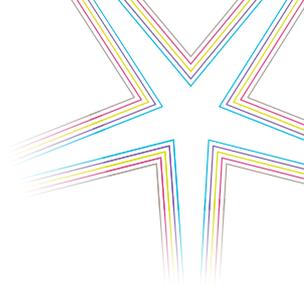


**sparqs**

student partnerships in quality scotland

Annual Report  
2014-15





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# Introduction



Professor  
Norman  
Sharp OBE

Independent  
Chair of sparqs  
Steering  
Committee

Scotland's commitment to student engagement and the work of sparqs is something of which we should be very proud. As policy developments elsewhere in the UK seem to increasingly emphasise education as a commodity and students as consumers, our deeper focus on the enhancement of learning and teaching and the role of students as partners is something we should seek to preserve and strengthen.

Scotland has a clear policy drive to ensure that the life chances of all are enhanced by excellent educational opportunities. It is important that as a nation we continue to emphasise the vital role of the student voice in shaping those opportunities to ensure they are the best they can be.

The role of sparqs in supporting an informed and effective student voice in quality matters continues to be pivotal. Our experience over the past twelve months has, yet again, reinforced the high esteem in which sparqs is held

internationally. Nonetheless, we are not complacent and our plans for the next few years are designed to ensure that the student voice will remain a cornerstone of continuing to deliver efficient and effective educational journeys fit for purpose in shaping our future economy and society.

As always, it has been a privilege to chair sparqs this year. I know you will find in the pages of this report evidence of the range and breadth of the vital work that sparqs carries out. It continues to provide the professional training and development services which have been instrumental in supporting students and staff across Scotland in benefitting from effective student engagement in the planning, delivery and quality enhancement of provision. sparqs also continues to challenge and introduce new activities which meet the needs of an ever changing sector, which are also outlined in the following pages.

I am pleased the report details some exciting new developments in student engagement that are of particular strategic importance in Scotland. For example, as the sector implements its work plans to address the challenges inherent in Scotland's Young Workforce and the Commission for Widening Access, sparqs is already continuing to develop activities to ensure learners from all backgrounds have the opportunity and support to enable them to shape and monitor their own experience to the benefit of themselves, their peers, our economy and society.



Eve Lewis

Director  
of sparqs

It has been a pleasure working with our many friends and colleagues across Scotland and increasingly internationally. I'm proud of the many things we have achieved this year, but none of it would be possible without the enthusiasm and hard work of students and staff in colleges, universities and a range of other organisations.

We have set ourselves many challenges this year and my thanks go to the sparqs team for their continued hard work. I receive so many lovely comments from

colleagues about the support they offer and I know their commitment is at the heart of our successes.

This report gives a flavour of these successes and I hope it will give you a good overview of our work. A highlight of the year was our National Conference. At the conference we announced a change in our name from 'participation' to 'partnerships' – a subtle but significant change which reflects the journey we have all undertaken in recent years. For me, the range of topics covered in our workshops and plenaries was a fantastic indication of the depth and breadth of student engagement in Scotland. These achievements were reflected again in the wonderful nominations and prize winners in our first Student Engagement Awards. Congratulations again to all our winners and runners up for your achievements – they are part of the success story.

We look forward to working with you all on the challenges of the future and celebrating more successes at our next conference and awards ceremony in March 2017.

# About sparqs

Our work over the past year has seen us complete a number of projects with colleges and universities whilst at the same time embarking on a range of new and exciting initiatives with sector partners, institutions and students. We have also been working on the development of an Outcome Agreement with the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) which will outline and measure the impact of a range of our key activities.

Key areas of work this year have included:

- Developing our course rep materials including the publication of a Gaelic version.
- Planning and leading a That's Quality event for college student officers and staff to complement our event for universities.
- Developing a range of staff development resources.
- Conducting research on the range of methods used by colleges and universities to accredit and recognise representation work, culminating in the publication of a report.
- Supporting colleges and students' associations in the SFC Action Learning Pilots.
- Playing a key role in the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Enhancement Themes Conference Working Group.
- Working with articulation hubs, particularly ELRAH (Edinburgh, Lothians, Fife and Borders Articulation Hub), on raising the profile of student engagement for students articulating from college to university.

New areas of work continue to emerge and include:

- Contributing to the work of the new *Framework for the Development of Strong and Effective College Students' Associations in Scotland*.
- Contributing to discussions and work around the Quality Enhancement Framework Review.
- Supporting colleges and universities undergoing external review.
- Further development of Student Partnership Agreements (SPAs) and enhanced representation systems across colleges and universities.

- Supporting the SFC work on the College Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey.
- Running school, college and university transitions events in partnership with the Higher Education Academy (HEA).
- Developing student engagement processes for apprentices in partnership with colleges and employers.
- International consultancy work with a range of partners in Ireland, Armenia and New Zealand.

Our impact is evidenced in the continued development of a culture of engagement and partnership as demonstrated in:

- Evaluations of how our training and events have developed understanding of engagement processes and provided skills to apply that understanding.
- Evaluative information on the effectiveness of student engagement in institutions from Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR), Institution-led Review (ILR) and Education Scotland Review reports; and stakeholder feedback.
- Quantitative measures – such as the number of institutions who engage with us on projects and feedback from partners on the effectiveness of our support and advice; the development of SPAs; statistics on use of our website and resources; and institutional documentation.
- Requests and invitations to provide advice and engage in project work with national and international colleges, universities and agencies.

Our strategic aims, while ambitious, are practical and rooted in the experiences of students and institutions; through our operational plan we will deliver effective support to students, colleges, universities, students' associations and sector agencies. Our work will continue to provide the resources, advice and research that can underpin truly effective student engagement and real changes and enhancements to the learning experience throughout Scotland.

This annual report highlights our work during the past year through the prism of our four strategic aims.

## Vision /Mission /Aims

### 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

INSPIRES

### 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

ACHIEVED VIA

### STRATEGIC AIMS

Strategic Aim 1  
**Supporting Students**

Strategic Aim 2  
**Supporting Institutions**

Strategic Aim 3  
**Supporting the Sector**

Strategic Aim 4  
**Developing a Culture**

SHAPES

HOW WE WILL WORK

SHAPES

OUR VALUES AND APPROACHES

## How we work

sparqs is funded by the Scottish Funding Council and you can see details of how our funding is spent below.

