

# ANNUAL REPORT 2011



Last year we engaged at least once with every one of the universities and colleges across Scotland that we are funded to work with. Many of our institutions have engaged with a range of activities and through several participants.

We have had 603 attendances at formal events and 2512 students attend Course Rep Training, making a total of 3115 attendances. These figures do not include interactions with people at working groups, consultancy visits or informal interactions.

But that's only the beginning of the story. For more information about the range of activities and successes of sparqs please read on...

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## Introduction by Professor Norman Sharp OBE

Effective student engagement is at the very heart of successful learning: it is a hallmark of a high quality education experience. Initiatives in supporting the further development of student engagement in the higher education and college sectors in Scotland are envied internationally. At the very heart of these initiatives lies sparqs.

Since taking the Chair of the sparqs Steering Committee in summer 2011, I have been impressed by the various journeys our colleges and universities have undertaken in further developing partnership working with students. This is increasingly playing a major role in the development of our students as successful, confident, independent, and lifelong learners. The role sparqs has played in reaching this point is pivotal, and the successes outlined in this report are indicative of the impact sparqs is making. This is a small team, operating with a small budget but having a big impact through extremely focused and strategic use of resources. From this very small resource base, the sparqs team adds significant value to our sectors, delivering services innovatively and, indeed, with passion.

Yet we face challenging times. Colleges and universities face unprecedented change and new demands. It is increasingly important

that our education resources are effectively and efficiently targeted to support effective learning. Now more than ever, securing dynamic and robust partnerships through engaging students fully in their learning is vital. Student engagement is now central, not only to underpinning a high quality learning experience, but in finding innovative solutions, driving enhancement and meeting future challenges.

In commending this report to you, I also express my confidence in the ability of the sparqs team to negotiate successfully the journey ahead as it continues to support students and staff in addressing these future challenges. As sparqs embarks on its strategic planning for the future, I am excited by the opportunities ahead. This is a reflective, dynamic organisation that has already achieved much. I am confident that, with the continuing support of all its partners, sparqs will continue to build on this success, and help to ensure that students can play their vital role in building a successful future for Scotland's colleges and universities.

Professor Norman Sharp OBE

Independent Chair of sparqs  
Steering Committee

## Introduction by Eve Lewis

I am pleased to present the achievements of sparqs over the last year.

Here you will see evidence of an agency delivering a range of highly valued and effective services, developing new and exciting approaches, and helping place students at the heart of developments as we work to meet future challenges.

We are proud to have worked with every one of our institutions this year. We have delivered more Course Rep Training and supported institutions to develop their own training, have run highly successful events and have developed valuable new resources. We have supported new initiatives such as Student Partnership Agreements, student engagement with the new QAA Enhancement Theme and the new college Community of Interest and have supported activities to ensure students shape their thinking and make a positive contribution to policy developments nationally and locally. Our research-informed Student Engagement Framework will develop as a way to underpin work across the sector.

We are confident our work helps students to make a positive difference to the experiences they have within our colleges and universities

and is helping Scotland achieve a reputation for putting students at the centre.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the sparqs team for their remarkable effort in these achievements. Pressures of funding have played strongly on our activities this year, yet we have grown as an organisation and delivered an impressive range of activities with significantly less resources. We would not have done so without their commitment and willingness to think differently. Thank you, team.

The students and staff in Scotland's colleges, universities and sector agencies do not simply support the concept of student engagement but actively participate in delivering it. From offers of free venues, to help with developing products, to support from members of our advisory groups and steering committee we are often overwhelmed by the support offered by you. In celebrating the successes we have had over the last year, we widely acknowledge the part all of you play in this and look forward to continuing to build on this as we develop our work to face new challenges.

Eve Lewis

Head of sparqs

## About sparqs

### What we do

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.

**sparqs**

You can find out more about our work in these four areas throughout this report.

### How we work

sparqs is managed on behalf of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) by the National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland, and our staff are based in Edinburgh (hosted by NUS Scotland) and Inverness (hosted by Inverness College). They include the Head of sparqs, four Development Advisors and a Central Support Team.

We take our strategic direction from a steering committee which contains membership

from all the major university and college sector agencies and includes student and independent members.

We are also guided by two advisory groups, one for each of the college and university sectors, composed of practitioners, student officers and students from institutions around Scotland. The chairs of both these groups also sit on our steering committee.



national union of students scotland



Scottish Funding Council  
Promoting further and higher education



## Supporting course reps

### sparqs Course Rep Training Scheme

Course reps are crucial to building effective student engagement. Empowering them is key to making sure students themselves can shape the way learning and teaching is delivered in our colleges and universities.

Ensuring the training and support we offer to reps is the best it can be is of great importance to us. We are proud of our record over the years in delivering training to reps that has a real impact on their ability to bring about change at a course level.

Last year was no exception to that. Our biggest training service – **Introductory Course Rep Training**, recently revised to align it with the steps a course rep would follow to gather student opinion, create a solution and take it to a committee meeting – had another highly successful year, with great feedback and satisfaction rates.

