**Vision**

Students making a positive and rewarding difference to their own and others’ educational experience, helping shape the nature of learning and contributing to the overall success of Scotland’s universities and colleges.

**Mission**

Ensure that students are able to engage as partners at all levels of quality assurance and enhancement activities, including:

- Commenting on, improving and shaping their own learning experience
- Taking an active part in formal student engagement mechanisms, including quality assurance and enhancement processes and strategic decision making
- Shaping the development of the student experience at a national level

**Strategic Aims**

1. **Supporting Students**
   - Strategic Aim 1:
   - Strategic Aim 2:
   - Strategic Aim 3:

2. **Supporting Institutions**
   - Supporting the Sector

3. **Developing a Culture**

4. **Supporting the Sector**

**How we will work**

**Our values and approaches**

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10. HOW WE WILL WORK
12. OUR VALUES AND APPROACHES
Over the last ten years, Scotland’s colleges and universities with the support of their students’ associations have made a commitment alongside national agencies to student engagement. This commitment stems from the central role of students established in the quality assurance and enhancement arrangements. To support this role sparqs (student participation in quality Scotland) was established, with funding from the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), acknowledging that there was a need for dedicated support and professional expertise in this area. A national agency supporting student engagement is unprecedented elsewhere and the support sparqs provides has been pivotal in helping to realise the potential of students in contributing to the success of institutions. sparqs is proud of the journey we have made working together with students and staff across the sector. Scotland is a beacon of success, with much interest being shown in its approach from around the world. Since that initial commitment, Scotland has embraced the contribution students can make to the success of its post-16 provision. From the early days of including student reviewers on external review teams and encouraging students to have more places on institutional committees, student engagement has developed. Students are now more active contributors to the various quality assurance and enhancement processes and, more than that, are being supported to play a key role as partners in the success of their institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Following recent work to update Scotland’s quality enhancement arrangements, student engagement will continue as a key principle and fundamental dimension of the quality arrangements for the cycle beginning August 2012. The resulting SFC guidance reflects this, picking up on a proliferation of good practice developed across the sector and identifying new challenges. The guidance also identifies a shift from an SFC ‘expectation’ to, where appropriate, a ‘requirement’ for student engagement activities, as well as reaffirming sparqs’ role in taking forward this work.

Scotland has a distinctive approach – a strong emphasis on enhancement within its quality arrangements, a rejection of the approach of shifting financial burden from state to student and an emphasis on student partnership rather than consumerism – an approach that is recognised internationally, including much interest in our unique approach to student engagement in quality. Yet this approach does not operate in a vacuum – what happens elsewhere will be challenging. There will be students from all parts of the UK and the rest of the world paying high levels of fees in our classrooms, bringing with them a range of perceptions. A risk-based approach to quality has been explored elsewhere in the UK and the European Union is developing its European Standards and Guidelines for Quality.

Closer to home, Scottish school leavers coming to college or university from 2014/15 will have experienced ‘Curriculum for Excellence’ and its emphasis on active learners and responsible citizens. They may well bring with them their own new perspective.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) UK Quality Code for Higher Education - Chapter B5: Student Engagement sets out for the first time the expectation that higher education providers, in partnership with their student bodies, define and promote the range of opportunities for any student to engage in educational enhancement and quality assurance, alongside a related set of indicators of sound practice, signalling a growth in commitment across the UK to student engagement. This code sits alongside a range of more challenging and aspirational practices and policies in Scotland that takes this commitment further.

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1. Council guidance to higher education institutions on quality from August 2012 & Council guidance to colleges on quality from August 2012, Scottish Funding Council (August 2012)
4. UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Quality Assurance Agency (June 2012)
Our Vision is of:

Students making a positive and rewarding difference to their own and others’ educational experience, helping shape the nature of learning and contributing to the overall success of Scotland’s universities and colleges.

To make this Vision a reality our Mission is to:

- Ensure that students are able to engage as partners at all levels of quality assurance and enhancement activities, including:
  - Commenting on, improving and shaping their own learning experience.
  - Taking an active part in formal student engagement mechanisms, including quality assurance and enhancement processes and strategic decision making.
  - Shaping the development of the student experience at a national level.

To achieve our Mission we develop services and activities under Four Strategic Aims that:

1. Support students to engage at all levels in enhancing their educational experience.
2. Support the development of practices and activities in institutions and their students’ associations that encourage and support student engagement.
4. Support the development of a culture of student engagement across Scotland.

This work is supported by a range of systems and practices and underpinned by key values and approaches.

The three areas of our mission correspond to three of the five key elements described in “A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland”, sparqs, Education Scotland, The Higher Education Academy Scotland, National Union of Students Scotland, Quality Assurance Agency Scotland, Scotland’s Colleges, Scottish Funding Council, Universities Scotland (December 2012).
Support the development of practices and activities in institutions and their students’ associations that encourage and support student engagement

In order to realise the benefits of a commitment to student engagement, it is important that institutions and their students’ associations have appropriate mechanisms in place. These should support the efforts of students and harness student engagement activities to shape change. Such systems need to provide opportunities for all students to engage and need to fit together as a coherent whole, encouraging all student voices to be heard, and used, to fulfil the institution’s need to assure and enhance quality. Importantly, for student engagement to be successful, staff within the institution need to be able to facilitate it and have commitment to it.