The role of students in shaping learning and teaching remains key to the quality arrangements for Scottish colleges and universities. sparqs supports this, working in partnership with students, institutions and sector agencies, taking direction from a Steering Committee. Chaired by an independent member, our Steering Committee includes representation from all the main sector agencies as well as student

membership from both the National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland and the university and college sectors.

sparqs employs ten members of staff, based largely in the NUS Scotland Edinburgh office, with one homeworker based in Inverness. We also employ a team of Associate Trainers – students who work for us part-time for an academic year, primarily to deliver Course Rep Training, but also to support other sparqs work and events.

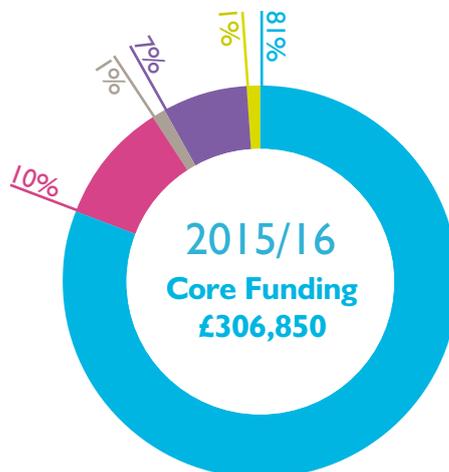
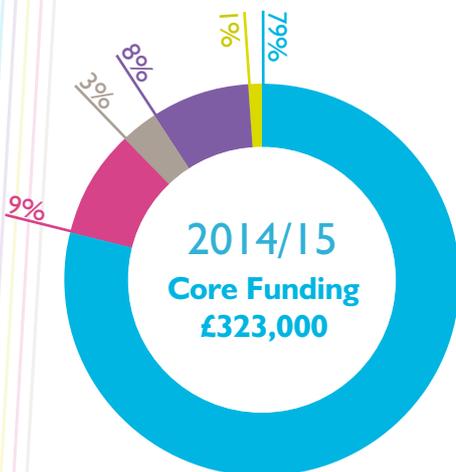
You can see details of all of our staff on our website.



## Finance

We face the continued challenge of developing services to realise new opportunities with ever tightening resources. Tight control of our finances, making efficiencies wherever possible, along with small amounts of external income generated from our international work has

allowed us to continue to respond effectively to sector needs whilst preparing for reduced funding in 2015-16. Over the next year we will continue to explore further avenues of funding to try and mitigate the effects of reduced core funding.



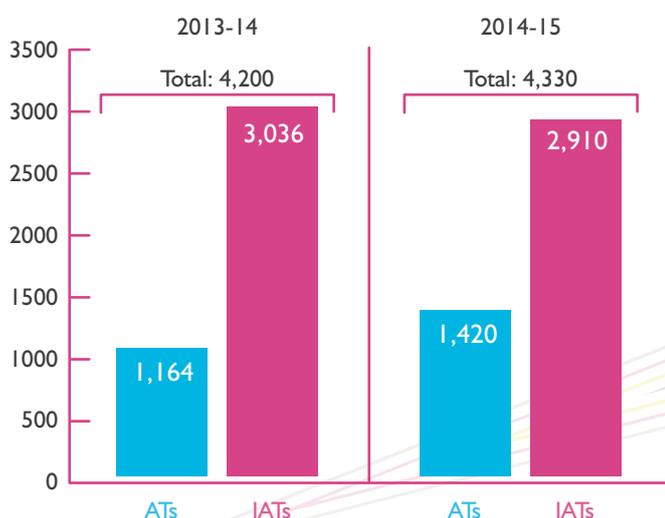
- Key**
- Staff Costs
  - Overheads
  - Events
  - Course Rep Scheme
  - Media and Resources

# Strategic Aim 1 - Supporting Students

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

### Course Rep Training

During 2014-15 a total of 4,330 reps were trained, 1,420 by sparqs Associate Trainers (ATs) and 2,910 via the Institutional Associate Trainer (IAT) scheme. Course Rep Training continues to be a key element of our core activity with 82 sessions delivered at colleges and universities by sparqs, an increase from 74 sessions in the previous year. Overall, the number of course reps trained has seen an increase.



Our training continues to be highly rated, as demonstrated by our evaluation data:

- 91% of attendees found the training useful or very useful.
- 94% would recommend sparqs training.
- 61% understood or fully understood the role of a course rep before training. This increased to 96% after training.
- 46% understood or fully understood the mechanisms for student engagement and representation within their institution before training. This increased to 93% after training.

To ensure relevance our Course Rep Training is delivered by a team of Associate Trainers, current



or former course reps who are recruited annually and work for us on a part-time basis. The training programme, the content of which is regularly reviewed, has a significant and positive impact on the institutions for whom we deliver training. Equally as important, it provides development opportunities for the ATs who deliver it. They develop a considerable range of skills in delivering training and an understanding of quality systems, often going on to do further work for sparqs and others in the sector.

“

“I have really enjoyed being an Associate Trainer with sparqs over a number of years; it has provided me with a great deal of self-confidence and personal development. I have delivered a wide range of course rep sessions in both colleges and universities and have recently been involved in facilitating sessions for special programme student groups. I have seen the positive impact of the training on course reps and using people like ourselves as trainers, close to the student experience, adds to its effectiveness. For me it has gone full circle as I have just helped sparqs train future Associate Trainers at their annual residential training event.”

”

**Morven Stewart, sparqs Associate Trainer**

## Institutional Associate Trainer (IAT) scheme

We also work with individual institutions to recruit their own Course Rep Training teams, known as IATs. The IAT scheme enables institutions to increase their capacity for training throughout the year and also gives them considerable flexibility. It also gives us opportunities to be more efficient and cost-effective in the overall delivery of Course Rep Training. We train IATs at our annual development event alongside our own ATs, and have supported the work of IAT schemes in nine universities and colleges over the past year. We are attracting interest in establishing IAT schemes in a number of additional colleges and universities and are committed to increase the number of participating institutions this coming year to enable us to cope with increasing Course Rep Training demands.

“

“Our Student Representation Assistants (IATs) are involved in delivering training, giving induction talks on student representation, organising the StaR Awards and promoting the NSS. The role has had a notable impact on student engagement as well as increasing students’ satisfaction with training by 50%.”