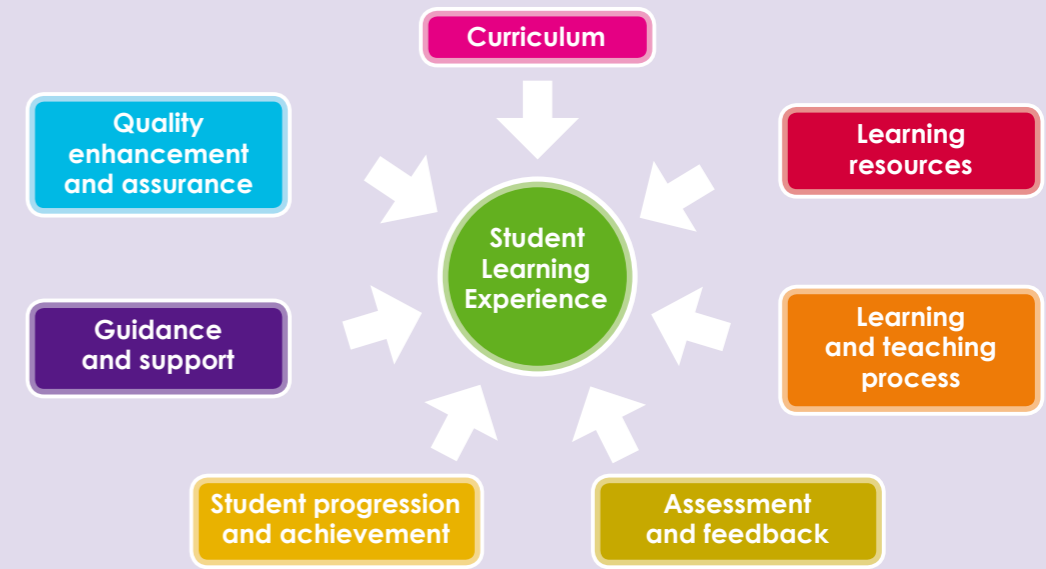
Despite activities that have seen more institutions delivering their own training supported by sparqs, early indications from this session indicate that demand and satisfaction continue to grow.

- In the academic year 2010/11 sparqs delivered 176 Course Rep Training sessions reaching over 2500 reps, a 14% increase on the previous year. As at mid-February we have delivered 146 sessions in 2011/12 with a further 20 to follow, well on the way to exceeding delivery this year.
- Evaluation of these sessions shows that 88% of participants find the training useful or very useful, and 96% of reps understand or fully understand their role compared to just 52% prior to the training.
- When asked what they would do differently as a result of the training many reps respond by telling us they feel more confident in their role and would therefore be more active in their role.
- Training is also often tailored by institutions who are able to provide relevant local context in addition to the sparqs materials. 13 institutions have taken up the opportunity to tailor their materials this year.

“One of the best things is that the trainers themselves are all students. The reps can relate to the trainers in a way that just wouldn’t be possible if it wasn’t the students doing the training. Using real life examples it shows the reps how to deal with various situations and issues as well as preparing them for the unexpected. The reps gain an understanding of what the role really entails and what their responsibilities will actually be. Without sparqs’ continued help and support the class rep system at Aberdeen College would be significantly poorer.”

– Lani Baird, President, Aberdeen College Students’ Association

The Student Learning Experience



## Associate Trainers (ATs)

The ability of students to take on demanding and sophisticated roles is nowhere more apparent than in the skills, knowledge and dedication of our team of student trainers. It is on these students, who deliver training right across Scotland, that much of our reputation relies.

The training they receive is intensive and has been fully revamped to make sure we can draw on their experience of being a student. We have concentrated on making sure ATs are able to fully respond to the learning and teaching issues course reps might raise in a training session and can support reps in being real agents of change.

This was partly achieved through the innovative 'Understanding the Student Learning Experience' session where the ATs got a chance to create their perfect learning experience in small groups and present it to others in a poster session. The resultant debate was great to see as many had different views on what 'perfect' meant. The session then moved on to building their learning experience using giant jenga, which you can see from the images on the front cover and inset. However, they were presented with a number of issues which reps face meaning that some elements had to be removed from the tower resulting in a crash.

The ATs then developed solutions to the issues, as all good reps do, which allowed them to build a bigger, stronger tower and therefore emphasised the role reps play in developing their own learning experience and those of their fellow classmates.

As ATs continue their experience with us they become an even more valuable resource, and frequently return to work in the role for a further year. They develop excellent training and facilitation skills but also become real advocates for the role of students within our institutions, whilst developing a breadth of knowledge about the real issues students care about. We are exploring more and more ways to utilise this resource but some examples of additional activities ATs have undertaken include:

- Training student governors from the college sector at our annual residential event.
- Facilitating a session for the Scottish Government on the Higher Education Green Paper 'Building a Smarter Future'.
- Supporting our international development work through delivery of Course Rep Training to Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology.



*"Being an AT is not a job - it is a privilege. We constantly meet inspiring people and this together with the huge diversity that each training session brings makes being an AT one of the best jobs around. As a result of the great support we receive from the sparqs team and the revamps in the training modules we are always fully equipped to deal with questions and different scenarios that emerge in the training sessions, which in turn fill us with confidence and allow us to grow as people and trainers continuously."*

*– Nicolene Holder, sparqs Associate Trainer*



- Supporting the delivery of Course Rep Training to students with additional support needs.
- Participating in ESU's QUEST project as attendees of both the Workshops and Research Visits.
- Supporting the delivery of Institutional-Led Subject Review Training.

### Supporting institutional Course Rep Training delivery

We are committed to providing high quality Course Rep Training directly to institutions and will continue to do so for institutions that need it. However, we also believe that there are many benefits to institutions developing the capacity to deliver that training in-house.

In advocating a move in this direction sparqs is creating new services to support institutions in developing their provision. Our aim is to

encourage institutions to develop training which meets local circumstances yet still continues to reach the high standards of Course Rep Training provision we have come to expect in Scotland.

