

Planning for the Year Ahead

Joint meeting of JAG, NEON & SESN
7th May 2024



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Welcome

Eve Lewis, Director



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Your sparqs team



Eve Lewis,
Director

Gloria Laurini,
Development
Consultant

Justin Walker,
Development
Consultant

Chase Greenfield,
Development
Consultant

Megan Brown,
Senior
Development
Consultant

**Nicola Cameron, Ali
McDade & Sarah
Davidson,** Central
Support Team

Outline of the day



- 10:30** **Welcome**
- 10:45** **Setting the direction of travel**
- 11:15** **Key project areas: exploring next steps**
- 12:30** **Lunch**
- 13:30** **Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework: exploring next steps**
- 14:40** **Plans for the future**
- 15:00** **Close of day**

Setting the direction of travel

Megan Brown, Senior Development Consultant



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The context

- Sparqs' Institutional Visits (Oct 2024 – Feb 2025)
- Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework



Sparqs Institutional Visits: October 2024 – February 2025



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Purpose of the visits

- To discuss sparqs' two key sector resources, the [Student Learning Experience model](#) and [Scotland's Ambition for Student Partnership](#), and to capture the ways in which these resources are being used in the sector.
- To gather information on the key topics institutions and students' associations are working on this year.
- To shape sparqs' ongoing support for institutions and students' associations.

Themes identified across 3 areas:



- Key topics related to the **student learning experience**.
- Key topics related to **students' associations**.
- Uses of the Student Learning Experience model and Scotland's Ambition for Student Partnership.