Key areas of activity for 2013-2018 will include:

2.1 Developing a strategic approach to staff development in relation to student engagement, to ensure staff at all levels can support a full range of activities.

2.2 Supporting institutions in developing effective systems, processes and opportunities that help realise the potential of student engagement activities.

2.3 Developing knowledge of individual institutional systems and processes and setting these in a national context. Providing consultancy, advice and support for dealing with key challenges.

2.4 Identifying key themes affecting institutions and developing national projects that can act as a vehicle for change across the sector.

2.5 Identifying key issues for student engagement raised by college regionalisation and supporting colleges in addressing these.

2.6 Supporting institutions to implement national initiatives that enhance student engagement in a way that suits their own context.

2.7 Supporting students to be involved in processes of curriculum design and development. Helping students to identify opportunities to engage with these processes.

Key areas of activity for 2013-2018 will include:

1.1 Developing and consolidating our provision of training for course representatives to ensure it remains effective, cost-effective and adaptable to the diverse needs of institutions and students’ associations.

1.2 Developing resources and activities aimed at course representatives to:
- Equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to be a successful representative and support them throughout their time in post.
- Aid personal development and contribute to the recognition, accreditation and reward of their activities.
- Provide flexible methods of support, including online resources, to meet their diverse needs (including mode and level of study, demographics/background and level of representative).

1.3 Developing resources and activities to support students in understanding the importance of student engagement in Scotland, emphasising the importance of their contribution, the differences it can make and has made, and outlining the range of ways they can be involved.

1.4 Providing events and resources to support students in other representative roles, including senior office bearers in carrying out their duties in relation to student engagement.

1.5 Continually updating training provision and resources to take account of national developments, (e.g. Enhancement Themes and Student Partnership Agreements).

STRATEGIC AIM 1

Support students to engage at all levels in enhancing their educational experience

In order to support students to engage in enhancing the educational experience at their institutions, we will provide training and resources which help them fulfil representative roles at every possible level, including at a national level. Some of these roles relate specifically to engaging with formal quality arrangements, whereas others relate to engagement in a wider sense. Where possible, we will look to increase the involvement of all students in engagement activities that are suitable for them. We will also look to building capacity amongst student leaders. This will involve equipping students at all levels with an appropriate set of specific skills, as well as with an insight into the value of their participation to their own development, the improvement of their immediate experience, and the success of their institution and the sector as a whole.

Key areas of activity for 2013-2018 will include:

1.1 Developing and consolidating our provision of training for course representatives to ensure it remains effective, cost-effective and adaptable to the diverse needs of institutions and students’ associations.
Support the development of a culture of student engagement across Scotland

In order to develop Scotland as a centre of excellence for student engagement and for us to realise the potential it offers the sector, it is important for us to develop understanding of student engagement in a national and international context. Using this understanding to share practice and promote and advocate the benefits of our approaches whilst learning from others is vital to our success.

Key areas of activity for 2013-2018 will include:

4.1 Developing and maintaining a comprehensive picture of student engagement in Scotland and regularly reporting to the sector on successes and challenges.

4.2 Developing and sharing mutual understanding of the key elements of student engagement, its importance to successful outcomes in colleges and universities and sharing successful practices and approaches.

4.3 Developing and disseminating research activities to help underpin engagement practices with theory and empirical evidence.

4.4 Contributing, as student engagement experts, to policy discussions and developments and using this work to help identify challenges for the future.

4.5 Promoting student engagement internationally and facilitating benchmarking and similar activities.
HOW WE WILL WORK

In carrying out this work we will operate in the following ways:

Informed and influenced by a range of partners
It is important that through all our approaches and activities we work in partnership with the sector, taking into account the range of perspectives of those within it working to enhance student engagement. To this end we will always seek opportunities for students, students’ associations, staff in institutions and sector agencies to inform and influence our work. Our steering committee and advisory groups are essential in helping us achieve this, as is our attendance and contribution to sector meetings.

Effective communication
We will provide and develop effective communication systems to ensure our work is disseminated widely to those who will most benefit. Our website and regular newsletters are important elements of this work but we will also continue to explore emerging technologies and their potential in reaching our audience.

Strong administrative and financial procedures
As a small, dynamic team we value the activities of our Central Support Team in ensuring we can deliver on a wide range of objectives. We will continue to invest time and resources to developing and supporting effective administrative procedures, including client management systems, event planning and booking processes, supporting course representative training and supporting internal communication. In ensuring maximum value from resources we will continue to operate effective financial monitoring and reporting procedures whilst continually exploring potential for efficiencies.

