

31 March 2020

Dear Colleague,

In the last few weeks, we have all dealt with a scale and pace of change that none of us could ever have imagined, and we will continue to do so for perhaps months to come. Now more than ever, the partnership working between students and staff must be the cornerstone of making decisions that minimise adverse impacts on our students and help us build solutions that safeguard, as much as possible, the educational experience of all our students, especially the most vulnerable.

In the last few weeks, I know you have all been working hard to keep students safe. Students' health and wellbeing has been, and will continue to be, your primary concern. For everyone working in, and with, colleges and universities, there is also a very specific priority of supporting students, where appropriate, to continue with their studies, or pause them, and safeguard their experience so that the opportunities education offers in life are not lost.

At sparqs we are reviewing all our activity to refocus our current efforts on equipping students and their representatives to play a key role in working with institutions to support the development of solutions that address this challenge.

Institutional Support

My team will be in touch with key contacts within each institution over the next few days. We know you have so much to deal with, but we hope to gauge a better understanding of the challenges you are facing to help us develop an approach that will support you moving forward. We will begin by focusing our efforts on three main areas:

1. Working with institutions and their students' associations to support representative systems that can operate remotely to monitor the new arrangements in place and influence decision making. We will support activities that help course reps understand the importance of their role in the next few months and fulfil their role effectively.
2. Supporting student officers to monitor the effect on the student learning experience of the special arrangements being put in place and identify areas that need national consideration. We will work with colleagues to ensure students can feed these issues into the work of sector partners and influence national decision making.
3. Working with you to develop immediate actions for the sparqs team and help put in place foundations for important work in the new academic year. This will include supporting you to ensure your representative systems can operate effectively, and vital activities such as course rep training can happen in a range of possible scenarios.

Throughout the above activities we will pay particular attention to protecting the needs of those students for whom the current situation presents particular challenges.

In focusing on the key areas above, we will, inevitably, cease some of our existing plans. For now, please assume that unless specifically stated, existing projects and activities will be paused.

Events

We plan to run a few key, existing events after Easter in an online format. The agenda of these events will address the new priorities of the current circumstances. These events are:

- Student Engagement Staff Network meeting – 5th May
- Joint Advisory Group meeting – 6th May
- National Education Officers Network meeting – 7th May

Details of how you can register and take part in these events will be available on our website soon.

We also plan to run the following events, in either an online or face-to-face format, depending on advice at the time. Again, content will be adapted to ensure these events are relevant to the circumstances of the time.

- That's Quality! Universities – 13th–14th July
- That's Quality! Colleges – 13th–14th August
- Residential Training Event for course rep student trainers – 25th–28th August

Further details of who should attend and how to register, will be made available nearer the time.

Communication

We are in the process of setting up a section on our website relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, where we will post updates and links to other useful resources. We will also send out further briefings and news articles as appropriate.

We will be attending a range of regular online meetings including NUS Scotland's Student Officer weekly catch up.

Finally, my team are adjusting, like all of us, to a new way of working. Many of us have children at home or relatives to care for. I cannot thank them enough for the way they have adapted to everything and for their willingness to continue to provide support to the sector and each other. But our capacity will be affected and for that I apologise.

In order to allow them to fulfil family commitments and manage annual leave, I have decided to close the (virtual) office for two weeks at Easter. We will be closed from Monday 6th April and will reopen on Monday 20th April. During this time, emergency cover will be provided, which you can access by phoning 07813 014 679, or by emailing eve.lewis@sparqs.ac.uk.

The strength of our work at sparqs has always relied on the willingness of our partners and colleagues to share their thoughts, ideas and practices. At a time like this, when we all must rethink and regroup, that could never be truer. Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you have any suggestions of ways we could help, or with ideas you can share.

Stay safe everyone.

All my best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Eve Lewis".

Eve Lewis
Director