The developments are dynamic; we are responding to demands from highly committed and experienced practitioners as well as providing support for staff just starting in a new role. We have introduced a number of new activities this year and expect these to continue to evolve. They are around three main areas:

#### I. Supporting staff to build the skills and support they need to deliver and develop their own in-house training, by:

- Delivering two Open College Network accredited **Train the Trainer courses**, in conjunction with NUS Scotland, to 26 delegates from 20 institutions.

*“The skills I developed in Train the Trainer have helped me to tailor the Introductory Student Rep Training much more to suit a variety of learner styles, using a wider range of training techniques.”*

– Carole Saunders, Quality Co-ordinator, Perth College UHI



- The development of our own Train the Trainer course accredited by the Scottish Qualifications Authority.
- Delivering a **Developing Your Course Rep Materials Day**, attended by 16 delegates from 14 institutions. We intend to make this an annual event for all staff with training responsibilities to review provision, share good practice and encourage innovative activities.

#### 2. Supporting institutions to run their own student training teams

This scheme allows institutions to build capacity for training beyond what sparqs could provide, allows institutions greater flexibility and helps them draw on the experience and expertise of their students. It builds on the success of the peer-led model employed by sparqs through its Associate Trainers. We have:

- Run a pilot scheme with University of Edinburgh Students' Association, University of Glasgow Students' Representative Council and University of Strathclyde Students' Association, through which we have trained 17 **Institutional Associate Trainers (IATs)** alongside the sparqs-employed ATs.



*“We were delighted to be able to participate in and help shape the IAT pilot. The ability to work together with sparqs to tailor the training to local needs, as well as to support and develop some of our own students to lead on the project here has been brilliant. I know the students involved are getting a lot out of their role, and the feedback from class reps shows how much they value being trained and supported by their peers. It’s been a great partnership all round, and I’d encourage other institutions to go for it!”*

– Sarah Purves, Representation Manager, Edinburgh University Students’ Association



- Helped institutions increase their training provision, with one institution increasing its number of reps trained by 39% during the first semester of the 2011/12 academic year.
- Encouraged those involved to use their team more widely in supporting course reps, e.g. University of Edinburgh Students’ Association are already conducting a Q&A drop-in with their trainers.
- Started evaluating the scheme with the view to rolling out to other institutions in future years.

### 3. Ensuring diversification of provision is captured and monitored at a national level. Through this we are:

- Investigating the concept of a national course rep database to help gather a national picture of Course Rep Training, support and activity.
- Developing a standard questionnaire with important key questions for national benchmarking.
- Developing a system of national accreditation for course reps.

## Supporting staff to engage students

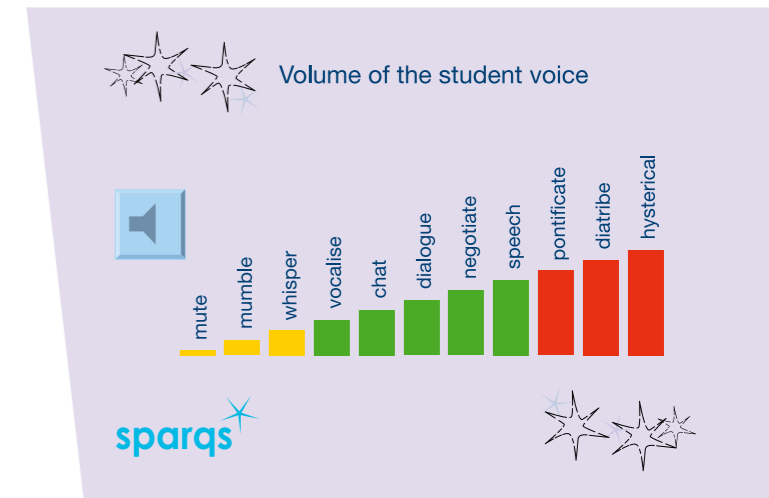
Just as it is important to support students to understand their role in shaping quality, it is also vital to help staff explore how they can best work with students and benefit from their perspectives as individuals, representatives and partners in learning.

In early 2011, sparqs redeveloped and re-launched its staff workshop, **Engaging Students in the Quality of Learning and Teaching**, following successful pilots at a number of colleges and universities.

The workshop presents an opportunity for staff involved in supporting the learning experience to reflect on, develop and celebrate their practice in student engagement.

The workshop is a two-hour session aimed at teaching, management, quality and support staff in colleges and universities. It is highly

participative, informal, and emphasises the sense of partnership and common goals in learning that exists between staff and students. It focuses on helping staff to identify their good practice and potential new activities in helping students to shape quality.



*“A great eye-opener for staff.”*

*“Well delivered with useful and good tasks.”*

*“Gave an opportunity to think about what we do and identify areas for improvement.”*

– Feedback from staff workshop evaluation forms





## Supporting College Student Governors

College boards of management are important bodies with wide responsibilities, but with students serving terms of one year, considerable support is required to ensure their impact is successful. sparqs works collaboratively with NUS Scotland, and with support from Scotland's Colleges and Education Scotland, to provide support for college student governors.

One main feature of the programme is a two-day residential in late October for student board members – providing the knowledge and skills required for the role, including an innovative simulation exercise set within a fictitious college scenario. This year's event was attended by around 40 students from across the college sector. Plans are afoot to extend the next event in 2012 by one day, widening the audience to include more training on broader students' association development and quality matters.

In addition, a pre-summer induction event was also held for the first time in June 2011 for those student board members elected prior to the summer holidays. It was attended by 8 participants from 6 colleges.

