



TOOLKIT ON DEVELOPING DEPARTMENTAL REPRESENTATION

**A resource for universities, colleges and students' associations
to aid the development of student engagement and
representation in faculties, schools, academic sections and
other departmental levels.**

Contents

Page 3	Introduction
Page 6	How to use the toolkit
Page 7	Structures
Page 9	Definition and recruitment
Page 14	Training
Page 16	Impact
Page 19	Engaging staff
Page 21	Incentives
Page 22	Appendices
Page 23	About sparqs

Introduction

- 1.1 A number of factors have created the need for this project to explore student engagement at the departmental level:
- The departmental level of engagement is crucial to the quality process, yet little knowledge about it has been gathered at the sector level
 - Departments are the “lynchpin” of representation, linking the strategy (at the institutional level) with the “coalface” (at the programme level).
 - Institutions and students’ associations often find the department the most challenging and least developed level of student engagement (see paragraph 1.11)
- 1.2 sparqs was assisted in this project by a small working group of practitioners and officers from institutions and students’ associations in both the university and college sectors (see acknowledgements). Through a series of meetings and communications, the group contributed to the development of a framework for this toolkit. This framework was then used as a basis for research into good practice and key challenges, which was conducted with staff and officers at the institutions of the working group members.
- 1.3 sparqs is grateful for the involvement of the individuals in the working group who helped formulate these toolkits. They are:
- Kornelia Sliwinska, Education Development Coordinator, Aberdeen University Students’ Association (since moved to new job)
 - Helen Chisholm, Student Liaison Officer, Borders College
 - Eric Monaghan, Assistant Secretary, Dundee University (since retired)
 - Nathan Shield, President, University of the Highlands and Islands Students’ Association (until summer 2012)
 - Denise McCaig, Academic Representation Coordinator, Heriot Watt University Students’ Association
 - Kevin Ward, Student Representative Coordinator, Glasgow Caledonian University Students’ Association
 - Gillian Plunkett, Head of Student Information and Funding, City of Glasgow College
- 1.4 sparqs further acknowledges the input of a variety of staff and students from the above institutions who contributed ideas and perspectives at research meetings.
- 1.5 Throughout this toolkit, departmental representation is taken to mean the engagement of students, particularly student officers, in shaping decisions taken about the learning experience at the departmental level; that middle tier of decision-making between the programme and institutional level.

- 1.6 “Department” is a shorthand for a variety of terms in use throughout the sector to describe an academic grouping, such as school, faculty, sector, section or (in universities only) college. This sub-institutional unit is the primary focus of this toolkit. The scope of this document does not extend to representation at, for instance, campuses that form a part of multi-site or federal institutions.
- 1.7 Institutions may have two “middle levels” – for example, the curriculum may be divided into a small number of colleges or faculties, each of which is split into a further number of schools. In such cases, representation tends to be more focussed at the school level, though this toolkit includes both levels in its scope and thus both in its definition of “departments”.
- 1.8 Both structures – with either one or two departmental levels – are illustrated below.



- 1.9 Anecdotally, a variety of practice exists throughout the sector in terms of departmental representation. Some institutions have well-established systems of student representation in their departments, some are developing or seeking to develop such structures, while others will have no departmental representative structures at all. Those that do not may tend to be the smallest institutions in the sector.
- 1.10 Although practice and structures vary, departmental representation can be characterised by, among other things:
- Student officers for each department, who might have:
 - Places on key departmental committees and groups.
 - A role within the institution’s internal review processes.
 - Close links between departmental staff and departmental reps.
 - Departmental rep team meetings.
 - Departmental forums or committees for class reps, often with the involvement of or chaired by departmental reps.
 - Specific training for departmental reps.
- 1.11 As already stated, the departmental level is sometimes less developed in terms of representation than the institutional or programme level. This may be for a number of reasons:

- Departments within institutions are the most likely level to change. There will always be a form of decision-making at programme and institutional levels, but institutions may periodically reform or restructure their middle level, with an obvious impact on the structures of student engagement at this level. Even if restructures might be minor or only take place many years apart, there can still be a knock-on effect in terms of ensuring that student engagement keeps up with the pace.
- The functions of departments often relate to academic policy, sharing practice, internal subject review and quality management. Though of huge importance, these are somewhat technical in their nature and can be hard to present as being of immediate relevance to the learning experience.
- As a consequence of this, departments often have comparatively weak “brands” in students’ minds when compared to their identity with their programme or whole institution, especially where such departments might be quite large or multidisciplinary. There may of course be notable exceptions to this where departments might be quite distinct from the rest of the institution in terms of curriculum or geographical location – for instance, in medical or healthcare-related subject areas.

