



# Workshop 6 notes:

## The students' association

### Introductory guidance

This is part of a series of six workshop templates introduced in a separate guide: [Exploring student engagement with academic staff: user guidance](#). Please refer to that document for general introductory guidance on organising these discussion workshops, including steps to take before and after the event.

### About this workshop

This workshop aims to generate understanding among staff of the role of the students' association (SA) in enhancing learning in partnership with the institution. Some institutions use the phrase "students' union" or "students' representative council" rather than "students' association" (though for these purposes they refer to the same thing), so when reading this workshop template and adapting it for your own use you should obviously use your own student body's name.

The content in this workshop includes the following sections:

1. Understanding students' associations.
2. Working with your students' association.

The activities in these sections could be used in different ways (see page 5 of the user guidance). They might be especially helpful to create briefings for new staff, or to generate staff ideas if the students' association is consulting stakeholders on its future structure or strategy.

While working with your students' association on any workshops within this wider toolkit is important, it is obviously essential for this workshop. Your students' association staff and officers can play a key role in designing and presenting content, sharing resources such as the students' association strategic plan, and highlighting their key successes and impacts.

Each section is outlined in the paragraphs that follow.

### Further reading to aid your preparation








- Cadogan, P. 1998. Looking ahead: The need to reassess the role of student unions. *Agenda: The journal of the Association for Managers in Students' Unions*, 63, 14-18. <https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/resource-item.php?item=166>
- Dickinson, J. 2020. Do students' unions waste money? *Wonkhe*. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/do-students-unions-waste-money/>
- Dickinson, J. 2020. Ten things we've learned so far from the Covid-19 crisis. *Wonkhe*. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs-sus/ten-things-weve-learned-so-far-from-the-covid-19-crisis/>
- Eberlin, A. and Thomas, H. 2020. Students as partners – challenges facing students' unions throughout COVID-19. *QAA Scotland blog*. 29 May. Available at: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/news-events/blog/students-as-partners-challenges-facing-students-unions-throughout-covid-19>
- Framework for the Development of Strong and Effective College Students' Associations. [www.dcsa.uk](http://www.dcsa.uk)
- University of Glasgow. Student representation toolkit. <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/students/studentrepresentationtoolkit/stafftoolkit/>



# 1. Understanding students' associations

Students' associations play an important role in shaping learning and the wider student experience, and it is important for staff to understand something of how your SA works. More than that, it will be useful for staff to reflect on this in terms of their role, and how they can promote partnership working with the SA.

This set of slides could be customised to create a self-contained workshop or briefing for staff on the role of the SA in your institution.

<p><b>What is a students' association?</b></p> <p>A good start for information to staff about the SA could be an overview of what an SA is. This could be very useful as part of staff induction information for those who have not worked with an SA before, or who have come from another country with a different system of student organisations.</p> <p>These slides are just suggestions, that your SA could adapt and which could provide detailed information about its structures, activities and key contacts.</p>	<p><b>What is a students' association?</b> </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Membership body consisting of all students at an institution (unless they opt out).</li> <li>• Defined by various legislation.</li> <li>• Funded by its institution.</li> <li>• Represents students on key committees that shape the learning experience.</li> <li>• The institution's governing body has various oversights, such as approval of accounts, assurance of democratic elections.</li> </ul> <p> @sparqs_scotland</p> <p><b>Key aspects of SAs</b> </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most SAs in Scotland affiliate to NUS.</li> <li>• SAs are engaged by sector agencies in national policy and decision-making.</li> <li>• SFC funds Developing College Students' Associations project for college sector: managed by NUS Scotland and sparqs.</li> <li>• This project created a useful framework...</li> </ul> <p> @sparqs_scotland</p>
<p><b>College SA Framework</b></p> <p>This framework was developed as part of the SFC-funded Developing College Students' Associations project. The project, managed by NUS Charity and sparqs, aims to help colleges to develop strong and effective SAs.</p> <p>The principles and themes are good discussion points for staff to reflect on what they understand the terms to be. This could be an especially useful conversation for those who work mostly closely with the SA on a regular basis. This might include senior management, student experience or engagement staff, institutional governors, or chairs of key committees relating to the student experience.</p> <p>Other workshop materials can be provided by NUS and sparqs to suit your context and priorities.</p> <p>Although the framework was created for the college sector, the principles and themes are just as interesting as discussion points in universities.</p>	 <p></p> <p>Framework for the Development of Strong and Effective College Students' Associations</p> <p> @sparqs_scotland</p>

## Partnership with students' associations

Students can and should be partners at an individual level, but the same is true of a students' association at an organisational and institutional level.

This article was written some years ago by Peter Cadogan, a former students' association chief executive, and could be useful reading for staff: <https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/resource-item.php?item=166>

It presents three matrices for exploring students' associations' internal and external relationships. This slide contains one of them: a way of reflecting on the SA's relationship with its institution.