However, student engagement at college board level is not simply a matter of training the students themselves. Therefore we have produced a set of toolkits for college management, students' associations and boards to reflect on their practice in supporting engagement at this level. These are vital materials for developing a sound student engagement strategy at board level and for ensuring the highest quality of student input.

Following a pilot of the toolkits with 8 colleges, they were rolled out nationally in 2010/11 and were described as excellent by one clerk to a college board.



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What they say about the October residential...

*“It gave us hands on practical skills and experience in the workings of our role!”*

– Feedback from an evaluation form

*“Our Student President entered into the Board role much more confidently after attending. I think the residential really made a difference in many ways.”*

– Clerk to a college board of management

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*“I think that Supporting College Student Governors is an absolutely amazing programme and massively important for all student governors, both new and returning. I've attended the training twice and have continued to develop as an officer, reinforcing my knowledge the second time around. The training provides you with all the knowledge and skills that you need to fulfil your role as a student governor and I think that it should be compulsory for everyone.”*

– Stacey Devine, President, Reid Kerr College Students' Association

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## Events supporting quality

The central role of students in the processes that assure and enhance quality in colleges and universities in Scotland is world leading. sparqs is constantly reviewing the support it gives to students and institutions to ensure that these processes give students confidence that their institutions are properly reviewed and that students are able to work fully with the processes to ensure the experience of being a student in any institution is the best it can be.

Support this year has included:

- **That's Quality!** – an introductory event for senior student officers and students' association staff in universities. It explored the quality framework, key national trends, and how to use the processes for change. The event was attended by 33 delegates from 17 institutions.
- **Getting Ready For Your College Review event and Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) briefing events** – attended by almost all institutions preparing for their external review.



- Training for students involved in university **Institutional-Led Subject Review training** – initially delivered centrally and now being developed into bespoke support for individual institutions.
- Input into training for college Student Team Members and ELIR student reviewers.
- Workshop for student members of institutional teams working on university Enhancement Themes.

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*“It can be quite daunting tackling education-quality fresh at first, but That's Quality eased me in and inspired me to be able to make a difference for Abertay students.”*

– William Mohieddeen, President, University of Abertay Dundee Students' Association

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*“The event ‘Getting ready for your college review’ was a well-attended and lively event that really assisted college presidents to engage fully with the college review. In particular, participants were given valuable advice in seeking out learner views prior to the review.”*

– Dr Jan Davidson, HM Inspector of Education, Education Scotland

*“We worked in partnership with sparqs to deliver training to our student panel members on the university's Periodic Subject Review. The training focused on development of the key skills students will need during the review. Feedback from the day was excellent and we valued sparqs' support in designing and delivering this piece of training.”*

– James Harrison, Vice President (Learning and Development), University of Glasgow Students' Representative Council

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## National Conference

The third sparqs bi-annual conference was held in March 2011 at Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh.

The purpose of the conference was to not only celebrate and share effective models of student engagement in the quality of learning and teaching, but also to explore how such practices impact on the student learning experience.

The conference was attended by almost 200 delegates from across the tertiary education sector, from both within Scotland and further afield. We were pleased to have such a wide variety of delegates including students, student representatives, staff at every level within colleges and universities, staff from students' associations and staff from sector agencies.

Plenary talks from Martin Fairbairn, SFC, and Professor Norman Sharp OBE, formerly of QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) Scotland, helped to set the scene and explore how Scotland's unique approach to student engagement was an internationally-recognised innovation. Over a dozen workshops allowed participants to find out more about different activities, with a wide variety of presenters from institutions, students' associations and sector agencies across Scotland and beyond.

Workshop topics ranged from engaging students in curriculum design to using large-scale institutional conferences to engage representatives; with others exploring how a variety of tools including blogs, accreditation and focus groups could be used to enhance students' engagement with quality. Other more theoretical, discursive workshops looked at the different approaches and dimensions to the concept of engagement that could help participants frame engagement strategies in their institutions.

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What participants said about the conference in the evaluation:

*“Inspiring range of workshops.”*

*“Very useful for increasing my understanding of the work being done in student engagement and also understanding the many dimensions of the concept.”*

*“Workshops were really interesting – I've learned about new things that we can implement in our institution.”*

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*“I attended the March 2011 sparqs conference with our Student Engagement Assistant, and between us we attended as many workshops as possible. These provided us with lots of great examples to take back to Shetland College to share and help build on and enhance our student engagement approaches. On our return to college we shared the Ladder of Engagement with all our programme teams, and each team is now working positively at implementing the various stages with their learners, as we continue to address our student engagement agenda.”*

*- Irene Peterson, Depute Director, Shetland College UHI*

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## Working across the sector

Scotland has made significant progress in developing the role of students in shaping our colleges and universities. sparqs continues to work with all parts of the sector to promote student engagement and look for ways to enhance this work at all levels.

Through our position on a variety of committees and bodies, as well as through active positive relationships with sector agencies and institutional staff, sparqs has continued to advocate and influence a range of activities to help keep student engagement at the forefront of activity in Scotland:

- Developing Student Partnership Agreements – through its work with the quality working groups, sparqs started to explore the concept of Student Partnership Agreements as a way of strengthening the relationship between institutions and student unions, focusing on using the developing systems to ensure a positive impact on the student experience. The concept was embraced by the Scottish Government in its paper ‘Putting Learners at the Centre – delivering our ambitions for post 16 education’. sparqs is now looking at how it can support the development of these agreements.