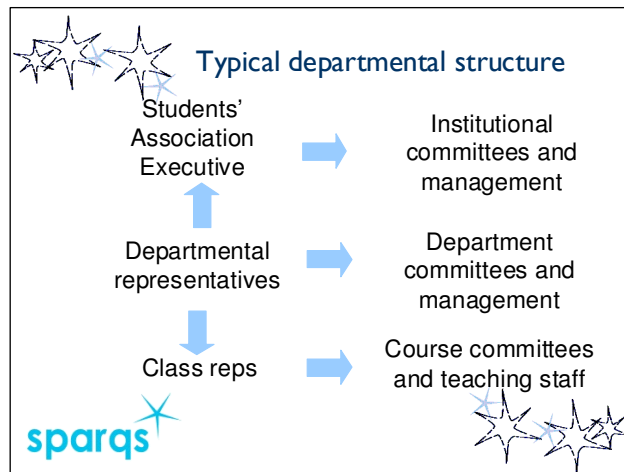
How to use the toolkit

- 2.1 The toolkit presents a mixture of questions, tools and case studies of good practice. This hopefully will provide institutions with a way of reflecting on their needs and their practice, and the ability to develop solutions that suit their individual institutional structures and cultures. They can be used at either institutional or departmental level, and it is recommended that a small group of staff and student officers in each case gather to read through and undertake each toolkit element.
- 2.1 **Where the toolkit includes specific questions for you to consider, these will appear in bold, like this.**
- 2.2 Institutions are welcome – and indeed encouraged – to invite sparqs staff to either facilitate groups who wish to work through the toolkit, or merely to observe. This will give sparqs a much stronger sense of how the toolkit is used and the impact it can have.

Structures

Whether you are looking to enhance or review your existing departmental representation structure, or actually introduce one, the first step should be to look at your institutional structure.

Typically, it might look somewhat like the diagram on the right, with institutional and programme levels, and perhaps a departmental level in the middle.



What does the structure of your institution look like?

1. **Create a diagram like the one above that reflects the structures and terminology of your institution. You don't need to go into detail, for instance by naming each curriculum area or institutional committee, but do make sure you include each level.**
2. **Draw arrows between them where they report to or communicate with each other.**
3. **Discuss as a group where you feel the strengths and potential areas for development are, particularly:**
 - a. **Between the different levels of student representation**
 - b. **Between student representative structures and institutional structures (the left and right sides of the diagram above).**

Where you feel there are weaknesses around departments, this could mean that you want to improve the engagement of students at this level.

Something else that will influence your departmental representation structures is the purpose of your departments, and the extent to which you feel student engagement does or should take place.

1. **Using your institution's regulations if necessary, identify the formal purposes of your institution's departments. These might include functions like being a basis for internal subject review, being a centre for the directing of research development, or allowing for comparison of the learning and teaching experience across similar subjects.**
2. **Enter each purpose into the following table, and decide as a group how much student engagement in these decisions there should be and currently is. Where the level of engagement you think there**



should be is higher than what it currently is, this could be an action point for you to explore further.

Purpose of the school	How much student engagement should there be (0 = none; 5 = full engagement)?	How much student engagement is there now (0 = none, 5 = full engagement)?

Definition and recruitment

If you would like to introduce or revise departmental representation structures, then there are two basic elements to consider:

1. **An individual officer** from each department representing students in that area. Typically this officer will liaise with class reps and senior staff in their department and in the students' association, and sit on major committees within both the department and students' association.
2. **A student council or forum** for each department, attended by students or class reps, which will meet periodically to discuss the learning experience in that specific department.

This section will explore these two options in turn (though both can be and often are used together within the same institution).

Departmental officers

There are a number of questions to consider with regard to a departmental officer – what their role will be, who they will work with, and so on. These can be addressed by means of an “**opportunity profile**”, an all-in-one job description and person specification that can be used to define a role and inform those who might be interested in it.

Using the following table, discuss the details of what a departmental officer does, or could do, in your institution. Don't worry if you don't have answers to all of the points – later toolkits will help you explore them, so you can always revisit this table later.