”

**Cecile Guilloteau, Welfare and Representation Coordinator, Queen Margaret University Students’ Union**



“

The Institutional Associate Trainer scheme at the City of Glasgow College Students’ Association has been a great success. It gives us the ability to build a timetable for course rep training that fits with the needs of the student body and has undoubtedly contributed to the increased number of course reps we’ve been able to train in the last two years. Reps have reacted positively to the scheme – it has allowed us to make the training bespoke for our reps and highlights the progression that can be made through actively engaging with the course rep role.”

”

**Dougie Smith, Students’ Association Liaison Officer, City of Glasgow College**

## Developing rep training

In 2014-15 we reviewed the content of our training materials to make it more up-to-date and relevant to reflect the changes which have been introduced across the college sector. These changes have been incorporated into our Introductory Course Rep Training programme for 2015-16.

This year we also produced a Gaelic version of our Introductory Course Rep Training materials to enable institutions to deliver training to students whose subject or medium of study is Gaelic.

Additionally, we continue to deliver Course Rep Training to supported education students and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) students across colleges, using sparqs staff and a number of experienced ATs. With the many changes in staffing across colleges over the past two years we decided in partnership with the College Development Network (CDN) to run an awareness session for supported education staff on the materials and their use. This was well attended and early indications are that our uptake in the training will increase in the coming year. We also ran an in-house event for course rep organisers and students’ associations aimed at increasing the knowledge of barriers faced by supported programme reps and how students’ associations can work with supported programme students.

- This year we employed an intern to carry out a piece of work around Post Graduate Taught (PGT) Course Rep Training and “Mastersness”, utilising the outcomes from the QAA Learning from International Practice (LFIP) project. We conducted research into the support available to PGT Course Reps and followed this up with a day-long consultation into issues around PGT representation. A consultation report has been written, from which we hope to develop guidance on maximising the PGT student voice.

### Training for students’ association officers and staff

This year, for the first time, we led a “That’s Quality Colleges” event which provided college student officers and students’ association staff with an induction to quality enhancement processes. In previous years this has been a joint event with NUS Scotland focusing on college student leadership. The event was supported by sector partners such as Education Scotland, the SFC and NUS Scotland and focused on the national arrangements and procedures that assist colleges ensure the best possible student experience. This was a well-attended event with 35 student officers and staff taking part from most colleges; feedback from delegates about the day was very positive.

We amended our “That’s Quality Universities” event for university officers and staff, lengthening it to two days, and providing more opportunity to hear from and speak with key sector partners such as QAA and the SFC.

The event was attended by 20 student officers and staff. The changes to the format were well received, resulting in a lively and stimulating event.

“

“That’s Quality provided an excellent opportunity for officers and staff to meet and discuss common and unique challenges being faced by students’ associations and to begin developing relevant solutions. The training programme was greatly beneficial for new officers and a great re-fresh for those who have been in the movement for a period of time. New skills and perspectives were also introduced which will benefit me and colleagues across the academic year.”

”

**Stewart Squire, Democratic Support and Policy Coordinator, Dundee University Students’ Association**



# Strategic Aim 2 - Supporting Institutions

## Supporting the development of practices and activities in institutions and their students' associations that encourage and support student engagement

We continue to support colleges and universities in ensuring that student engagement remains a key focus in the quality of the student experience. This is particularly important in the face of substantial structural changes that have been introduced in the college sector and the range of new national policy initiatives faced by both colleges and universities. The Partnerships for Change Project which was designed to support the development of students' associations throughout the college regionalisation process ended in Autumn 2014. However, it was recognised by sector partners that there was still further development work required. sparqs (together with NUS Scotland) has been funded for a further two years by the SFC to support the continued development of college students' associations in line with the recommendations contained within the Griggs Report on college governance. We will work closely with colleges, providing each with a named sparqs contact to liaise with and plan bespoke consultancy work.

### Framework for the Development of Strong and Effective College Students' Associations in Scotland

The Framework was launched by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning in June 2015 and is the culmination of work led by a working group comprising the Scottish Government, the SFC, NUS Scotland and a College Regional Chair. The group was established after the SFC was asked to work with NUS Scotland to take forward Recommendation 23 of the Griggs Review of Scottish College Governance. sparqs contributed to the development of the Framework, particularly in ensuring that students' associations were positioned as key players in quality enhancement arrangements; we also took part in all the consultation and validation events which took place during its development. The Framework provides a sector-shared vision for students' association development and a common understanding of its key concepts and qualities and is enabling us to contextualise much of our development work with colleges.

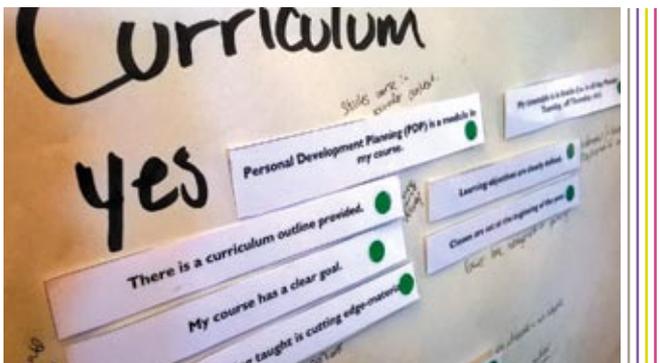


### Staff Development

Enthusiastic and committed staff are a key component in effective engagement with students and we work closely with staff to develop their role in and their understanding of student engagement. We have developed an induction programme for new college staff which will be available for institutions to book from early 2016. This programme is also being developed in an online format.

This year we have also supported three students' associations (Glasgow Caledonian University, New College Lanarkshire and South Lanarkshire College) in developing and delivering a number of successful student-led staff development sessions within their own institutions. This work was showcased at the sparqs conference and has attracted interest from other students' associations.

We have worked with CDN in support of their college leadership programmes, putting together a pack of materials on student engagement for staff to use in project work.



This year we launched a new series of events aimed at staff within universities, colleges and students' associations who co-ordinate Course Rep Training. The series is designed to support practitioners and officers in developing and reviewing various aspects of Course Rep Training, such as materials, online delivery, the use of Institutional Associate Trainers, accreditation, and engaging reps in key decisions and consultations. The first event was held in April 2015, attended by 20 staff from both colleges and universities. Going forward, we are planning to hold 3 events per year.