- Recognising and rewarding course rep activity – we are exploring the opportunity the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) affords the sector to acknowledge the vital role student representatives play in our quality systems. Whilst supporting a group of institutions to develop accreditation activities we are also working at a sector level to support such developments.
- QAA Code of Practice – a new code of practice for student engagement is being developed for the UK. We are active members of the group developing this, helping ensure that the code meets the needs of Scotland.
- College Community of Interest for Student Engagement – Student Governance and Academic Representation – sparqs has identified the need for support for staff working in this area. This Community of Interest has recently recruited a secondee funded by Scotland’s Colleges to work with NUS Scotland and sparqs to develop a valuable set of resources and activities directed by the needs of the sector.

- Developing student engagement with QAA Enhancement Themes – we are developing a range of new activities with QAA Scotland with the aim of ensuring students can influence the direction of the new theme, ‘Developing and Supporting the Curriculum’ and use it to develop work in their own institutions. This involves increased support for student members of institutional teams, support for student representatives on the Enhancement Themes steering committee, resources and networking opportunities.

- Developing opportunities for college students to engage at a national level – through strengthening our work at national committee level it has become apparent that few opportunities exist for college students to engage at a national level. To address this we have encouraged strengthening student engagement with Aspect Reports. We will continue to explore further possibilities with our partners.



*“Student engagement is a vital part of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework and sparqs has a vital role in enabling effective student engagement. We are delighted to continue to work with sparqs and to see it grow and develop, including revising courses and providing support for SLEEC. The level of participation at the sparqs conference from staff and students is testament to the high regard that sparqs is held in.”*

– Kirsty Conlon, Manager/Policy Adviser (Learning and Teaching), Universities Scotland



## Shaping the quality arrangements

Working with both SFC quality working groups as well as with QAA Scotland and Education Scotland, sparqs has advocated improvements to the quality processes including:

- Improved guidance on student engagement and its role in quality.
- Clearer and more accessible judgements coming from reviews.
- A clearer role for students in actions following review.
- Changes to processes, for instance the timing of learner questionnaires, and formalising the role of students in annual engagement.

Whilst supporting involvement in the current cycle, sparqs has also been actively contributing to the review of the quality arrangements in preparation for the new cycle. With the overall aims of increasing the opportunities for students to contribute to the review processes, ensuring student confidence in the quality arrangements and increasing the opportunities for processes to bring about positive changes to the student experience, sparqs has undertaken a range of activities. These include:

- A consultation event with college student officers to gather opinions about the current college sector review process.
- Submissions to SFC College and University Working Groups on strengthening student engagement within the arrangements.

- Workshop sessions at Universities Scotland's Teaching Quality Forum on strengthening aspects of the arrangements including public information, Institutional-Led Subject Review, student involvement in the reflective analysis and Student Partnership Agreements.
- Detailed work with Education Scotland and QAA Scotland on ways to improve processes and guidance.
- Reviewing our current set of support activities to strengthen further student engagement.
- Planning an event with Education Scotland to get student input into redrafting the Learner Engagement Questionnaire.

Some enhancements to the review arrangements currently being explored include:

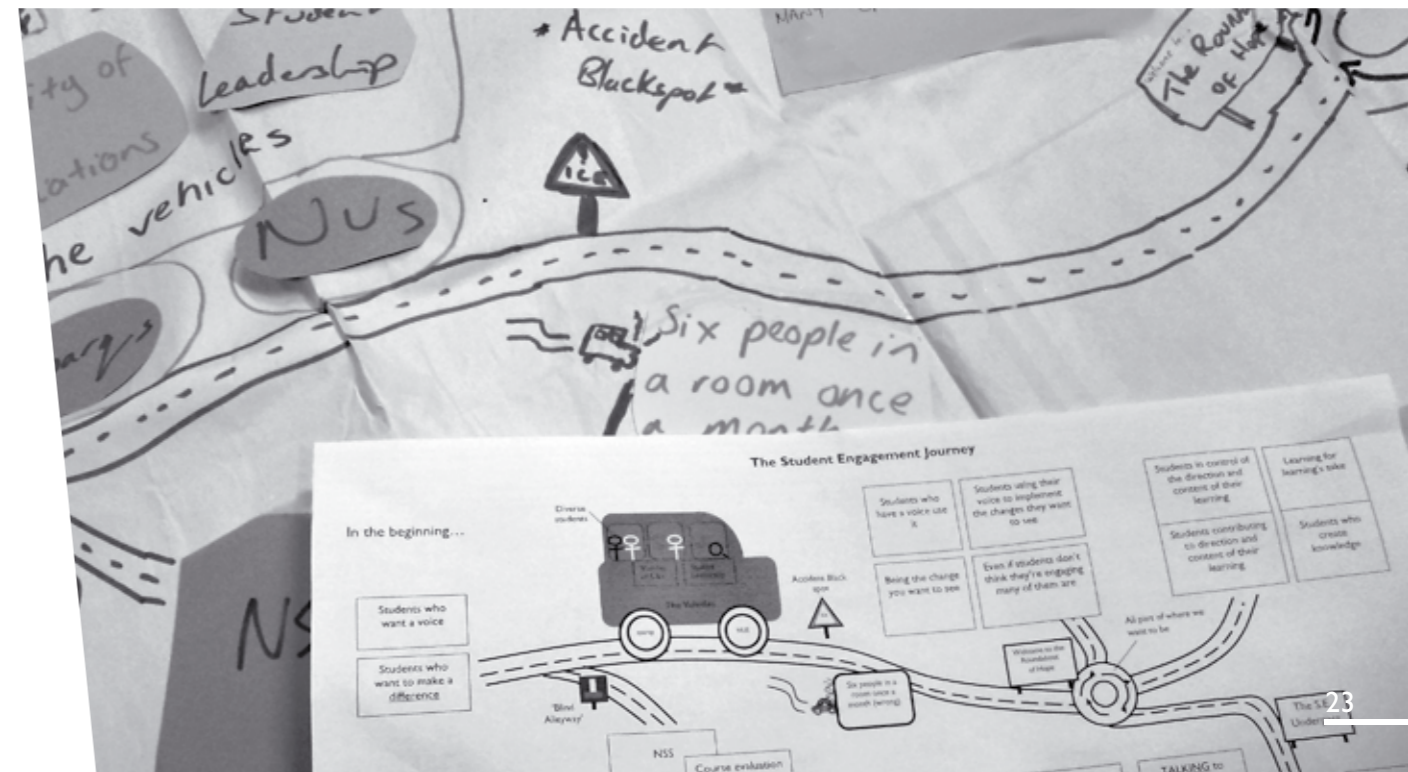
- A shift from focusing on the year of the review to a more ongoing process including strengthening student involvement in annual engagements.
- Clearer, more useful reporting of review outcomes.
- Developing Student Partnership Agreements between students' associations and institutions.