Element	Your answer (to replace suggested text below)
1. Title of role	Departmental representative, school officer, or other relevant term
2. Main purpose of role	How would you sum up the job in just one sentence? For instance, “to represent the views of students at the departmental level”.
3. Main activities	What are the few key tasks involved in the role? Write a bullet point list.
4. Experience, skills and interest required	You may think that certain skills or attributes might be expected among candidates, such as an interest in enhancing the learning experience, good communication skills, or experience as a class rep. You may alternatively feel that there should be no prerequisites, and instead that such skills will be developed while undertaking the role.
5. Time commitment	Very roughly, how much time a week will this role take? Perhaps mention any “peaks” and “troughs” throughout the academic year.

6. How to get the position	What do you have to do? Apply? Stand in an election?
7. Who you will work with	What variety of staff and students will you primarily be expected to interact with? It might be worth considering here whether the post is “owned” by the institution, the students’ association, or both.
8. Support in the role	Who is there to help post-holders in the role, and what will they provide for them? Think about departmental staff or the students’ association, and particularly any training.
9. What you can get out of it	What skills or experience might the role give someone?
10. What it can lead to	If someone does this job successfully and enjoy it, what might they consider doing in future years?
11. Where to find further information	Which individual or website should someone go to, to find out more about the post and to put themselves forward?

Question 6 in the above table is a particularly important one in defining the role. There are two main options:

1. **Election** – the post is democratically elected, and all students within each department are entitled to stand and vote for their departmental representative post. Normally, the positions will form a part of the democratic structures of the students’ association too.
2. **Appointment** – managed by either the institution or students’ association (or both), the job is treated somewhat like an internship, with students putting themselves forward for interview, with a panel of staff and senior student officers deciding who should get the job

Examples of both exist across Scotland’s universities and colleges, and there are advantages and disadvantages to both options.

Using the following table, add to or amend the following list of advantages of election and appointment, and think about which of these two options is more persuasive to you.

Advantages of election	Advantages of appointment
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Democratic legitimacy 2. Benefit of raised profile 3. Can fit into democratic structure of students’ association 4. Can be seen as truly independent of the institution and on the students’ side 5. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can appoint purely on merit 2. Ensures high standard of quality in the post-holders 3. Through joint ownership, can symbolise the partnership approach to quality between the institution and students’ association 4.

Departmental council

A departmental student council can be created within each of an institution's departments, allowing students to look at the learning experience from the particular perspective of their common subject area.

There are a number of different forms this council could take.

Look at the following pairs of statements that relate to different aspects of a departmental council. Decide as a group which statement you prefer, or ideally write a new one that reflects the views of the group.

From your statements, you will then have a clear idea as to how you think your departmental councils should work.

Formal or informal?	
<p>The departmental council takes place in a meeting room and is formally minuted so that there is a clear record of what's been discussed and what action points have been agreed. Papers are called for and circulated in advance so people can prepare for the meeting thoroughly. There is a chair elected at the first meeting of each academic year.</p>	<p>The departmental council meets in a common room or social space, with lunch or light snacks provided. Although there is one person to facilitate the meeting, conversation tends to be relaxed with no real structure to the deliberations other than the issues brought forward on the day by those who turn up.</p>
<p>Your view:</p>	

Staff-led or student-led?	
<p>The chair and minute clerk of the departmental council are members of staff. This spares students the responsibility and means that continuity is provided in the way the council operates.</p>	<p>The departmental council's chair is the departmental representative or another senior student officer, and the minute clerk is another class rep. It's the students' meeting so they alone are responsible for its conduct and success.</p>
<p>Your view:</p>	

Reactive or proactive?	
<p>The departmental council is a useful “focus group” for the teaching staff and management in the department to get a snapshot of what reps think of key issues. Sometimes group work is used to allow reps to think deeply about the issues the staff want to ask them about. Ultimately, though, the real decision-making power lies in the course and departmental committees, and this is only a sounding board.</p>	<p>Class reps have not only a right but a responsibility to steer the agenda of the departmental council. They’re not just there to pass comment on issues the staff ask them about, but to get the staff to pass comment on issues and suggestions they as students want to raise. Decisions that come out of the meetings inform the agenda and priorities of other formal committees and the school’s operational plan.</p>
<p>Your view:</p>	

Issue-led or themed?	
<p>Departmental council agendas are shaped purely by the issues that are raised by those attending. That means that meetings are very responsive and could end up discussing a whole range of issues all at once, time-permitting, that can’t be predicted beforehand.</p>	<p>Departmental council meetings are themed – so each meeting explores only one particular topic in depth, for instance the library and IT; the curriculum and timetabling; assessment, and so on. Relevant staff make introductory presentations to spark debate.</p>
<p>Your view:</p>	