## Curriculum design

We continue to be involved with the HEA project on Equality and Diversity in the Curriculum through membership of its advisory group and supporting student involvement in its work in institutions. We have delivered joint workshops on student involvement in this work in institutions several times, including to Scottish university staff and to student officers at the NUS Scotland Gathering in August 2014, at our own event in-house and at the sparqs national conference in May 2015. We were also invited to present this work at the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQUAF) in November 2014 in Barcelona.

As an example of this work the Vice President Academic Affairs at The University of Edinburgh is leading a university-funded project to develop a pre-Honours gender elective module. This work was presented at this year's sparqs conference.

## Institutional consultancy work

While we continue to offer training materials for student members of internal review panels in

universities, we have also begun work on capturing the student contribution to the review more effectively. In partnership with The Robert Gordon University we are facilitating awareness sessions with staff and students and developing a resource for departments and subject areas on how to engage students in preparing for and responding to an Institution-led Review.

We have worked closely with the university's IT resources team (who were reviewed throughout 2014-15) and Gray's School of Art. We are supporting Gray's School of Art in their preparation for an Institution-led Subject Review in January 2016. We have been working with staff and students in close partnership and have devised a development programme to ensure that the review is informed by high quality and creative dialogue and feedback. It is planned that this work will inform the development of a resource to be produced in early 2016 to support other institutions engaged in internal review.



“

“We have enjoyed working with sparqs on their institution-led subject review project. It's good that our experiences are contributing to a nationally-available resource, but we've also learned a lot from sparqs' expertise and creativity to help our own review preparation. Their contribution to promoting student engagement has been very useful.”

”

**Libby Curtis, Associate Head, Gray's School of Art, The Robert Gordon University**



This year we were approached by the new Scottish Graduate School of Arts and Humanities (SGSAH) to work with them on the involvement of their students in learning and teaching enhancement. SGSAH has a unique governance structure, made up of 16 Scottish universities offering graduate programmes to students across Scotland. Working with the Director, we devised a consultation process with a focus group of their students. The outcomes of the consultation were significant; SGSAH have developed resources and information specifically aimed at student reps, identified training suitable for reps, and sparqs will be involved as critical friends in their new rep induction and development over the year.

## Annual Support Visits

We have conducted Annual Support Visits with universities for the past three years. These visits have provided us with useful intelligence on what is happening in individual universities as well as assisting us plan for future work. On the advice of the sparqs University Advisory Group we have enhanced the structure for the coming year by engaging in more pre-visit dialogue with each institution, encouraging them to reflect on their own priorities and successes and using data from sources such as SPAs, the National Student Survey (NSS) and internal and external quality reviews to shape the agenda. These changes should ensure that sparqs is in a better position to respond to needs and shape future services.

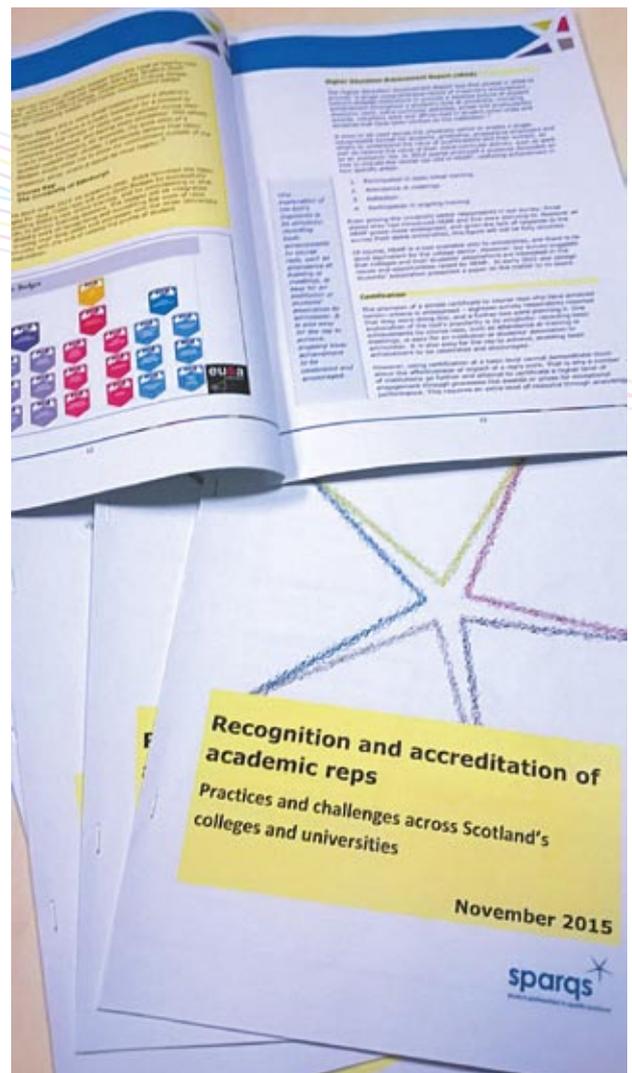
## Accreditation and recognition

sparqs has conducted research and produced a resource exploring the accreditation and recognition of

academic representatives, especially course reps. The focus has been on practical initiatives to give something back to course reps in terms of skills development, and a reward for time and energy invested in the role, and this resource attempts to highlight the main features.

The research involved desk-based research, a survey of the sector and a number of site visits to institutions. The report highlights some excellent partnership working between institutions and students' associations, and looks at some of the key challenges involving resources and recording activity.

There is considerable interest from across the sector in accrediting student officer and rep activity and impact; this resource will be a useful starting point for students' associations and institutions to take this forward.