## Understanding and advancing student engagement

A vast array of activities and processes has developed in Scotland since the inception of sparqs, all with a clear level of commitment and enthusiasm across the sector. Scotland can be proud of the importance it places on working in partnership with its students and sparqs is equally proud of its record in supporting developments in this area.

Building on this, we have undertaken a major research project to map out the understanding across the sector of the term

“student engagement”. Our aim has been not simply to define the term but rather develop a framework that will help us draw together the range of thinking and activities that exists. This important research is part-funded by the Higher Education Academy and the framework, once agreed by all stakeholders, will form a basis for strategic work on student engagement across the sector, helping us clarify approaches, prioritise our work and pull together materials and support in a range of areas.



The research has helped us to identify five areas of a Scottish student engagement framework:

1. Providing services that help students initially engage with and continue to feel part of a supportive institution.
2. Students engaging in their own learning.
3. Students commenting on and shaping the direction of learning.

4. Formal student engagement mechanisms, quality and governance.
5. Engagement in shaping the student experience at a national level.

We are very grateful for the involvement of so many people through the 46 participative groups that contributed to this research.



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“The broad range of work going on in colleges under the learner engagement banner is indicative of the sector’s commitment to this agenda. The framework being developed by sparqs will help to put the work of individual colleges into a national context, assisting in benchmarking activities and spreading best practice. I anticipate colleges making extensive use of this research.”

– Diane Rawlinson, Principal and Chief Executive, Ayr College

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## Identifying and celebrating practice

### Website

To share innovative and effective practice across the sector sparqs is currently redeveloping its website to become a natural destination for staff and students seeking to learn, share, celebrate and develop good practice in student engagement in quality.



### Report into student engagement

sparqs will undertake a major piece of research in 2012, identifying the activities and successes of student engagement since our last mapping reports carried out in 2004/05. Our work with all institutions in the coming months will allow for collation of good practice and the

perceptions of practitioners as to how student engagement has developed.

A report will be published based upon this research, and will be accompanied by moves by sparqs to significantly improve its data management and the way it gathers and records information about student engagement across the sector. Along with the allocation of a key contact within the sparqs team for every institution, we will better be able to identify and respond to trends and needs.

### Resource Library

We have long attempted to introduce a section of our website which is devoted to collating good practice on student engagement. The research mentioned above will enable us to finally bring this to fruition. This library will aim to capture and reflect the wealth of knowledge and expertise throughout the sector in student engagement, for instance through:

- Sample student representative job descriptions.
- Module evaluation forms.
- Research reports.
- Examples of effective student engagement in committees.
- Strategies for student involvement in review preparation.
- Innovative focus group tools.

## Student Learning Enhancement and Engagement Campaign (SLEEC)

There has been great progress across Scotland in developing systems and opportunities for students to engage with learning and teaching issues. But these systems, however well supported, are of little consequence if students do not use them to influence real change. sparqs has been funded by NUS Scotland to work with them to establish SLEEC to develop opportunities for students to shape their thinking, develop local campaigns and programmes for change, and influence national policy.

sparqs' role in SLEEC is to provide accessible information to students on current learning and teaching issues and to facilitate discussion around them. It will also produce resources for

officers to use around key topics, such as QAA Enhancement Themes. NUS Scotland will use the outputs from these discussions to shape national policy and support student officers in taking issues forward at a local level.

Activities include:

- An introductory session at NUS Scotland's new officers' event, The Gathering, to raise student officer awareness of the importance of education campaigning and linking it to evidence from quality systems and national activities.
- An event for college student officers to help shape student input into the ongoing updating of the quality arrangements.

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*“The developing and supporting the curriculum workshop gave students from all over Scotland the chance to voice their opinion on how students would like to see the Enhancement Theme evolve. The level of engagement from students was overwhelming, proving a desire to help shape the enhancement of Higher Education in Scotland. sparqs helped enable students to become involved at a national level and became an impartial and supportive point of contact throughout the process.”*

– Correen Dickson, NUS Scottish Executive Committee member and student member of Enhancement Themes Steering Committee

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- Events to explain and explore national developments around Public Information, Key Information Sets and Student Partnership Agreements.
- A workshop at NUS Scotland Conference to develop student opinion around the new Enhancement Theme, ‘Developing and Supporting the Curriculum’, and begin to outline key areas of importance within the theme for students.

