national networks about their experience of involvement in TNE quality activities?
2. What data is generated sectorally through surveys, research projects and other means, to inform students’ association and university partnership working on TNE quality enhancement?

**Next steps**

sparqs intends to progress this project with participation open initially to the six universities named at the top of this paper.

The answers to three key questions will assist in progressing this project:

1. What further questions or issues or might be added to the above sections, to provide a clear starting point for this project?
2. What can participating universities contribute in terms of an evidence base, case studies, or potential projects on which they are willing to work with sparqs?
3. In terms of providing meaningful impact to the sector, what outputs would the sector most find valuable? Potential products could, depending on priorities and available resources, include:
   1. Mapping of student engagement in TNE quality.
   2. A summary of best practice of student engagement in TNE quality.
   3. A toolkit focussed on developing solutions to different aspects of TNE quality, such as student feedback, programme management, regulations or representative structures.
   4. Training materials around TNE engagement for representatives, either at TNE sites or in senior student officer roles in Scotland.

sparqs is hosting a meeting of interested parties from the six universities on Thursday 27 October its office in Edinburgh, at which this paper and the above questions can be explored in more depth, and a fuller outline of the project can be developed.

Participation in this event will be very welcome by up to four participants from each university, including staff and students with the following suggested remits:

1. A teaching or management staff member that involves TNE responsibilities.
2. A member of staff with related quality enhancement responsibilities.
3. A students’ association officer with an education remit.
4. A students’ association staff member with a remit of supporting academic representation.

sparqs looks forward to receiving comment from the universities and students’ associations on this paper and the wider project.

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1. *The Scale and Scope of UK Higher Education Transnational Education*, HE Global, 2016 <http://heglobal.international.ac.uk/resources/reports-and-publications/the-scale-and-scope-of-uk-higher-education-transnational-education.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://enhancementthemes.ac.uk/focus-on/managing-collaborative-activity> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/institute.php?page=525> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/SEFScotland.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)