Key themes across the Student Learning Experience

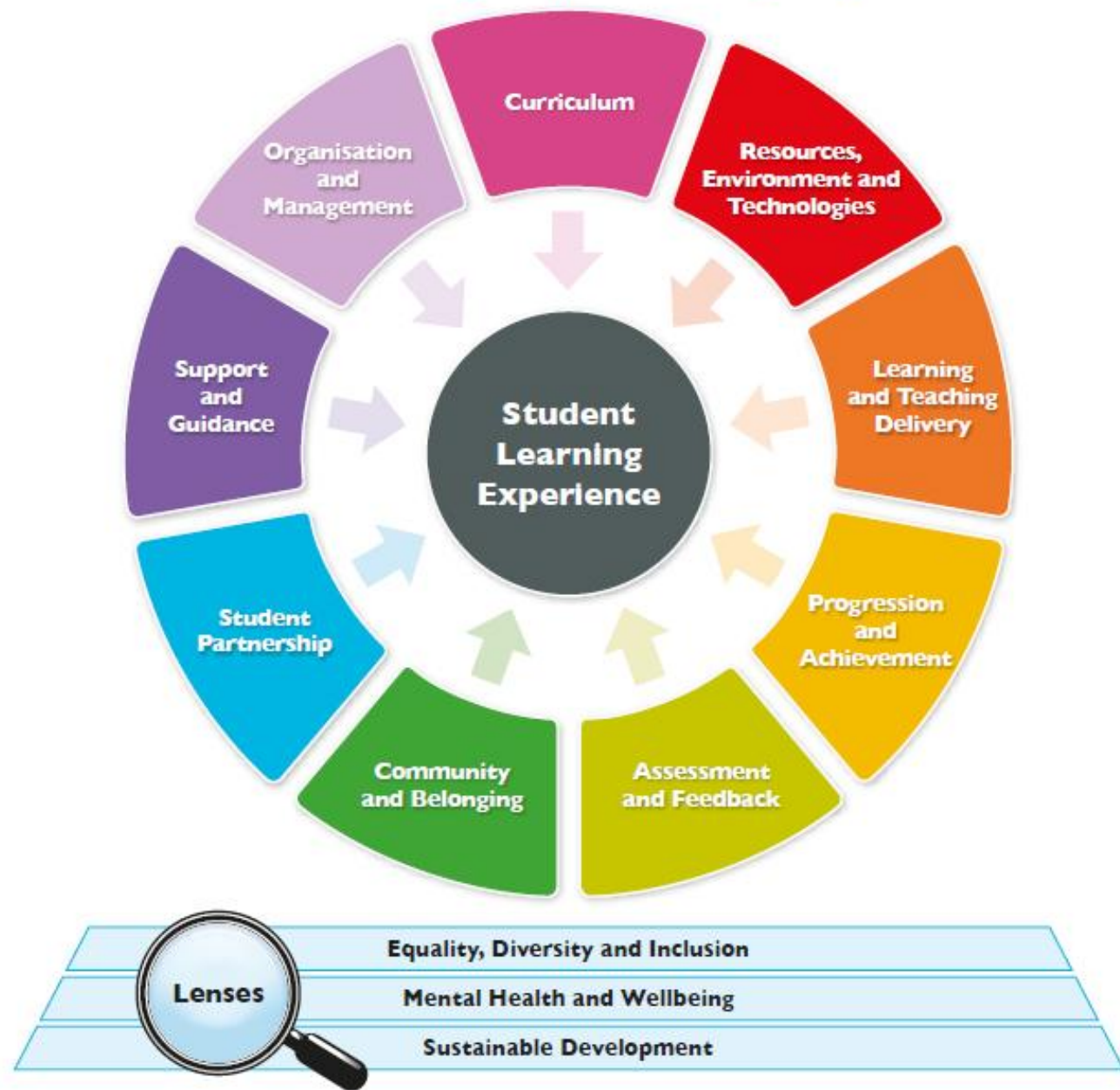


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Student Learning Experience (SLE) model



Curriculum



- Institutions exploring how students can be more involved in **course and programme design** and development.
- **Credit weighting** and how the expectations of the amount of hours students should commit to a course matches up with the reality.

Resources, Environment and Technologies



- The use of **Generative AI**.
 - Supporting students and staff to use AI successfully, including the implementation of clear **guidance** on its use and subsequent **training**.
 - Increase in **academic misconduct cases** related to AI.
 - Approaches to **assessment** in the context of AI, including the merits of the use of authentic assessments vs exam based, invigilated exams.
 - Student concern about being **wrongly accused** of using AI and the risk of false positives in the use of technology.
 - **Accessibility** issues related to AI, including financial barriers to certain tools and the use of AI in some students' learning support plans.
- **Study and social spaces**. Students want more spaces on campus to study and to socialise.

Learning and Teaching Delivery



- **Online vs In-Person Learning.** Subthemes included:
 - Lack of a shared understanding from students and staff of the **meaning of wording** related to learning and teaching delivery e.g. hybrid.
 - Some students coming to the institution without a **prior understanding** of whether their teaching will be delivered online or in-person.
 - Some students still don't like having **cameras on** and this is a challenge for engagement.
 - Some students are unhappy with lectures that are delivered in-person but do not involve **interaction** so could have been accessed from home.
- Several institutions highlighted challenges with **student behaviour** in the classroom.

Progression and Achievement



- Some students are struggling with the **enrolment** process, in particular on more complicated matters related to accessing of funding and a broader understanding of finance.
- A feeling at some institutions that we are telling students too much as part of **induction** and that there is a need to streamline this.
- Several institutions were particularly focused on **retention** and the challenge of keeping students on courses. Institutions are exploring the reasons why students don't complete their courses, which can sometimes be a challenge to decipher when there is incomplete **data** about where students are going next and why they aren't progressing within their course.

Assessment and Feedback



- **Timing** and **communication** of assessments can sometimes cause challenges for students, as well as the **number** of assessments students are expected to complete within a period of time.
- **Academic integrity** issues, including new challenges related to AI. Questions around how policies related to academic integrity and misconduct can be more clearly and simply communicated to students.
- An increase in students coming forward with **mitigating circumstances** and with **extension requests**. Several institutions are evaluating their policies and in many cases are considering how processes can be made more compassionate and understanding for students.

Community and Belonging



- Challenges of accessing and supporting a sense of community across the whole institution when the student body is so **diverse** and students' circumstances are so different to one another.
- Particular challenges of improving community and belonging in **rural** locations.
- Several students' associations struggle to run events to increase a sense of community and belonging due to a lack of available **social space**.

Student Partnership



- **Closing the feedback loop** can be a challenge. In some cases, students are reporting that they don't know what happens to their feedback once they've given it.
- Some feedback doesn't appear to lead to **actions**. Sometimes this is because issues don't have a clear place to be sent, so there is no accountability for change.
- Interest in the future of **national student surveys** and how separate surveys such as NSS and SSES will relate to each other in the new tertiary system.
- Interest in how the students' association can collate its **own evidence and data** and how it can standardise the collection of evidence and data from reps across the institution to make it easier to analyse centrally.

Support and Guidance (Part 1)



- A major theme across the institutional visits was the **cost of living crisis**. Several connected subthemes emerged:
 - More students need to **work** alongside their studies, sometimes taking on full-time jobs alongside their course.
 - Impact on **retention**: some students are leaving for 'poor attendance', but in reality this may be due to financial reasons.
 - Many institutions and students' associations are running **food banks** and other welfare-related projects such as emergency food parcels, free soup, etc.
 - **Digital exclusion**, with some students unable to access key parts of the course such as lecture recordings due to not having access to digital resources.
- **Mental health and anxiety issues** are prevalent.