- Workshop at NUS Scotland Conference for college officers to develop a national picture of key learning and teaching challenges for their students.
- Support for student officers attending national committees.
- Training for the NUS Scotland Scottish Executive Committee on the education landscape in Scotland and its challenges and opportunities.

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*“SLEEC has been an invaluable way of finding out what's happening on a national level in the Scottish education sector. In particular, the day that we spent discussing Key Information Sets and Partnership Agreements allowed us to explore the pro's and con's of each initiative in depth and come to an informed and robust opinion about each one. This in turn contributed to the discussions about these initiatives at an institutional level. I can speak much more confidently about various issues because of discussions I've had at SLEEC.”*

– Mike Williamson, Vice-President Academic Affairs, Edinburgh University Students' Association

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## Developing student engagement internationally

The work of sparqs attracts much international attention. Scotland is considered world leading in its approach to student engagement and the role of sparqs in achieving this status is widely acknowledged.

Our international work allows us to continue to promote Scotland as a high quality education sector which places an excellent student experience at the centre. We are able to promote Scotland's approach to enhancement and help create much interest in practice across the sector.

# QUEST

sparqs is involved in an exciting project 'QUEST for Quality for Students' which aims to improve student understanding of and involvement in quality assurance and enhancement processes across Europe. The other partners in the project are ESU (The National Union of Students in Europe), ARACIS (The Romanian Agency

for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) and Freier Zusammenschluss von StudentInnenschaften (FZS, the German association of students' unions). sparqs is responsible for developing a series of workshops for student experts in quality, as well as the development of a toolkit at the end of the project. Through sparqs' contribution Scotland will also feature as a national case study in the report which will be published on conclusion of the project.

The first workshop was successfully held in July 2011 in Edinburgh and was attended by 30 students from 20 countries. The next workshop is taking place in Brussels in February 2012 followed by further activities leading up to the final conference and launch of the toolkit in November 2012.

Following significant interest in our stall at the 2010 European Quality Assurance Forum we were accepted to run a workshop at the 2011 Forum. The workshop was oversubscribed and we have received requests for further work from Romania, Croatia and Portugal. We are also preparing to present at a conference in Slovenia, and have this year received delegations from Malawi, Australia and Denmark.

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) invited sparqs over to deliver a session on how to develop and deliver Course Rep Training at their summer training conference for new student officers. The session was well attended with over 40 delegates coming along. This also resulted in working with Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology to deliver Introductory Course Rep Training and run a Continuing Professional Development Day for one of their new staff members.



QUEST participants at the European Parliament in Brussels.

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*“sparqs helped me realise that quality assurance and enhancement are much simpler than I perceived. I thought this was a difficult area and the solution was in drafting a policy at a macro level, but the expertise of sparqs made me realise that change lies at the grassroots level, in small things that are easy to accomplish. sparqs had an extraordinary encouragement effect through enabling us to see that other structures have the same beliefs and successes as we have.”*

– Anca Prisacariu, Vicepresedinte Educational ANOSR  
(Alianta Nationala a Organizatiilor Studentesti din Romania)

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## Supporting individual institutional priorities

sparqs helps institutions and students' associations on an individual basis, and is invited to do so on a wide variety of aspects of student engagement. By providing an external perspective, sector-wide knowledge and expertise, and by customising our work to meet individual institutional needs, sparqs aims to work with staff and students to help them shape and achieve their objectives for student engagement.

Work this year has included:

- Developing a set of toolkits for staff in an institution to reflect on and improve practice relating to feedback on assessment.
- Providing external membership to key institutional working groups and committees on quality and student engagement.



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*“As author of the draft reflective analysis, I really value the perceptions of key issues and questions from sparqs... I would really recommend your approach as an example of a very practical way in which sparqs can add value to the ELIR process.”*

*– University senior manager preparing for institutional review*

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- Helping institutions engage students in the preparation for internal and external review activities. In one institution, this has included looking closely at how the students' association can play a more meaningful part in internal review. Meanwhile a university and its students' association who were preparing for Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) invited sparqs to facilitate a student focus group to explore the claims made in the draft reflective analysis about the learning experience.
- Acting as a critical friend and supporting a students' association to develop and propose a new representation structure to the institution.
- Working with a college to explore how induction can be improved through student engagement and how engagement can be increased through induction, resulting in a clear longitudinal induction with engagement raised throughout.
- Work with a university to identify how relationships between the students' association, the institution and the reps could be improved, leading to better information and materials, clear guidance on rep structures and a programme of development opportunities for reps.



*“sparqs were a great resource to call on when looking at implementing big strategic changes within student representation. Following a significant restructuring of departments to schools a gap existed in student representation between course and senior university committee levels. sparqs helped us with our approach to the institution, striking a great balance between operational difficulties such as getting rep information and more strategic areas such as obtaining academic buy-in for representation on senior school committees and partnership working. This project is now entering its second semester and we have already had interest from another four of the seven academic schools showing a significant change in the institution’s approach to student engagement and representation.”*

– Mark Charters, Representation & Student Support Co-ordinator, University of Stirling Students’ Union



## Supporting collaborative activity

sparqs, working with institutions, has identified some key projects where we can develop resources and activities to meet shared needs within the sector and to support a step change in practice across the sector as a whole. These consultancy themes will continue to develop as an important way in which sparqs can support the sector in the challenges it faces.

