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Student Partnership Agreements during COVID-19

“ If ever there was a time for co-creation, that time is now... Just because the pace of change is rapid, it does not mean that collaborative engagement and co-creation cannot move equally rapidly. ”

Advance HE, 2020

“ partnership working... is more important than ever. ”

Alcock and Ball, 2020



Student Partnership Agreements were originally conceived by the Scottish Government in their 2011 pre-legislative paper Putting Learners at the Centre. sparqs published guidance on their creation for universities in 2013 and colleges in 2015, setting out that they would be annually-updated documents developed and agreed by institutions and students' associations that illustrate how they work in partnership and describe current priority projects.

Institutions have been creative with their SPAs since their inception, with staff and students working to take their documents forward in different ways beyond the outline suggested in the guidance documents. Innovations have included:

- An additional Part C, celebrating achievements.
- Widening SPAs beyond the learning experience to the general student experience.
- Devolving SPAs to schools or constituent units.
- Changes to the lifecycle of SPAs, for instance to two years.

sparqs had been planning in 2020 to update its guidance to reflect these innovations, map current practice and impact, and provide up-to-date direction for future developments in SPAs. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has transformed sparqs' priorities alongside those of the entire sector, has meant that a more focused response is required to support institutions looking to redevelop their SPAs or manage their periodic renewal.

The challenges COVID-19 presents require a partnership approach to safeguarding the student experience. A specific COVID-19 SPA is one way to address this.

As such, this briefing note supports institutions who feel the SPA might be a good vehicle to frame this work, to create customised, short-life SPAs, and to think about partnership in a pandemic context where decisions have been taken at speed, where uncertainty is a continuing feature, and where the luxury of time and space to reflect deeply and consult widely on the priorities for partnership may not exist in the same way.

This briefing note should be used together by staff and students involved in leading the quality of learning and wider student experience, or your student partnership committee or equivalent where it exists.



Partnership during the pandemic

As originally outlined in the guidance documents and further developed through institutional practice, there are usually three sections in a Student Partnership Agreement.

| Part A: The tools | Part B: The projects | Part C: The successes |
|---|---|--|
| An outline of the different ways in which students can engage with shaping their learning experience. | Ambitions for between three and five priority projects agreed together by the institution and SA. | A report on progress and outcomes from previous Part B activity. |

SPAs have been published and communicated by institutions in various formats, such as short leaflets or posters that outline the three sections, webpages updated regularly with changes in each area, or fuller documents that are monitored by those leading the SPA.

The impact of COVID-19 on the learning experience has been significant and obvious. Where institutions and students' associations are facing capacity issues in looking at strategic developments of student engagement, the SPA should be a short-life document, with:

- An accelerated planning and writing process (see the table at the top of the final page).
- A duration of perhaps no more than six months, in order to respond to future developments.
- An explicit focus on the pandemic learning experience.

Its three parts should be realigned to reflect the current context in the following way.

| | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Part A: The tools | The learning experience is now substantially digital or blended, and how you engage students will reflect this. With continued change and uncertainty, it is important that these tools of partnership can facilitate conversation easily and inclusively in a digital environment and allow you to act on feedback swiftly. |
| Part B: The projects | By far the dominant issue in today's learning experience is COVID-19. There are many dimensions to this, such as moving to online or blended learning; staff and student competence with digital resources; maintaining a sense of community online; mental health; and digital poverty. Your response to the pandemic has probably already identified these and maybe others. The common question throughout them is how staff and students are working together to shape this new learning experience. As such, you have less need for the usual wide consultation to identify priority projects. |
| Part C: The successes | At a stressful and uncertain time, celebrating your successes has never been more important, because it reassures staff and students that partnership working is still possible and necessary. Even just getting the basics right – moving the management of the course rep system online, holding staff-student meetings by video-conference, or creating VLE spaces for discussion and feedback – is worth celebrating. |



Developing your COVID-19 SPA

sparqs has produced various resources since the pandemic began to support institutions and students' associations. The table below outlines what they aim to do. They can help provide the basis for the content of the three parts of the resource.

