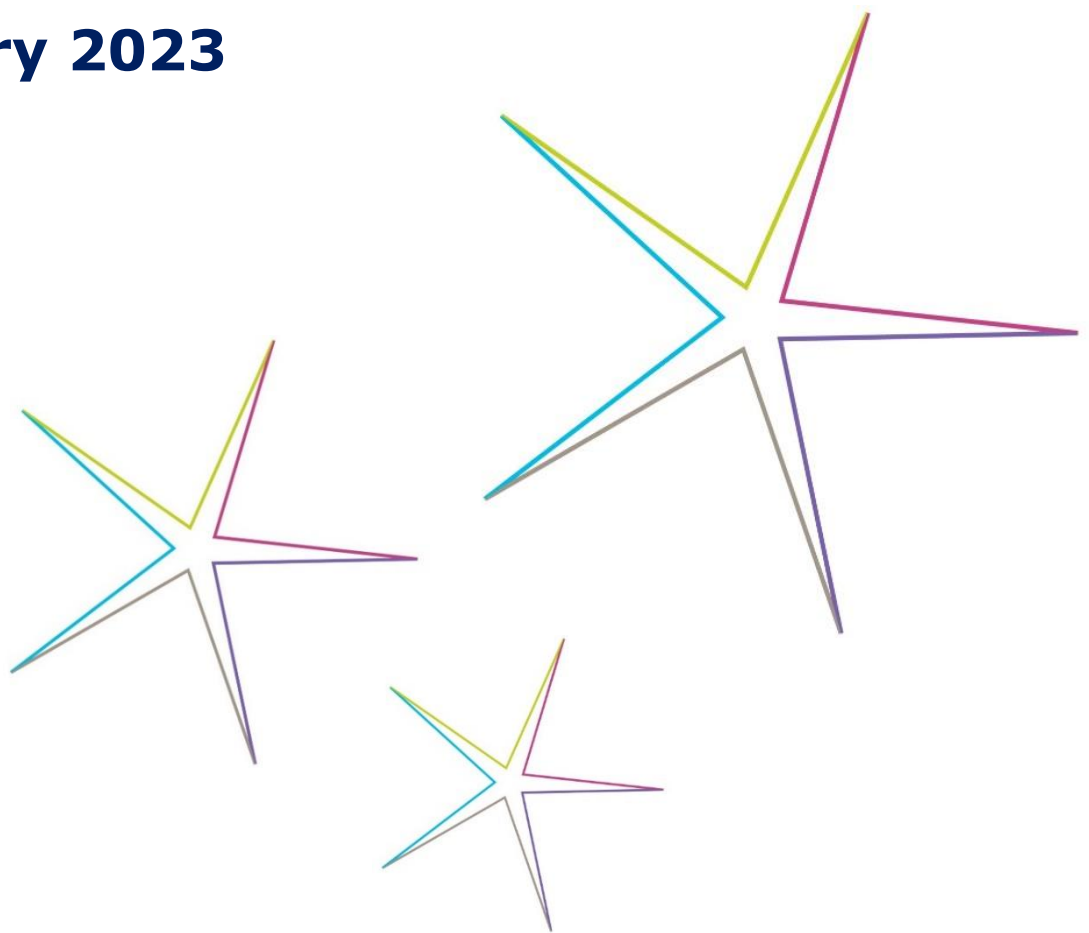


# **sparqs' Joint Advisory Group - a members' guide**

**February 2023**



## Introduction

This guide aims to help members of sparqs' Joint Advisory Group (JAG) to understand more about the group and their role within it. We hope it is also valuable to anyone interested in joining JAG or who would like to find out more about the vital part JAG plays in supporting sparqs' work and indeed the entire sector.

sparqs (student partnerships in quality Scotland) is the national development agency for student engagement in Scotland's colleges and universities. It is funded by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) which is the strategic funding body for colleges and universities on behalf of the Scottish Government. sparqs provides a variety of training, support, research, publications and events to build partnership between staff and students in the shaping of the learning experience. It is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO), with a board of trustees. You can find out more about our work at [www.sparqs.ac.uk](http://www.sparqs.ac.uk)

## The role of JAG

JAG provides advice and guidance to sparqs on the direction of its activities. It is made up of staff and students from across our college and university sectors who come together to be a "critical friend" to sparqs.

In sparqs' constitution, there is mention of a separate College Advisory Group and University Advisory Group. However, since 2020, they have met, with our Trustee Board's approval, together as JAG, to respond to the increasingly tertiary nature of discussions about national policy and quality arrangements. JAG members say they really appreciate the learning and sharing between colleges and universities that meetings enable. So, while members will technically be a member of CAG or UAG, and very occasionally our meetings will split into parallel college and university discussions if there are topics which require this, members will not generally notice this difference. Instead, meetings are held jointly and are jointly chaired by the chairs of CAG and UAG.