Cadogan argues that the relationship can be viewed in terms of:

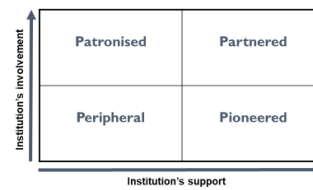
- **Institutional involvement in the SA:** not meant negatively in terms of interference or the erosion of autonomy, but the extent to which the institution takes an interest in, and responds to, what the SA does.
- **Institutional support for the SA:** which can include financial, practical or political support.

He further argues that this determines what sort of SA is created:

- **Peripheral:** largely not on the institution's radar or priorities, it is unlikely to have the ability to make any impact.
- **Patronised:** micro-managed by the institution, possibly out of fear of disruptive behaviour.
- **Pioneered:** not engaged in institutional priorities, and instead focused on external campaigning.
- **Partnered:** impactful, involved in institutional work, and respected for doing so.

Staff could be encouraged to consider where they would place their SA on this grid, and what actions an institution and its staff might need to take to move it more towards partnership.

## Partnership with students' associations












See the sparqs website for more.

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## 2. Working with your students' association

Building on the above content introducing the SA to staff, this set of content looks more at how staff can work with their SA. It will significantly benefit from being customised to specific activity, so staff can learn, and think about, the many different ways the institution and SA work together.

<p><b>Key contacts</b></p> <p>There are various key roles within the students' association that academic staff will most need to be aware of. This slide includes four possible roles, which may exist with different titles across different SAs.</p> <p>By highlighting these roles, a number of key points can be made:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The important role of the permanent SA staff, acting as a civil service to support the work of officers.</li> <li>• The full-time, annually elected sabbatical roles, often including a dedicated post relating to the quality of the learning experience, such as an education officer.</li> <li>• The importance of a role that provides direct professional support to course reps, and which may lead on rep training, liaison with academic departments, and support for partnership initiatives in quality.</li> </ul>	<p>Key SA contacts </p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td><b>Director</b></td> <td><b>President</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>Representation coordinator</b></td> <td><b>Education officer</b></td> </tr> </table> <p> @sparqs_scotland </p>	<b>Director</b>	<b>President</b>	<b>Representation coordinator</b>	<b>Education officer</b>
<b>Director</b>	<b>President</b>				
<b>Representation coordinator</b>	<b>Education officer</b>				
<p><b>National engagement</b></p> <p>Your SA will be well-placed to provide content that explains the ways in which it works at a sectoral level to impact on decisions about the learning experience.</p> <p>This will include work with sparqs and others on shaping quality arrangements, contributing to national projects and committees, and meeting with other SAs about shared priorities.</p> <p>These may be areas of work that most staff do not hear much about.</p>	<p>National engagement </p> <p> @sparqs_scotland </p>				
<p><b>Institutional engagement</b></p> <p>Again your SA will be well-placed to create content for this topic, but there are a number of elements of the SA that are worth considering. Staff may find it interesting to try to identify what they know about the SA's work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key committees and forums – the SA will sit on a large number of institutional committees relating to learning, teaching, quality, governance and the wider student experience. It will be useful to understand the full range of what the SA sits on, and that that means for demonstrating partnership and impact.</li> </ul>	<p>Institutional engagement </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key committees and forums.</li> <li>• Institutional strategies: including on partnership.</li> <li>• Student-Led Teaching Awards.</li> <li>• Reviews.</li> <li>• Campaigns on learning and teaching.</li> </ul> <p> @sparqs_scotland </p>				



- Institutional strategies: similarly, the SA will be involved in the development of various strategies that shape learning and student life. Among them may be a Student Partnership Agreement, student engagement strategy, or similar document that sets out the way in which the institution and SA will work together. Staff may have interesting reflections on how aware they are of this document and how they might have contributed to it.
- Student-Led Teaching Awards (SLTAs): One of the most striking ways in which students can celebrate excellent teaching are through SLTAs. They are a great way of congratulating staff who have done great things, but more than that, they illustrate the aspects of good learning experiences that students most appreciate. Your institution and SA may have done analysis of these results, which could be the basis of interesting discussion about what good learning and teaching looks like.
- Campaigning on learning and teaching: While SAs campaign on a wide variety of issues, this also includes matters relating to the learning experience. And such campaigns may be attempts to influence institutional leadership and might even be rooted in disagreement. How can an SA effectively campaign against a decision it does not like while still being a partner? Does partnership always mean agreement? If not, how does an SA and institution disagree well?

### Academic reps

The aspect of an SA's work that staff might know most about is its support for the system of academic reps, including course reps (see content in workshop template 5) and reps at a departmental or faculty level.

Of importance here are staff and officers within the SA who provide that direct support. But key institutional staff also have a role in supporting academic reps – such as departmental or faculty managers and administrators, course leaders, and committee chairs. It is worth reflecting on what staff can do to support, and gain from, the academic rep system.

Academic reps



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