

## **Institutional Approaches to Self-Evaluation – the student engagement dimension**

### **Introduction**

In 2012-13, QAA Scotland commissioned the **Institutional approaches to self-evaluation (IASE)** project. The project was undertaken on QAA Scotland's behalf by Prof Paddy Maher. It explored and reported on the ways in which Scotland's university sector undertook four types of self-evaluation (listed later in this report).

The report, which was published in late 2013, is available to read [on the QAA's website](#), and highlights a number of successes and challenges in self-evaluation.

Within the IASE report, however, are a number of interesting observations about the development of student engagement in self-evaluation. Indeed, one of the six headline changes that the report highlights from over the past ten years is, unsurprisingly, the increase in student engagement in review and evaluation. The report further recommends a number of areas where there is evidence of demand for further work and collaboration, including the closing of the feedback loop and engagement of stakeholders, including students, in the preparation for reviews.

This short commentary from sparqs highlights those identified changes in student engagement. It does so in two parts:

Firstly, it explores the changes and enhancements the IASE report found related to student engagement in each of four types of self-evaluation. Secondly, it looks at the IASE report's general observations on student engagement across the range of self-evaluation activity.

### **Part 1: Changes in self-evaluation**

The report looked in detail at four types of self-evaluation activity, and identified developments within each.

Firstly, within **annual monitoring** processes, a number of characteristics are identified, including:

- A shift from audit-style paper trails to the use of documents simply to enable meaningful conversations. Such a shift will obviously aid all types of discussions, ensuring that students can easily see the point of reviews and the impact they are intended to have.
- Student membership of course committees is reported as "ubiquitous" (albeit that these structures "may vary in effectiveness").
- Training for course reps is found to be provided across the country. This includes' sparqs' own [course rep training](#) as well as, increasingly, a [facilitative model that "trains the trainer"](#) within individual universities.
- There is still a role for hard data. For instance, there is a reported increase in the use of external reference points, such as the National Student Survey (NSS), the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) and Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), the International Student Barometer (ISB) and leavers' destination data.
- There has been improvement in "closing the loop" on feedback by explaining to students what impact their views have had. As the report states:

“Several respondents stressed the value of their 'You Said, We Did' communications to students. A managed approach to student feedback is exemplified by one institution with a long history of promoting student engagement and includes extensive evaluation and follow-up action on external student surveys, in particular the NSS. There is a co-ordinated, common approach across the institution in which key themes are drawn out and analysed, and which then inform the management of performance indicators, while at school level the 'You Said, We Did' approach is prevalent and staff-student liaison committees take a more proactive approach to feedback.”

Secondly, on **institution-led quality reviews**, students are now an inherent part of this process, as members of review teams and increasingly as contributors to the preparation for a review within a subject area. The report found:

- There were positive reports from staff of student reviewers, as well as from student reviewers themselves of what they learned from the experience.
- Student reviewers were being provided with “systematic support and training”, something for which [sparqs provides resources](#).

Thirdly, students are strongly involved in the **preparation for ELIR**, for instance as members of the steering group leading the preparation, or in focus groups where evidence and opinion is gathered. Students trained to be ELIR reviewers elsewhere have also been used by their “home” university to comment on draft reflective analyses (RAs).

Indeed, sparqs has been involved on at least one occasion in engaging students with draft RAs, as [this case study from our Resource Library](#) illustrates.

Finally, increasingly engaging students in **transformational reviews of institutional processes** has also been a feature of the report’s findings. There are several examples mentioned in the report of students being engaged in major changes such as curriculum reform. sparqs’ 2013 report [Celebrating Student Engagement in the University Sector](#) (page 32) highlights just one example of this.

## **Part 2: General points**

The report also made a number of observations from its consultation about student engagement in general. Some of the key factors in the increase in student engagement are institutional commitment, training for representatives, and the role of paid students either as elected senior officers or as short-term staff in academic units.

Positives that were reported by contributors to the project’s survey included “enthusiastic participation” in reviews, better use of survey feedback and course committees, the development of student-led teaching awards, and the contribution of sparqs at an institutional level.

Challenges, too, were highlighted in the report, including concerns over “survey fatigue” and some low response rates, variation in the effectiveness of course committees, and engaging students from traditionally “hard to reach” groups.

The report helpfully highlights some obvious areas for action around feedback, such as “various aspects of student engagement including improving ways of getting feedback from students and closing feedback loops, and making better use of social media”.

It further reports that students have a key role to play in the evaluation and interpretation of feedback data. This raises questions, therefore, about students’ associations having the skills and capacity to explore the data (and indeed having access to it in the first place).

Meanwhile on areas such as internal review preparation, the report states that “a number of institutions indicated that they would welcome more opportunities to share practice across the sector.” This suggests, for instance, that teams facing institution-led review could receive help to engage students in their preparation, in the same way that support is provided for those preparing for institutional review.

### **Conclusions and actions**

The report concludes that there is a readiness among many institutions to learn and share practice on the development of student engagement. sparqs is in a strong position to support the sector by leading on a number of the reported challenges. Specifically:

- Institutions could make better use of sparqs key contacts and regular annual support visits to discuss, design and provide tailored support for staff and students around preparation for review.
- Continued work, led by sparqs, supporting students to engage, evaluate and analyse institutional data effectively.
- Planned work with institutions on “hard to reach” groups of students such as Post-Graduate Taught and Post-Graduate Research, part-time, distance and transitional students. The latter group is of particular interest in light of the new Enhancement Theme, with sparqs already working in partnership with ELRAH (The Edinburgh, Lothians, Fife and Borders Regional Articulation Hub), during Summer 2014, on the specific needs of students in transition from college to university.

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