Support and Guidance (Part 2)



- A significant increase in students with **additional needs for learning**.
Subthemes included:
 - A significant increase in students who require **Personal Learning Plans**.
 - An increasing number of students are coming from school, or returning to study as an adult, and not receiving a **diagnosis** of a disability or health condition until they get to the institution.
 - Some students not **disclosing** additional needs until midway through the year.
 - Conversations about how to make learning and teaching more **inclusive** for everyone and implementing **universal design for learning**.

Organisation and Management



- Many institutions reported challenges with **communication**. This is made harder because students seem less likely to use email than in previous cohorts.
- Several institutions are coming to the end of Learning and Teaching Strategies and Student Engagement Strategies, or equivalent. There is a lot of activity taking place to develop new iterations of **strategies** and students are key stakeholders in this work.
- There are challenges with **transport** at some institutions, particularly those in more **rural** areas.

Three cross-cutting themes



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Student engagement



- Within **learning & teaching**, issues included students **not attending classes**, particularly lectures, and less students taking part in feedback activities.
- **Class rep engagement** has been challenging for several students' associations, with reports of diminishing attendance at class rep conferences; a lack of students taking part in class rep drop-in sessions; and some class reps not undertaking the fundamental duties of their role.

International student experience



- There are reports of a disproportionate number of international students who are being investigated for **academic misconduct**, particularly postgraduates.
- Some international students may be facing additional challenges such as immigration restrictions, limits to how many hours a week they can work, and managing the needs of their family who may have moved with them to Scotland. There is a need to ensure that international students are **supported** and feel **welcome**.
- Some international students have English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL). How can institutions and students' associations most effectively support **ESOL** students to engage in institutional life?

Challenging financial context of colleges and universities



- Universities and colleges are operating in a challenging **funding** environment. Several institutions discussed the potential impact of restructuring, courses closing and staffing cuts on the student experience.
- Students' associations also have a challenging role to play in **strategic conversations** about the future of learning, teaching and student services in this context.

Key students' association themes



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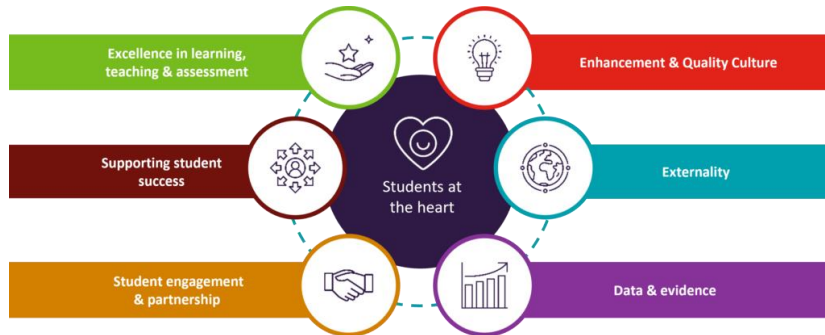
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Limited Resources

- Some students' associations have **little or no dedicated staffing**.
- Officers are expected to attend a significant number of **committees**. Some students' associations are exploring how to support other students (who are non-officers) to share committee responsibilities.
- In some institutions, student officer roles are only **part-time**. However, sometimes expectations are set as if they are working full-time.



Engaging with the TQEF



- Concerns around **capacity to engage with the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF)**, particularly those students' associations with little or no dedicated staffing.
- Consideration being given to how to **equip student officers** to engage in TQEF & how best to **balance** the requirements of TQEF alongside the rest of an **officer's** workload.
- There is a desire for future support for the **Lead Student Rep** role in **TQER**.

Student Rep Systems



- Changes to **student officer structures**. This includes considerations related to remits of the officers; full-time vs part-time roles; and decisions related to how the sabbatical officers roles map to key responsibilities within TQEF.
- Changes to **course rep systems** e.g. move from course/module level representatives to year/department/curriculum area level.
- Several students' associations have developed, or are in the process of developing, **new tiers of representation** such as Lead Reps.
- Many institutions are currently in conversation about **restructuring** or have recently restructured. Students' associations therefore need to adapt their rep structures to map to the new structure.

Rep System Logistics



- It can be a challenge for the students' associations to get all of the **names and contact details of the reps**, often because there is not one consistent approach across the institution.
- A desire to implement a **system to track key issues** coming out of student-staff committees and how they are actioned.
- Increasingly challenging to get reps to attend **training**.