# Strategic Aim 3 - Supporting the sector

## Support student engagement with national sector agencies and policy developments

### Sector Committee Engagement

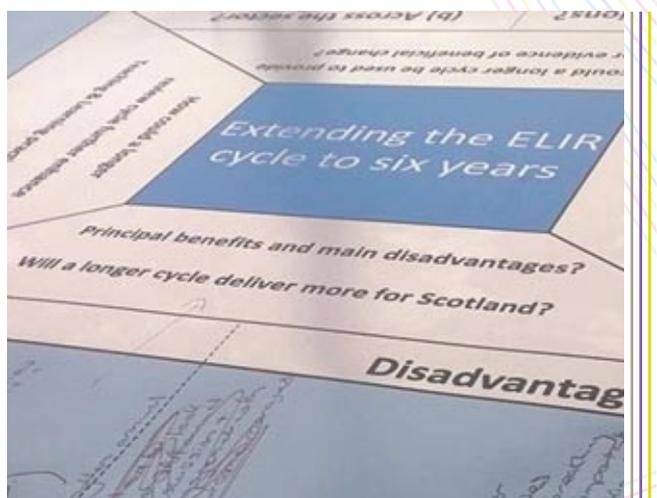
Student representatives from across Scotland sit on a number of national committees which help to determine the future of learning and teaching in colleges and universities. Working with NUS Scotland, sparqs supports these representatives to be able to contribute effectively to the committees, briefing them on current sector issues and offering guidance and practical support.

During 2014-15, 9 student officers from institutions and 3 NUS officers were supported across 22 committees, the majority of which meet quarterly. 15 of those included representation from sparqs and/or NUS Scotland staff, who also sat on a further 11 committees and working groups throughout the year. In total, 79 meetings were attended by one or more students/staff throughout the year.

### Sector Conferences

We directly engage at a sector level through participation in national conferences organised by sector agencies and individual institutions. Throughout the year we have attended a total of 54 conferences, 30 in the capacity of delegates and 24 as presenters/facilitators, covering topics such as student engagement processes, good practice in student representation, transitions and articulation, the student reviewer in QAA external reviews, enhancing learning through technology and implementation of the *Framework for the Development of Strong and Effective College Students' Associations in Scotland*. Many examples of presentations delivered by our staff are focused on core elements of our work which is highlighted throughout the rest of this report, not least events relating to our international engagement.

These opportunities continue to maintain and enhance the profile of sparqs and our work across the sector and beyond, but more importantly ensure that we remain aware of and responsive to the main debates and trends within colleges, universities and students' associations.



## National quality and review developments

### College Quality and Action Learning Pilots

Over the past year the SFC has initiated work on the development of college quality arrangements. This is taking the form of a series of pilot projects at three colleges, which feed into a group called the Action Learning Project Board which oversees the process. One of the aims of the review is to determine how colleges can develop their self-evaluation processes. This year sparqs has worked closely with South Lanarkshire College, assisting them to identify ways of enhancing the student voice within the review process and also to investigate more innovative ways of incorporating that voice within the report. We facilitated an event at the college in June 2015, working with a wide range of managers, teaching and support staff and students on the arrangements for student input to quality processes. The session resulted in an outline plan for future work focusing on strategic development and an SPA.

The pilot projects have been extended for a further year and sparqs is continuing to work with colleges to ensure students are able to contribute to this work.

## University Quality and Quality Enhancement Framework

In the university sector, the quality arrangements are governed by the Quality Enhancement Framework, of which student engagement is one of the key pillars. The SFC has initiated a review of arrangements and has involved a number of key committees in this work, of which sparqs is a member. The outcome of the review has potentially far-reaching consequences for learning and teaching in universities.

In January 2015, together with NUS Scotland, we held an event for student officers to help them think critically about the future of HE quality in Scotland and support them in responding to the SFC's consultation on the review. This process was also a means of informing sparqs' own consultation response which focused on recommendations for enhancing student engagement in the review process.

The responses from the sector conveyed strong support for the Framework and the ethos of enhancement which, it is felt, has been of great benefit to the sector. sparqs was also delighted by the strong commitment shown across the sector to the role of student engagement with submissions, showing support for the contributions students have made over the years and an appetite for further development work in this area.

A majority of institutions would like to see the ELIR cycle extended from its current four years. There is agreement that this would be a significant change which would need further thought and consultation with the sector. Another key area for discussion will be the role of Public Information and how it fits into the Framework. As a member of the SFC's University Quality Working Group, sparqs will continue to contribute to these discussions and ensure that student engagement remains at the heart of the quality arrangements in Scotland.

## External Reviews

In the college and university sectors, we have continued to provide support for institutions undergoing external review. Working with Education Scotland, we will be holding an event for college

students' association student officers and students' association staff to help them prepare for their external review in the coming year. The event aims to provide participants with an understanding of the review process, including the Learner Engagement Questionnaire, and to help them engage their students with the process. At our conference this year, one of the presentations led by Education Scotland and sparqs provided an opportunity for delegates to discuss the current and future quality arrangements across the college sector.

This year we have worked with Edinburgh College Students' Association in developing the ideas for an annual quality report which will better reflect the student voice in relation to the quality of the student experience.

In the university sector, we continue to offer consultancy support to university students' associations in advance of ELIR.

## Student Partnership Agreements (SPAs)

This year has seen more focus on SPAs in Scotland's colleges. Our national conference featured two specific sessions on SPAs – one focusing on developments in universities and the other in colleges.

We published the *Guidance on the Development and Implementation of a Student Partnership Agreement in Colleges* in May 2015 as a complement to the University Guidance published the previous year. In connection with the work being done around the College Students' Association Framework we are holding a workshop in October 2015 for colleges, to enable officers and representatives from colleges to develop their ideas and plan for the development of an SPA. We are also holding a workshop for universities in October 2015 with the purpose of looking at good practice, reviewing and renewing existing agreements and introducing them for institutions who have yet to develop one.

This practical activity should see a number of college SPA developments being supported at colleges around the country in the coming months and universities reviewing and renewing their SPAs.

## Enhancement Themes

In the university sector, the QAA Enhancement Themes are a key part of both institutional and national quality activity, producing sector-wide outcomes and the sharing of good practice. Students have a key role in this development work.

This year brought the start of the new theme – Student Transitions – and sparqs has carried out a programme of work to raise the level of student engagement. At the beginning of the year we met individually with most of the student officers to help them explore how the theme could provide opportunities for them to develop work plans that would fit with their own priorities for learning and teaching. These visits were followed up with an event to help officers develop their plans further. These activities helped raise student awareness of the new theme and helped support students to make the most of the activities within their institutions and fed into their work at a national level.

We continue to work in partnership with QAA Scotland to support student members of institutional Enhancement Theme projects.