Themed activity has this year included the following:

- Departmental representation – responding to the growth in departmental level representation, sparqs has brought

together some of the key institutions that have developed or are developing these reps to explore how we can better support them and learn from the experiences of those already supporting them successfully. This group has directed the production of a set of materials to help institution engagement at this level.

- Engaging students in supported education programmes – we have explored the approaches and tools that can engage students in such programmes, with the objective of producing guidance for institutions and adapting Course Rep



*“The departmental representation group has been a worthwhile investment of my time as it has enabled discussions relating to different experiences. Through these, we can try to devise a practice that draws the best elements from a variety of approaches.”*

– Helen Chisholm, Student Liaison Officer, Borders College



Training materials. In partnership with Stevenson College, sparqs has been exploring ways to develop support structures and suitable training for students within supported education. The overall aim of the project is to ensure students are supported to confidently participate in the college's standard quality processes. A tailored training session has been developed and trialled, with notes for the trainer and guidance for teaching assistants who will be facilitating the session. Alongside this are materials aimed at the students' association and general guidance on inclusion and accessibility.

- Engaging international students – following on from the highly acclaimed “Students without Borders” (SWB) research project which explored the educational experiences of international students, sparqs in partnership with NUS Scotland, has worked with a group of universities to develop a comprehensive training resource. Consisting of four modules, including international students and the quality enhancement framework, it contains everything necessary to deliver training sessions and aid the engagement of international students. A copy of the SWB training has been sent to every



students' association in Scotland. To date, the feedback from the pilot and subsequent training sessions has been overwhelmingly positive. It has also been widely endorsed by Scottish educational stakeholders, colleges and universities, as well as further afield in Europe, North America and Australia.

- Accreditation and reward of student reps – recognising a need to support practice in this area, sparqs has been working firstly through a project exploring the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR), and secondly through an exercise to map the creative ways

in which colleges quantify the work done by representatives. A university working group has been directing the development of a toolkit which will explore the various ways to include student representation within the HEAR. It will support universities to identify and record the work of student reps in a way that they can confidently verify, but will also explore ways the university can support student reps to be as effective as they can be.

Forthcoming work commencing in 2012 will explore the engagement of part-time, distance learning and postgraduate students.



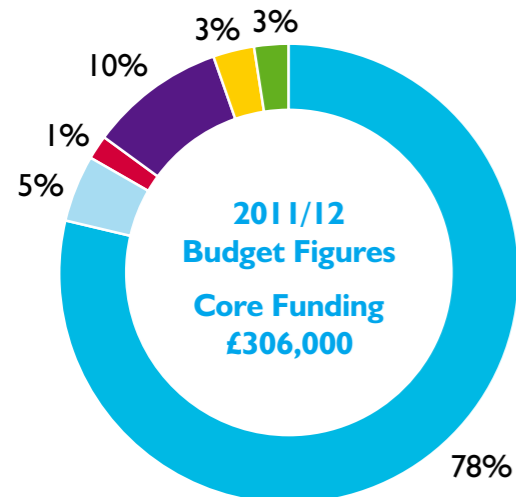
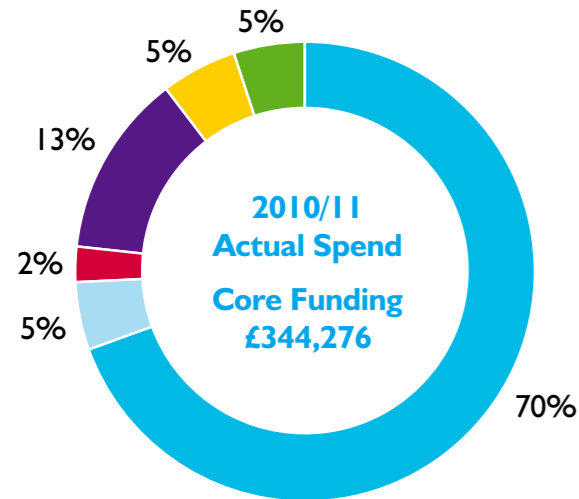
*“I think the documents are very useful, especially the handbook which is a really useful document which I hope will not only help with HEAR but also assist in gaining greater understanding of the role within the academic community as well as with senior management.”*

– Kim Macintyre, Faculty Quality Officer, Faculty of Science & Technology, University of the West of Scotland



## Funding information

- Staff Costs
- Course Rep Scheme
- NUS Overheads
- Events/Meetings
- Office Overheads
- Media Resources

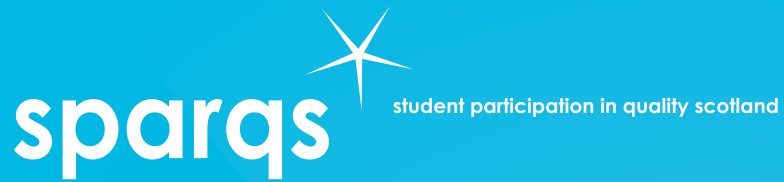


## Find out more

This annual report gives a taster of our wide range of activities. Our website contains much more information and can help you find out more and hopefully encourage you to try out new ideas, tell us about your effective practice, and get involved in shaping our work.

You can find our web and postal addresses on the back of this report. Our website will undergo a major restructure in 2012, strengthening it as a natural home for examples of good practice, reports, and other sectoral activity in student engagement.

You can also keep in touch with the latest developments through our newsletter. It announces forthcoming events, highlights important developments and activities, and puts the spotlight on various examples of effective practice from around the sector. The newsletter is published quarterly and you can sign up to the mailing list and read past articles via our website.



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