Working with institutional staff



- Some **newer staff** are less familiar with course reps and their role within the process.
- There can be **inconsistency of engagement** with course reps across the staff body. Some staff are very engaged while others may have no engagement at all.
- Relationships with staff on the **operational side** of the institution are sometimes not so well developed, so issues related to these matters, such as estates issues, are often not reaching the students' association until after the fact.

Representing Diverse Student Groups and Levels of Study



- **Online students**
- **Evening students**
- **Postgraduate Research students**
- **Transnational education students**



Reward and Recognition

- Some students' associations have introduced reward and recognition **schemes** where students can gain more rewards the more activities they undertake (e.g. attending training, attending rep meetings etc).
- Some students' associations are exploring how to connect the rep role to **external volunteering validation schemes** such as the Saltire Awards.
- Several students' associations are particularly interested in recognising **skills** gained through the course rep role.



Key Project Areas: exploring next steps



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Project Areas:

- Reward and Recognition for Student Reps - **Chase**
- Using Data and Evidence Effectively - **Justin**
- Strategic Approaches to Student Partnership - **Eve**
- Course Rep Training Logistics - **Nicola**
- Support for Course Rep Systems - **Gloria**
- Student Behaviour – **Meg**

3 20-minute sessions

Lunch: 12.30 – 13.30



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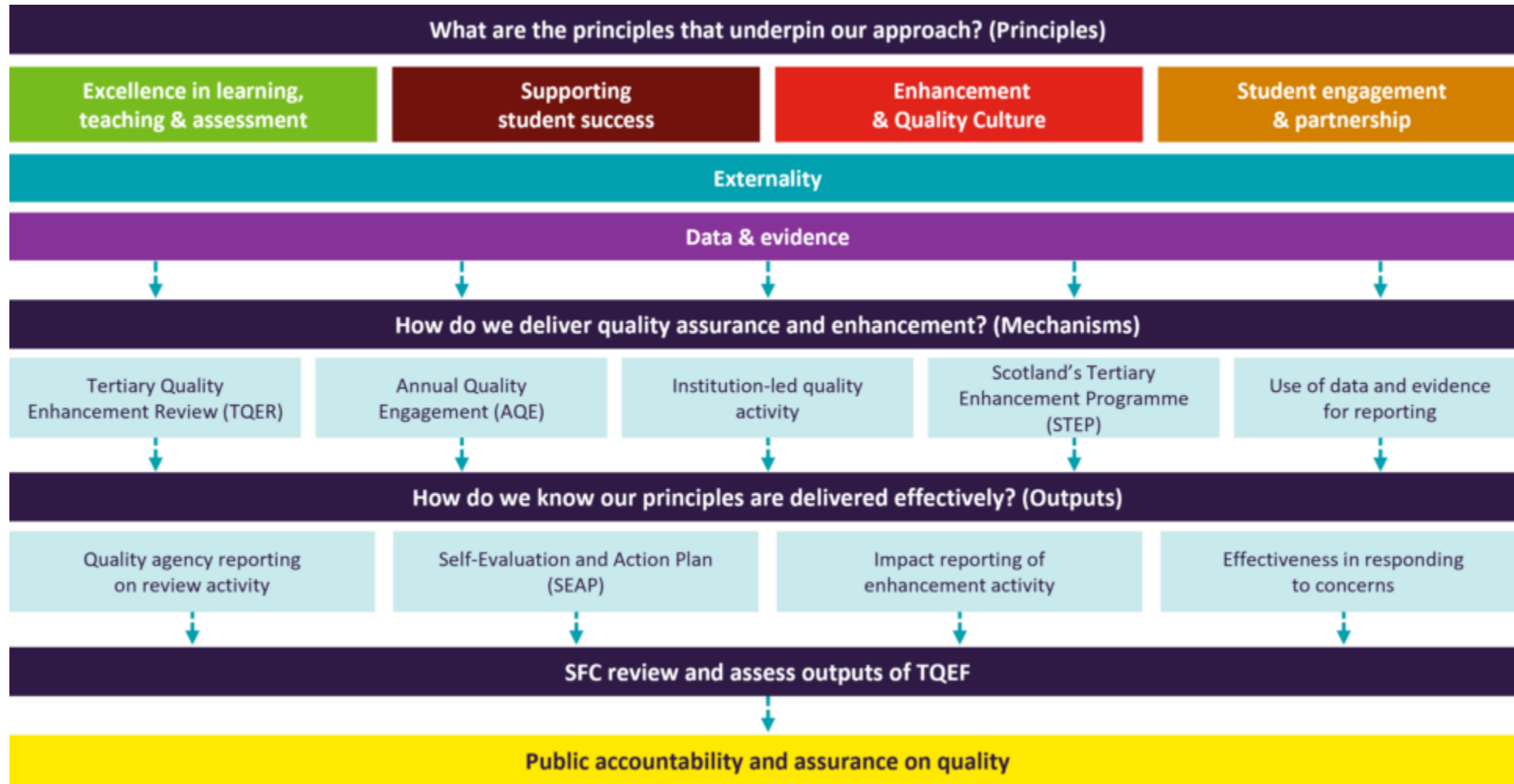
Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework – exploring next steps