Student-led or a partnership?	
<p>The departmental council is all about the class reps – they must have the space and freedom to talk about what they want. A very small number of staff are there only to answer specific questions, and only at the invitation of the students.</p>	<p>The departmental council exists to foster partnership. Therefore a wide range of management, teaching and administrative staff attend, so that reps can learn more about their work, and can inform lots of staff at once about student views.</p>
<p>Your view:</p>	

Limited or inclusive?	
<p>The departmental council is for class reps and the departmental representative to share their views with each other and with staff, and attendance is in the reps' job descriptions. No other students need (or are expected) to attend.</p>	<p>The departmental council is for anyone. All students have valid views and it doesn't even matter whether the class reps turn up – just as long as there are plenty students there and the discussions are informative and engaging.</p>
<p>Your view:</p>	

Frequent or infrequent?	
<p>The departmental council should meet at least monthly. It is important for there to be regular exchange about the learning experience in the department, and it helps everyone to get to know each other and build good relationships.</p>	<p>The departmental council only needs to meet once a term. That way there is less time commitment, and discussions can be deep and rich. In any case, course committees exist besides this, so it's important not to overload students.</p>
<p>Your view:</p>	

Uniform or flexible?	
<p>The departmental council should have a single model across the institution. It is important to get a consistent and comparable quality of student views from across the institution.</p>	<p>Each department has its own culture and dynamic, so should run its council however it chooses. There should even be devolved choice as to whether a department ought to have one at all.</p>
<p>Your view:</p>	

Training

Once departmental representatives are in post, training and support is vital to ensure they are clear about their roles and the sources of help that are available to them.

There are three sources of training and support to consider:

1. sparqs' Senior Representative Training.
2. Embedded training delivered by the institution or students' association.
3. More informal support from a variety of local sources.

sparqs Senior Rep Training

sparqs provides a wide variety of training for student representatives, including Senior Rep Training which is aimed at those with responsibilities above those of class reps such as departmental representatives. This training explores the issues around representation and quality more deeply and looks at how to proactively research the student opinion and make change within your institution.

You can find the materials for this training on the sparqs website, and you should contact sparqs if you would like to find out more about how this training can be delivered to your departmental representatives.

Embedded training

sparqs works with institutions and students' associations who, rather than receiving training directly from sparqs, wish to develop their own materials. sparqs can support this process by:

- Providing support and guidance to staff members who would be providing this training.
- Developing materials that draw on the expertise of sparqs but are adapted for each institution or department's local structures and needs.
- Developing an in-house student training team, which can be used to deliver all training to student representatives, not just departmental representatives. You may wish to consider what overlap there may be, for instance through departmental representatives themselves having training responsibilities.
- Producing handbooks specifically for departmental reps¹.

Informal support

There are a variety of staff and student officers who would work with departmental representatives, and these individuals will play a key role in providing ongoing support and advice to them. They may include:

¹ See appendix 2.

1. The Vice-Principal or other senior manager with responsibility for learning and teaching.
2. The head of quality.
3. The head of department or departmental director for learning and teaching.
4. The chair and clerk of major departmental or institutional committees that the departmental rep will sit on.
5. The students' association senior officer for learning and teaching.
6. The students' association staff member for learning and teaching.

Think about how training can be delivered to your departmental representatives, and other related issues such as how the training is promoted and the best time for delivering it. Invite sparqs to your institution if you wish to talk these options through in depth.

Whatever option you choose for training, meeting key staff and students (see informal support above) will be very important for departmental reps – not just at the start of their term of office but also perhaps through regular support meetings. Which staff or students are best placed to provide this?

Examples of department-specific support to representatives can be found in the appendices.²