Responsibility for sparqs' governance and setting its strategic direction lies with our Trustee Board. In exercising this, the board considers input from JAG by receiving its minutes and periodically inviting the college and university chairs, or other members of JAG, to its meetings or other activities, such as strategic planning workshops.

## Membership

The advisory groups are composed of staff and students from colleges, universities, students' associations and sector agencies across a range of different roles relating to learning, teaching and quality. There are around thirty or so members in total.

Institutional and students' association members are generally invited on the basis of their particular insights and skills, and we will from time to time seek new members with specific areas of expertise to reflect changes in our sector and the current priorities in sparqs' work. Each year sparqs invites a number of new student officers, especially those with education remits, who we think will bring certain qualities or experiences to JAG. We don't have or need members from every single institution or students' association, but we always try to have a good balance of roles, backgrounds and types of institutions.

We also have members from sector agencies, including SFC, NUS, Colleges Scotland, the College Development Network, Education Scotland, SQA, Universities Scotland and QAA Scotland.

Our chairs are generally from senior management positions in colleges and universities, who can help to provide a strategic view and leadership to JAG. They are recruited with the support of Colleges Scotland and Universities Scotland, who help us publicise vacancies when they arise to college and university managers.

## A note from the current Chairs

“ Welcome to sparqs’ Joint Advisory Group! We’re really pleased to have such a diverse range of staff and student expertise from across our sector, and JAG is all the richer for the different perspectives that members bring. We play a really important role in supporting, enhancing and guiding sparqs’ work, but equally we, as co-chairs, can testify to how much we learn from being a part of JAG – about sparqs, about its globally unique position as a student engagement agency, and the importance of student engagement in all that we do. We look forward to working with you on JAG and learning from your own expertise. ”

### **Ann Baxter, Chair of CAG**

Deputy Principal for Students and Curriculum  
New College Lanarkshire

### **Prof Tina Harrison, Chair of UAG**

Assistant Principal (Academic Standards and Quality Assurance)  
The University of Edinburgh

## How the meetings work

JAG usually meets four times a year, in around September, November, February and May. Meetings in November and February tend to be online due to weather, while meetings in September and May are in-person.

Meetings are quite informal and friendly, and they include agendas and papers you will need to read beforehand. Agenda items are usually presented by a member of sparqs staff about a project or question they are working on. These might include:

- Draft publications from sparqs for you to comment on before they are published.
- Reports on our work, such as major training events, with an analysis of the outcomes and evaluation.
- Introductions to new projects, perhaps responding to national developments, asking members for their views about a proposed direction for our work.

The in-person meetings also allow for some more workshop-based activities. Meetings in May have often broadened to involve sparqs’ Student Engagement Staff Network (SESN) and National Education Officers’ Network (NEON) in wider strategic discussions.

## How you can contribute

We want you to bring your expertise! Whether you are university or college leader, a student officer, a staff member in a quality or students’ association role, or a representative of a sector agency, you have a particular skillset and insight which we want to hear. Your institution, students’ association or agency, and the learning experiences you support every day, are the reason sparqs exists, and the direction of our work depends on what you can tell us.

Questions you might like to ask yourself as you are reading JAG papers and taking part in meetings are:

- What expertise or experience do I have which sparqs can benefit from?
- What do I know about learning that sparqs needs to know?
- What are the strengths of sparqs' work?
- What is missing or could be different in sparqs' work?
- How can sparqs' activities be most relevant and beneficial to my everyday work?
- How can I learn from other JAG members to help build a clear picture in my head of how sparqs can support national decisions?
- How can being on JAG help inform my own work in my institution, students' association or agency?

JAG members tell us they appreciate being a part of a sector committee that helps them develop their understanding of national issues in learning, teaching and student engagement, and get a deeper appreciation of sparqs' work.

“ *I have been part of sparqs' College and Joint Advisory Group for three years. It's been a great opportunity to connect and network with other staff, students and agencies from across the sector, to discuss changes, reflect on current practice and share ideas of new ways of working. Being part of JAG provides me with real insight into quality in the sector and a chance to ensure that students are at the forefront of all decisions.* ”

**Micole Cochrane**  
**Student Association Development Officer, West Lothian College**

“ *I have worked with sparqs in several capacities at national and institutional level, and for me JAG is extremely beneficial, giving insights into sparqs' wider work and the opportunity to contribute to national policy on student engagement. It's also an important tertiary networking opportunity, and has been useful as we revised GCU's Student Partnership Agreement over the past year.* ”

**Prof Alastair Robertson**  
**Pro-Vice Chancellor in Learning and Teaching, Glasgow Caledonian University**

## Further information

Simon Varwell, Senior Development Consultant, is the officer to the advisory groups, ensuring that meetings reflect the key questions and developments in sparqs' work. He is responsible for liaising with the chairs on content, and keeping in touch with members to gain their perspectives and ideas.

For more information, or if you have any questions about the work of JAG, please see our website, or email Simon at [simon.varwell@sparqs.ac.uk](mailto:simon.varwell@sparqs.ac.uk).