Planning, reporting and developing the team
In our fast changing and complex environment it is important that members of our team have clear, achievable objectives that contribute to a shared team vision that is also shared by our partners. Our strategic plan will link directly to the development of our operational plan which will in turn clearly link to staff personal objectives and appraisal. Progress towards the operational plan will be monitored and shaped through regular team meetings and reported to our steering committee and advisory groups. Our approach to planning will aim to be ambitious and realistic. We will encourage staff to take on work in an environment that acknowledges this is an ambitious agenda. Our reporting will acknowledge where we believe the challenge is high and will be honest in where we are unable to realise this. We will build reflection and evaluation into all our work plans.

Effective use of funding and resources
We operate with great regard to efficiency and with a continual regard to delivering value for the public money we receive. We will continue to investigate cost-effective ways to deliver our services and will explore ways of working with our partners to do so. We will continue to explore the efficiencies and opportunities of aligning our processes with those of our managing partner, NUS Scotland. Whilst we will explore new sources of income we will ensure that in doing so we do not detract from our core mission and vision. We will use externally generated income to supplement our activities and to establish a small reserve to allow us to establish some stability and make plans for the future. We will work regularly with our funder, SFC, to negotiate a budget for delivering our strategic and operational plans. Where our strategy presents work that is not within current resources we will actively seek to develop ways to deliver this work from alternative funding sources.

Developing our staff
We are committed to developing our staff through the provision of training, mentoring and support. We will endeavour to provide opportunities within sparc for career progression whilst recognising that the size and shape of our organisation provides an ideal stepping stone to further careers. We will play our part wherever appropriate in providing suitable opportunities to help people into work, including placements and work experience.

Working with NUS Scotland
Much of the work we do is supported by NUS either in Scotland or at a UK level. Our IT, HR, and communications systems are all supported by them, significantly beyond any fees paid, and continuing improvements to these systems will play an important part in our strategic developments. Staff within NUS’s London HQ and the other national offices are all developing projects similar to those of sparc and we have much synergy with these projects. We have made great progress in establishing the distinct identity of sparc and our role working with NUS and we will continue to identify our distinct but complementary roles in the future. We will continue to ensure that we meet this distinct role whilst acknowledging the considerable support given to us by our lead partner as well as the benefit this relationship gives to ensuring we remain student focused.

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OUR VALUES AND APPROACHES

The following values and approaches will underpin the way we carry out our work:

Partnership

Developing strong partnerships between students and their institutions is an essential feature of student engagement in Scotland. In undertaking work we will look to promote an environment which encourages:

- Promoting and further developing the importance of the clear commitment to student partnership within our national quality arrangements.
- A strong partnership between the institution and its students’ association, promoting opportunities which support the role of an autonomous, representative body that at the same time is contributing to an agreed institutional agenda.
- A strong partnership between students, their associations and national agencies, setting a strong culture of partnership at a national level and ensuring this can be used to influence change both locally and nationally.
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Responding to the diversity of students

All students have the right to have their voice heard and for their educational experience to be enhanced with their needs in mind. Students will choose to engage in many different ways and at many different levels. It is important that institutions and national agencies develop opportunities that adapt to the student rather than the student always adapting to the constraints of existing systems.

Valuing the student contribution

When considering diversity we need to pay attention to protected characteristics as covered by equalities legislation, mode and level of study and socio-economic background and related aspects of widening access. When considering how to engage the diversity of students, spars will take into account:

- The level of engagement. We wish to encourage students to take on active student engagement roles. However, we also should recognise the value of student engagement at all levels. Students filling in a questionnaire or module feedback form are engaging, as are class representatives or full-time elected officers. Students will have different reasons and motivations for engaging and we recognise that some students will for various reasons choose to limit their engagement to a level appropriate for them.
- Systems and opportunities being appropriate. Whilst students may choose their own level of engagement, we will encourage the development of opportunities and systems which allow all students who want to, regardless of their background, to participate fully.
- The right to representation. In meeting the needs of diverse students, institutions may develop a range of methods to engage certain groups of students. It is important that in doing so we ensure these methods also feed into representative structures. Students’ associations need to develop structures to ensure they can represent all students as far as possible, and this will require the support of their institutions.

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Valuing the student contribution

In recognising the progress we have made in student engagement we must acknowledge that we would not have got there without the often remarkable efforts of students themselves. Students are balancing study, work and other commitments - yet even at the junior levels of involvement a class rep will be committing around forty hours volunteering a year to do their job well. At more senior levels they are taking on complex roles and participating in activities that others around them are being paid to do. In valuing the student contribution we will encourage activities that:

- Ensure students are supported in their efforts and do not have unrealistic demands made of them.
- Make clear the difference their contributions have made.
- Develop ways to recognise, reward and accredit their contribution.
- Value the expertise they bring without expecting them to have the same expertise as others.

Challenge, advocacy and innovation

We are champions of student engagement. In promoting an ambitious response to developing student engagement we also recognise the diversity of institutions and the value of a diversity of responses. We will adopt an approach which encourages professional dialogue between our staff and colleagues in the sector whilst using our expertise to challenge and encourage innovation. Through such genuine challenge we can raise expectations and support work that is truly ground breaking.