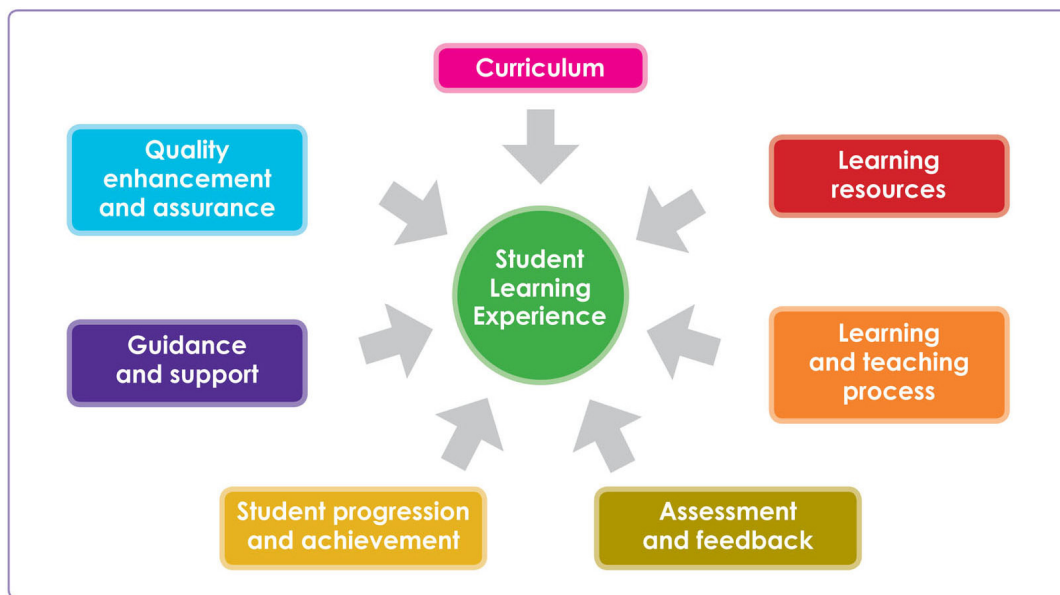
² See appendices 3 and 4.

Impact

What will departmental representative structures actually do? What issues relating to the learning experience will they explore, and what impact will they make?

The Student Learning Experience

A key tool in sparqs' training for student reps is the Student Learning Experience (SLE) diagram, below.



The Student Learning Experience is a way of breaking down the very general concept of the experience of learning into more tangible bite-size chunks. Most of the elements will be self-explanatory, though “Quality enhancement and assurance” can be seen as something of a concluding element, through which student reps can ask how students feel they are engaged in quality and whether they see their views actually making an impact in terms of changes that are made.

By asking targeted questions about each of these specific areas, student reps will find themselves gaining much richer and more useful perspectives from their peers than broad, open-ended questions about whether there are any issues or problems.

As a conduit between the frontline of the learning experience and the strategic decision-making level, departmental representatives are key in conveying student views on the learning experience.

Consider the following questions, using the table below for notes:

- **How much student engagement is there in each element of the Student Learning Experience?**
- **How does that engagement best come about?**

- **What impact does that discussion have? Can you think of specific examples where the learning experience has changed as a result of student input?**

SLE element	How much student engagement?	How does it best come about?	What impact does it have?
Curriculum			
Learning resources			
Learning and teaching process			
Assessment and feedback			
Student progression and achievement			
Guidance and support			
Quality enhancement and assurance			

Reviews

Departmental representatives often have a key role to play in reviews, for instance by coordinating research into the learning experience that can be presented to internal or external reviews. In universities, where periodic internal reviews take place, departmental representatives are often the student members for review teams.

Consider how you can use departmental representatives in the internal review process, either as:

- **Reviewers – by acting as a pool of student reviewers, departmental representatives can be appointed to internal review panels for departments other than their own.**
- **Reviewees – when their department prepares to undergo internal review, departmental representatives can work key staff to research and document student views of the learning experience and identify the most effective tools of student engagement within the department**

SLEEC

Another tool for student representatives to think about the issues they are involved in is the Student Learning Enhancement and Engagement Campaign (SLEEC). Run by NUS Scotland with support from sparqs, this campaign is a series of meetings and toolkits that can be used to explore student perceptions of various elements of the learning experience. More information is on the NUS website at <http://www.nus.org.uk/en/campaigns/campaigns-in-scotland/learning-and-teaching-campaigns-page/sleec/>

Engaging staff

Student reps are often only as effective as the relationships they have with staff. The way that staff perceive and work with departmental representation structures is crucial to their success. Whether a course leader being willing to chat informally with reps about issues students have been raising, or a committee chair sitting down with a student member before the meeting to run through the key points of the agenda, the actions of staff can make a huge difference.

There are a number of things that can be explored in raising staff awareness of representation at the departmental level.

sparqs staff workshop

To complement its training for student representatives, sparqs offers a workshop for staff on engaging students in the quality of learning and teaching, which can play a vital part in institutional professional development programmes. It covers a variety of discussion points around tools of feedback and the role of class reps. However it can be adapted to explore representation at the departmental level, if required, and can generate discussion and awareness among staff of how to best support and draw on the perspectives of student reps. It may be useful for the workshop to be delivered to departmental-specific groups of staff.