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Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review (TQER)



- We worked with QAA on the development of **TQER guidance** for the sector.
- Over 2024/25, sparqs has worked with Forth Valley College and St Andrews to support student engagement in their TQER process.
- **Reviewer Training** for student and staff reviewers.
- By July 2025, sparqs will develop a **practical guide** to TQER aimed at student officers and students' association staff.
- sparqs is currently working with QAA Scotland on the development of a programme of **support and training for Lead Student Reps** for the remaining years of the TQER cycle.

Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP)



- sparqs is a member of all 3 levels of **STEP governance** through the STEP Steering Group, Topic Leadership Group and Network.
- Project lead for “**Strategies to Support Student Engagement and Partnership for Time-Poor and Cash-Poor Students**”.
- Sparqs delivered a session for STEP Network members on how to develop a **student engagement strategy** as part of project proposals.

Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP)

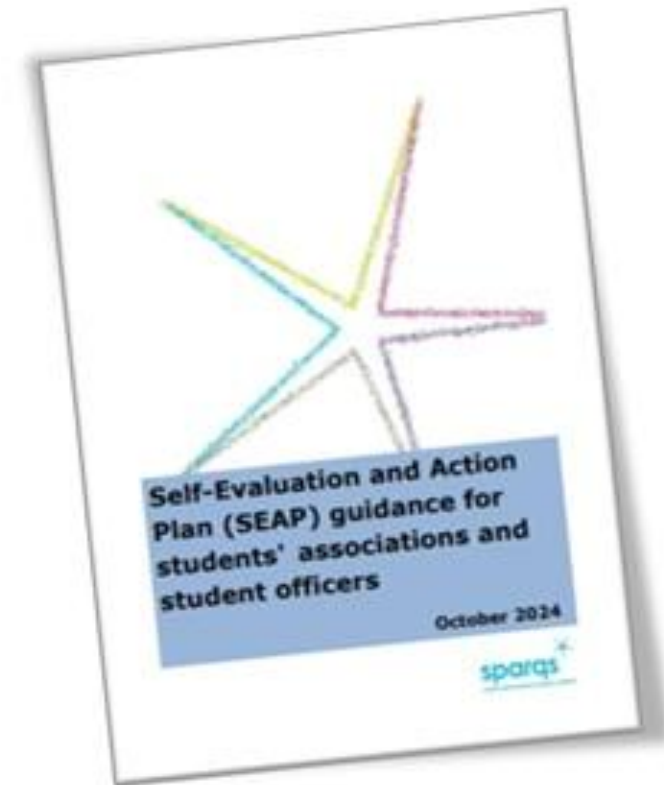


- sparqs and QAA Scotland ran a session for institutional **STEP student leads** to gain an understanding of how their involvement in STEP was going so far. Following this session, sparqs developed some suggested actions for institutions and sector agencies as we begin to move into the second year of STEP.
- sparqs will work with QAA Scotland and CDN to implement a **programme of support for institutional STEP Student Leads** for 2025/26.
- By summer 2025, sparqs will create a **practical guide for STEP**, aimed at student officers and students' association staff.

Self-Evaluation & Action Plan (SEAP)



- In October 2024, sparqs published [SEAP \(Self-Evaluation and Action Plan\) Guidance](#) for students' associations and student officers.
- The guidance includes an overview of the SEAP process; some ideas of how students can be involved in the development of the SEAP; and suggested actions for students' associations.
- sparqs plans to make a small update to this guidance for the 2025/26 academic year. This may include the addition of case studies which capture some of the existing practice of student engagement in SEAPs from 2024/25.



Activity:

- We've put some discussion questions on your table.
- Each table has a member of sparqs staff who will facilitate the conversation.
- These discussions will help us shape sparqs' ongoing support for TQEF.

Plans for the future



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Thank you to those who are leaving us



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And finally..... JAG (Joint Advisory Group) is changing its name...



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To TAG! (Tertiary Advisory Group)



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Thank you for joining us!

The AGM will start at 3.30pm.



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