We have also continued to support the Enhancement Themes Student Network, which brings together lead student officers and students' association staff from across the university sector to develop ideas and make suggestions for projects. We supported a presentation of their activities at the Enhancement Themes International Conference "Enhancement and Innovation in Higher Education" in Glasgow in June 2015. The improved level of student engagement with the theme is most easily evidenced by the increased involvement of students at this conference. There were 88 student delegates and 21 sessions presented by students, alongside students delivering plenary sessions, after dinner speeches, taking part in panel discussions and performing.

Further work relating to Enhancement Themes this past year has included:

- Being an active member of the Theme Leaders' Group, which directs the work of the theme for the sector.

- Supporting the organisation and delivery of the Enhancement Themes International Conference through our membership of the Conference Working Group.
- Working with QAA Scotland to produce a new leaflet aimed at course reps to help get them more involved in the current theme.
- A strong presence at the International Enhancement Themes Conference. sparqs led a workshop on engaging articulating students and also supported two student groups to run workshops on Post Graduate Taught transitions and transitions from college to university. Additionally, we supported student chairs of presentation sessions.

## Support for student engagement with national data

For several years we have supported the college sector in exploring the potential for introducing a national survey. Last year a survey was considered at the SFC Thematic Group on quality that could be used by colleges and their students' associations to identify and help shape enhancement activities. This idea has been progressed with a pilot survey being introduced across the majority of colleges. We have supported this development, contributing to the working group and developing opportunities for student engagement. In March 2015 we ran an event with the objective of increasing the capacity of college students' associations to promote the pre-pilot of the survey and to utilise the resultant data as fully as possible. With SFC participation at the event, we facilitated discussion about the strategic background to the survey, and how college students' associations can best use the data to push for quality enhancement within their institutions. This work will assist us in working with individual college students' associations.

We are keeping up-to-date with the progress of the ongoing NSS Review, as well as liaising with colleagues and partner organisations across the sector to make sure sparqs maintains an informed stance on the future of NSS. In the context of developing our ongoing work on students' associations' use of data to lead enhancement work, the future of the NSS will inform our future work closely.



## Widening the student voice

### The student voice in decision-making around e-learning and assessment

Supporting the use of the student voice in e-learning developments is an emergent area of work for sparqs. The majority of colleges and universities are expanding their use of digital approaches in learning and teaching; promoting student engagement in its effective design and use is seen as an important piece of work for sparqs, assisting students to enhance its effectiveness. To that end we are ensuring that we are represented and involved in a number of e-learning projects.

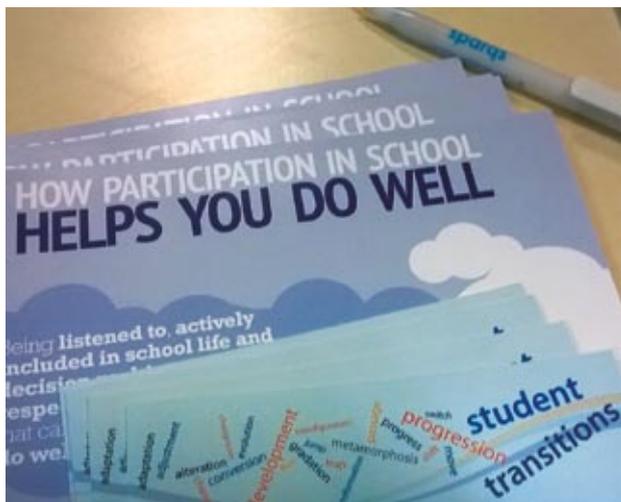
- We have been invited to join the Jisc Change Agents Network Advisory Board which has a focus on innovative student-led e-learning initiatives.
- We are working with the Scottish Qualifications Authority to incorporate the learner voice into e-assessment design and we are also co-authoring a paper on co-created assessment and programme design with the SFC.
- We are also represented on working groups such as the Colleges e-Assessment Group (CEAG) and the Jisc-funded Creating Innovative Technology-enhanced Assessments (CIT-eA) project.

- Finally, and tying in with our work supporting the Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey, we have created a data and technology working group for students' association and support staff in colleges.

All of these individual pieces of work are contributing to, and are evidence of, the increasing importance of the student voice in the design and development of e-learning and e-assessment. As ever more institutions develop the use of e-learning, this is an area of our work that will expand and develop.

### Articulation

This year we worked with all of the articulation hubs across Scotland, in particular with ELRAH, to promote student engagement in articulation between college and university. This included establishing a student representative group consisting of students and students' association staff from the region's colleges and universities. It has created opportunities for this important group of students to have their voice heard and help shape developments in their learning and teaching and ensure the success of these programmes. The student representative



group facilitated workshops at both the sparqs conference and the QAA International Enhancement Themes Conference.

As part of this work we also sought to work with articulation practitioners and ran workshops for college and university staff at a series of conferences, including the annual SFC event 'Articulation for All'.

We are continuing this project in the coming year and are developing plans to embed this activity within ELRAH partner institutions.

## Supporting School Transitions

Building on the 'Transitions' Enhancement Theme, sparqs and HEA are delivering a project in Autumn 2015 to bring together learners and education professionals from schools, colleges and universities. Aligned to the Curriculum for Excellence, sparqs and HEA will jointly run 4 events across Scotland covering the subjects of Engineering, Social Sciences, Creative Industries and Health Sciences.

All of the events will aim to encourage dialogue around learning styles and expectations of the next level of learner transitions being undertaken by those in attendance. The HEA contribution will focus on CPD style work with staff from schools, colleges and universities who are in attendance. As a key outcome of the project, sparqs will produce a toolkit incorporating the session plans to allow other organisations to replicate the workshops. This will subsequently be available via the sparqs resource

library along with an evaluation of the project and the research completed around the pedagogy of engaging diverse groups of learners and practitioners.

## Working with apprentices

This year we have begun exciting work developing representation structures with apprentices. Working closely with the National Society of Apprentices Scotland, we have developed contacts with three major firms across Scotland with the intention of holding 'Apprentice Voice' events with their apprentices. Building on the success of the programme in England, we are seeking to create long-term links with employers that will lead to cohorts of apprentices well-versed in reflecting on the quality and content of their learning. We aim for one of the outputs of this project to be a comprehensive draft of an 'Apprentice Learning Experience', with input from a number of sector bodies. We have also held a number of apprentice engagement days in colleges that have informed our work, as well as collaborating on external National Society of Apprentices work reaching 60-70 apprentices with 'Apprentice Voice' training.