The workshop is best delivered in conjunction with a short presentation from the students' association about its work and structures.

For more information, visit the sparqs website or call the sparqs office.

Teaching qualifications

A number of institutions will offer professional qualifications to academic staff, such as postgraduate certificates in education or academic practice, or the Teaching Qualification in Further Education.

If your institution offers courses like these, it might be worth considering how they can support staff to better engage and make use of representatives, particularly at the departmental level.

Assessing impact

It is important for an institution to know how effective departmental representative structures are, so that good practice can be shared across the institution and beyond. It can also help identify areas for development.

There are a number of questions through which staff can be encouraged to reflect on the effectiveness of departmental representative structures.

- 1. What examples are there of changes in learning and teaching in the department that have come about only as a result of student suggestions? Compiling a list could be a great way of celebrating successes, encouraging students to consider becoming reps, or of evidencing student engagement for internal review purposes.**
- 2. Revisit the table at the end of toolkit 1. To what extent has the role students have played increased?**
- 3. Undertake a survey of representatives in your department and ask staff to think about the implications of the results. What would improve reps' experience or make the role more worthwhile? How easy do they find it to make an impact on the learning experience? What do they feel have been their successes?**
- 4. How can staff use national academic networks, for instance through Scotland's Colleges or the Higher Education Academy, to share and explore methods of student engagement within their subject area?**

Incentives

As with any representative role, departmental reps will require some sort of incentive to do the job. You may already have considered this as part of the opportunity profile (toolkit 2).

There are a number of ways of incentivising a departmental rep position. Using the table below, add to the lists of advantages and disadvantages of the following types of incentives. Add any other types of incentives if you can think of them.

Type of incentive	Advantages	Disadvantages
Expenses – the provision of lunch at meetings or reimbursement of travel costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A simple, old-fashioned way of saying “thank you” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible issues of parity across institution • Budget implications
Certification – the provision of a certificate for undertaking the role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple, cheap acknowledgement of the value of the role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No measure of impact • Little recognition of certificate by prospective employers
Personal development – reflecting upon experiences, eg through a log or PDP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on success or otherwise of individual experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potentially resource-intensive for both rep and assessor
Competition – allowing staff or students to nominate a “departmental rep of the year”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can promote certain ideal behaviours • Can be evaluative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only recognises an elite • Depends on balanced awareness across institution
Payment or gifts – a small honorarium given to each representative, or a gift such as branded clothing or special discounts or access to SA or institutional facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognises seniority and time commitment compared to a course rep post • Can raise visibility and accountability of post 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget implications for institutions, tax implications for students • May make post attractive mainly for monetary reward
Accreditation – the provision of a course, eg through SQA or internal module, relating to the activities of the post	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognises the value of the role to the individual’s learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time commitment

Appendices

The following examples of good practice exist as appendices to this toolkit. Appendices 1-4 can be downloaded along with the toolkit from the sparqs website, and 5 and 6 found via the links below.

1. Diagram of representation within Heriot Watt University's School of Built Environment
2. Borders College Faculty Council Chair handbook and Council remit
3. University of Dundee School of Humanities School President remit
4. Diagram of representation within the University of Dundee's School of Humanities
5. Heriot Watt University's school officers' blog
(<http://schoolofficers.wordpress.com/>)
6. DU School President resource
(<http://www.dundee.ac.uk/qaf/studentrepresentationschoolpresident.htm>)

About sparqs

sparqs aims to support the engagement of students in shaping the quality of the learning experience within Scotland's colleges and universities.

We deliver our work through four main areas:

- **Training and support** – a variety of programmes that equip student representatives, staff and others with the skills and knowledge required to successfully promote student engagement
- **Events** – opportunities for staff and students to gather nationally to learn about key developments in student engagement and explore innovative work from around Scotland
- **Sharing Practice** – research and other sector-level activity to identify, develop and highlight key elements of effective student engagement
- **Consultancy** – working individually and collaboratively with institutions and students' associations on their priorities for enhancing student engagement in their quality activities

In 2010, as a result of demand from the sector, sparqs introduced a thematic approach to its consultancy work. Through this it would not only assist individual institutions and students' associations with their specific priorities on student engagement, but would also facilitate collaboration between them where those priorities were shared.

The first round of themes included departmental representation, recognised as an emerging priority for development by a number of universities and colleges. This toolkit is the main outcome of this theme.

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