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|----------------------------------|--|
| Part A: The tools | <p>Course rep recruitment resources – The role of reps in working with staff to use students' views about learning has never been more important. These tools include guidance on what a course rep role should look like in a digital learning environment.</p> <p>Briefing note for course reps – An adaptable message to convey to course reps the continued increased importance of their role at this time.</p> <p>sparqs' Introductory Course Rep Training – An overview of sparqs' revised training materials, outlining the two parts (a self-study module and an interactive workshop).</p> <p>Tool for developing a forum for students on online courses – This resource helps you think through what a meeting or focus group to get students' views might look like.</p> <p>Briefing note on inducting education officers – Senior student officers with education remits are vital to student engagement at the strategic level. This guide can shape their induction at a challenging and changing time.</p> |
| Part B: The projects | <p>Briefing note on preparing your course rep system – Based on your experiences this year, readying your course rep system and recruitment process for the 2021-22 academic year may be a priority area.</p> <p>Suggested questions for course reps – This adapted version of our Student Learning Experience diagram is at the heart of our revised Course Rep Training, but includes questions that all staff and students could use to reflect on the priorities for enhancement in the learning experience.</p> <p>A Toolkit for Effective Learner Engagement – Drawing on the above suggested questions and Education Scotland's Our Best Future resources, this document helps institutions and SAs to put student views on the pandemic learning experience at the heart of quality processes. It is written for colleges but has applicable ideas for universities too.</p> |
| Part C: The successes | <p>sparqs' Resource Library – You should share your past and current successes, individually or collectively, in our Resource Library. Your final SPA should be a submission too!</p> <p>sparqs' COVID-19 hub resources page – Successes relating to your COVID-19 response can also be linked from this page.</p> |

Our [COVID-19 hub's resources page](#) includes these resources, as well as tools and publications from institutions, students' associations, sector agencies and others that you will also find useful in developing your SPA.

You should obviously continue working in partnership in developing your SPA, and ensure that your timeline for completing it is short, perhaps two weeks. The diagram on the next page offers a suggested series of steps that key institutional and students' association personnel could undertake in this time.



Two to three week timescale

1. Read this document and the resources included.
2. Meet to map out your Part A tools based on existing practice and inspired by the tools in Part A of the table on the previous page.
3. Agree the aspects of the impact of COVID-19 that your institution and students' association can work together on (or are already doing so) as the Part B projects.
4. Identify the successes of your engagement so far during the pandemic, and in your past SPA if you had one, to form Part C.
5. Draft your agreement. Keep it short, perhaps one page for each of the three parts.
6. Approve and sign off the SPA at relevant institutional and students' association committees. Time your preparatory work to fit in with the decision-making cycle.
7. Monitor progress in your SPA on an ongoing basis, through a partnership committee or equivalent forum.
8. Review and reflect at the end of the cycle, at the end of the academic or calendar year.

Help and further resources

Your key contact in sparqs

Keep in regular touch with the [sparqs team's key contact for your institution](#). They can help with any part of this process, for instance talking you through the guidance or our other resources, or meeting with a relevant group or committee to discuss student engagement during the pandemic.

Original SPA guidance

You may find that our 2013 [university guidance](#) and 2015 [college guidance](#) still has some useful questions or activities, especially if you are in a position to think conceptually about partnership or consider methods of consultation with your wider staff and students.

sparqs resources

As mentioned above, our COVID-19 hub has a [resources page](#) with useful relevant submissions from sparqs and others around the sector. Our [Resource Library](#) also has more general resources, and those relating to representation and partnership may be of particular value.

References and some further reading

- Advance HE (2020) *Creating Socially Distanced Campuses and Education Project – Final Capstone Report*. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/creating-socially-distanced-campuses-and-education-project-final-capstone-report>
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