Additionally, sparqs and NUS Scotland held an event on apprentice engagement in March 2015 with staff and students from 7 colleges exploring how apprentices can be better engaged in representation and quality within colleges.



# Strategic Aim 4 - Supporting a Culture

## Support the development of a culture of student engagement across Scotland

The development of a strong and vibrant culture of student engagement is very much our overarching aim in all the work that we do, and is what continually attracts interest from the rest of the UK and internationally. That culture is demonstrated by active student partnership in decision-making processes and the enhancement of learning, teaching and the student experience.

### sparqs National Conference 2015

The sparqs national conference was held on Friday 29th May 2015 at the Edinburgh Conference Centre, Heriot-Watt University. We were delighted to have over 180 delegates attending from Scotland, the rest of the UK as well as from New Zealand, Ireland, Slovenia and Kosovo. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with many responses indicating ways delegates could use learning from the conference. Delegates praised many aspects of the range of presentations, the event organisation and the awards ceremony.

The day began with a welcome from Eve Lewis, Director of sparqs, followed by a formal opening of the conference by Professor Alice Brown, Chair of the Scottish Funding Council.

Our keynote speakers included Professor Mary Stuart, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lincoln and Dan Derricott, the University's Student Engagement Manager and Liz Gunn, the Strategic Lead for ELRAH,



together with input from Vonnie Sandlan, NUS Scotland President, plus David McKay and Gabriel Kemp, students at Heriot-Watt University and Edinburgh Napier University. The presentations set the tone for an engaging conference, highlighting issues such as strategic approaches to student engagement across an institution, empowering staff to engage students and the increasing importance of engaging with the increasing diversity of students, including those articulating from college to university.

The conference included a wide range of sessions on topics of current importance such as co-curriculum initiatives, Partnership Agreements, working with apprentices, development of representation and international approaches to student engagement. Students, staff and sector agencies came together to share practices and successes as well as explore new challenges.

### International Conference Delegate Day

On Thursday 28th May 2015 we held a day for international delegates, as a precursor to our national conference taking place the following day. We hosted delegates from Ireland, Kosovo, Slovenia, Spain and New Zealand to give them an opportunity to learn about the Scottish context of student engagement ahead of the main conference.



Glasgow Caledonian University/Glasgow Caledonian University Students' Association

## Student Engagement Awards 2015

This year at the end of the conference Professor Norman Sharp presented a number of sparqs student engagement awards as recognition of the increasing body of innovative and inspiring partnership work that is taking place across our colleges and universities. The awards covered four categories:

**1. A new initiative established by a students' association in partnership with their university which has made the most impact on the enhancement of the student experience**

**Winner:** Glasgow Caledonian University/Glasgow Caledonian University Students' Association ~ GCU Engage: a model for sustainable student engagement and partnership working in higher education

**Runner-up:** Queen Margaret University Students' Union ~ Student representation assistants: supporting academic representation and experience

**2. A new initiative established by a students' association in partnership with their college which has made the most impact on the enhancement of the student experience**

**Winner:** Glasgow Clyde College Students' Association ~ Enhance your Learning and Teaching Experience (ELATE)

**Runner-up:** New College Lanarkshire and South Lanarkshire College Students' Associations ~ Engage to inspire - student delivery of staff development in practice – the perspective from college students' associations

**3.(a) The most effective course rep initiative in a university**

**Winner:** Glasgow Caledonian University Students' Association ~ GCU School Conferences: a picture of School specific engagement across GCU

**Runner-up:** Edinburgh University Students' Association ~ Developing course rep engagement through institutional partnership

**(b) The most effective course rep initiative in a college**

**Winner:** Borders College ~ Student Representation at Borders College

**Runner-up:** Forth Valley College Students' Association ~ Forth Valley College Students' Association Class Rep training

**4. Partnership in the classroom in a college/ university – a recognition of partnership in curriculum design, curriculum delivery and assessment and feedback**

**Winner:** University of Abertay ~ Assessment criteria with consensus are authentic criteria: students as partners in assessment grading and feedback

**Runner-up:** Edinburgh Napier University ~ Rethinking peer, rethinking review: students' collaboration in the review of teaching practices



Borders College

## Student Engagement Framework

Originally published in 2012, the Student Engagement Framework continues to be a valuable resource for the sector, and sparqs has been at the forefront of its application. Its sector-approved approach to understanding and exploring student engagement has been of considerable interest to many of our international partners, as well as a vital foundation for institutional engagement.

For instance, we have worked with a number of colleges to use the Framework as a basis for institutional strategies and plans for student engagement, including Edinburgh College and Orkney College UHI.

“

Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) partners the GCU Students' Association to articulate a co-constructed approach to student engagement that reflects key messages of the Student Engagement Framework and the QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education. This joint approach informs the GCU annual student-led Student Experience Summit and underpins a sustainable approach to student engagement within existing academic and professional spheres, making student engagement normal practice, and 'just part of what we do'.

”

**Professor Nicola Andrew, Academic Lead for Enhancement, Glasgow Caledonian University**

“

The City of Glasgow College Student Engagement Team has fully adopted the Student Engagement Framework, and employs it as the foundation for all our formal and informal plans, strategies and initiatives. It informs our goals for the session, and ensures that our focus and motivation always puts students at the centre of everything we do. Our self-evaluation sessions assess our progress, development and improvement against the Framework, and we work together to ensure quality enhancement is being realised.

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**Dianne Gallacher, Head of Student Development, City of Glasgow College**

## Website

We continue to develop our website to ensure it provides an up-to-date, attractive and easily navigable resource. Statistics show that our website is increasingly utilised, with a 63% increase in users compared to the previous academic year. Unsurprisingly, our national conference webpages were amongst the most-viewed during 2014-15, along with the Student Engagement Framework, Resource Library, and Course Rep Training pages. After the UK, our second biggest audience continues to be the USA, followed closely by Ireland and New Zealand, then India, Australia and Belgium. Our news articles also continue to reach a wide audience, both national and international, with our read-rates consistently well above the typical industry average.

Our Twitter activity continues apace, using the medium on a daily basis to engage with the sector and keep abreast of important sector developments. Twitter is also key to our events, as we are able to live-tweet and monitor reaction to many of our workshops and conferences. At our 2015 national conference, for instance, the event hashtag was trending! We have also produced reflective accounts of our major events using 'Storify', including our Associate Trainers' residential, May 2015 research trip to New Zealand and national conference.

## Resource Library

Our Resource Library continues to be a vibrant home of student engagement practice, from research reports to case studies about institutional approaches. We continue to promote it in all our work and encourage all individuals and teams with good practice to submit their examples.

We are committed to continuing to develop this through our engagements with institutions in the coming year.

Our Talking Student Engagement interview series on our website is now a year old, having started at the beginning of the 2014-15 academic year. Over the year we have interviewed a number of student officers and student engagement practitioners, as well as those with a perspective from beyond Scotland

or indeed beyond universities and colleges. Through the interviews we have explored many fascinating topics such as institutional strategies, feedback on assessment, the work of course reps, and more.

This year we have had a good blend of practitioners in Scotland talking about initiatives locally and a number of national and international figures who have advanced our understanding of current issues, e.g. Tam Baillie (Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People), Celeste McLaughlin (Subject Specialist for Teaching, Learning and Assessment at Jisc), Amy Hamilton (Students’ Association Development Officer at Borders College), and Phil Ker (Chief Executive of Otago Polytechnic in New Zealand).

## International engagement

This year sparqs has continued to develop an international programme which helps promote the strengths of student engagement in Scotland, reinforcing sparqs’ reputation as a major player with regard to student engagement in the enhancement of learning and teaching. It also promotes the strengths of the wider Scottish quality arrangements. Our

international work allows us to develop our thinking and practices, drawing on activities across the world. Our staff develop important skills and expertise in this area which they can bring to play throughout their work. Importantly this work also generates income which we have utilised to develop new areas of work in Scotland.

During the year we have been contacted or visited by a number of international agencies and institutions from Australia, Slovenia, Belgium, Ireland and South Africa, to talk about student engagement in Scotland and the key role that the student voice plays in the enhancement of learning and teaching in our colleges and universities. We have provided consultancy or support to a number of organisations, conferences and projects including the following:

- Work with Cork Institute of Technology, assisting them in the development of student partnership approaches.
- Contribution to two national conferences in New Zealand, for both the polytechnic and university sectors, organised by the New Zealand Union of Students’ Associations (NZUSA).



- Enhancing Students' Participation in Quality Assurance in Armenian Higher Education (ESPAQ) - an EU funded Tempus project - now fully underway, with sparqs taking a lead on developing student capabilities, including leading a student engagement awareness raising conference for 80 delegates, delivering a training programme and producing a student handbook.
- SIHEKSU (Support to the Internationalisation of Kosova Higher Education System through establishment of the Kosova Students' Union) – another EU funded Tempus project. We are working with NUS Scotland to support this work, sharing our knowledge of effective representative systems and helping participants explore how they might use the structures to develop student engagement activities. As part of the project, we hosted a major delegation of Kosovan attendees at the sparqs national conference in May 2015. The conference was successful in enthusing them about what a national union would be able to do and how they can take things forward.
- European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) - presented our work on Equality and Diversity in the curriculum alongside the Higher Education Academy in Barcelona in a paper entitled 'Embedding Equality and Diversity in Curriculum Design'.
- International Conference on Improving University Teaching (IUT) with the theme 'Students as Partners in Innovation' hosted by the Universities of Ljubljana and Maribor and the CMEPIUS Centre in Ljubljana, Slovenia - presented a workshop on 'Gathering Student Feedback – its purpose and potential'.
- European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) Annual Conference – 'Professional Higher Education more Relevant than ever – Challenges for the Future', Lisbon – ran a workshop on 'Building successful student partnerships' and participated in a panel debate around reflections on challenges for the future.

## Sharing across the UK

During the year we have attended several UK-level conferences, including once again contributing to the RAISE (Researching, Advancing & Inspiring Student Engagement) annual conference in September 2014, running a workshop as well as showcasing a range of sparqs resources for mapping and planning student engagement. We were also invited to contribute to an HEA frameworks review workshop in London in May 2015.

## Linking research with practice

On a very practical level, sparqs draws upon the experiences of the sector to identify, research and develop practice in areas of priority to universities and colleges. We undertake periodic research, publishing both short and more substantial reports into various aspects of student engagement, informed by both our contact with institutions and keeping abreast of the wide range of literature and research into student engagement domestically and internationally. Our engagement with institutions is crucial to this, and all of our work with colleges, universities and students' associations continually shapes and enhances our understanding of the common challenges and opportunities facing the sector.

We have enjoyed regular engagement with the college sector through our work supporting the *Framework for the Development of Strong and Effective College Students' Associations in Scotland* as well as support for institutions undergoing external review. We have also this year begun work on the development of the apprentice voice and issues relating to students articulating from college to university. We have developed our ASV process with universities enabling us to understand better where universities and students' associations are at with their student engagement work, identify where we can best support them, and learn from their practice and developments. We have also embarked on work supporting universities in Institution-led Review work. By continuing to work with institutions closely in this way, we aim to deliver meaningful, informed and constructive support to the sector in the coming academic year and beyond.



# Annual Report 2014-15

Visit the sparqs website to find out more about all the areas of work mentioned in this report. The website contains a range of materials and resources to assist your student engagement activities, including our Resource Library.

Details of our staff and Associate Trainers can be found on the 'Our staff' page under the 'Home' menu. You can also sign up to receive news articles about our work and emerging practice in student engagement.

**w: [www.sparqs.ac.uk](http://www.sparqs.ac.uk)**

Contact us at:

**1 Papermill Wynd  
Edinburgh, EH7 4QL**

**t: 0131 622 6599**

**textphone: 18001 0131 622 6599**

**e: [info@sparqs.ac.uk](mailto:info@sparqs.ac.uk)**

Follow us on Twitter to get up to date information about what the sparqs team is doing across Scotland and beyond.

**[www.twitter.com/sparqs\\_scotland](http://www.twitter.com/sparqs_scotland)**