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Paper

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Title: National student engagement: creating and developing spaces for partnership

Abstract (maximum of 150 words):

At a time of continuing and globally driven change, and with the growing importance of the student voice in quality, the national level of decision-making is a crucial arena for building partnership in quality. Drawing on experiences in Scotland, and on related literature and policy, this article highlights how sparqs (Scotland's national agency for student engagement) supports and develops national

spaces for staff-student partnership, with a particular focus on the arenas of policymaking, quality monitoring activity, and advancement of the professionalisation of student engagement. In exploring these three areas, the article shares various approaches and tools used to enable Scottish sector-level student engagement, and draws conclusions about the importance of such national spaces and the ways in which they can impact on learning, teaching and enhancement.

Key words (up to five): student engagement; partnership; quality enhancement; national decision-making; policy.

Text of paper (maximum of 3000 words, excluding references):

Introduction, research question and methodology

The connection between national decision-making and staff-student partnerships cannot be understated, due partly to legislation and national agencies, but also to the collaborative nature of institutions and student bodies. The link between student engagement at institutional and sectoral levels has been widely researched (Klemenčič, 2012, 2014; Klemenčič & Park, 2018; Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Brooks et al., 2015). Meanwhile in Scotland, the link is seen in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (United Kingdom Standing Committee on Quality Assurance, 2018) and Scotland's own distinct Quality Enhancement Framework (QAA Scotland, n.d.a), Enhancement Themes (QAA Scotland, n.d.b), Student Engagement Framework (QAA Scotland et al., 2012) and, of course, its unique national agency for developing student partnership, sparqs, for whom the authors work.

Ensuring these processes are inclusive, effective and responsive at times of considerable change is critical. sparqs' role in developing national spaces for staff-student collaboration generates meaningful sharing of experiences and impactful outcomes for quality. This paper, therefore, aims to highlight the nature and value of these spaces and draw conclusions for creating effective student engagement at a sector level.

Its methodology for doing so is a scan of national level student engagement in Scotland and the support provided for this by sparqs and others, drawing on existing materials, policy and literature, and on the authors' own knowledge of sparqs' work. The paper explores three broad spheres of activity: sector policy and quality enhancement; national approaches and support for quality monitoring and review; and the coordinated professionalisation of student engagement.

Sector policy development and quality enhancement

A key part of sparqs' role is ensuring that students are partners in spaces where change-making takes place. There are two key areas where these change-making spaces exist: quality enhancement processes, and the development of sector policy for learning, teaching and quality.

The existence of a national sector agency in these spaces ensures a coordinated approach to student engagement in policy and enhancement discussions, both in 'business as usual' ongoing sector enhancement activities, and one-off sector developments.

Student engagement in quality enhancement

Scotland has an enhancement-led approach to quality. All institutions are expected to engage in a process of continuous improvement, underpinned by the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF). While 'student engagement' operates as a standalone pillar of the QEF, there is also an expectation from the sector that student engagement is an integral part of all sections of the QEF.

This is particularly evident in Scotland's Enhancement Themes work. The Enhancement Themes aim "to improve the learning experience of students studying within the Scottish higher education sector" (QAA Scotland, n.d.a). Every 3 years, the sector agrees a topic (known as a Theme) to work on institutionally and nationally. Staff and students consider how to improve strategy, policy and practice under the Theme and institutions are encouraged to work together on solutions to challenging issues. The current Theme

(2020-2023) is Resilient Learning Communities. This Theme focuses on “meeting the changing needs and values of an increasingly diverse student community and a rapidly changing external environment” (QAA Scotland, n.d.c).

As part of the Enhancement Themes, sparqs is commissioned by QAA Scotland to facilitate the delivery of the Student-Led Project (SLP). The SLP is led by a steering group of student officers from across Scotland who choose a sub-topic under the Theme to work on each year, supported by staff members from sparqs and QAA Scotland. The SLP Steering Group is formed in September each year. The exact composition of the group is flexible, but is always majority-student. Most members are sabbatical officers with an education remit, who represent their student body at the institutional level. sparqs aims for a group which covers a broad geographical spread across Scotland.

The Steering Group meets approximately once a month from September to May. The first meetings select the SLP’s chosen topic for the year based on officers’ manifesto commitments, current issues in the wider sector as identified by national quality reporting, and national (including governmental) priorities.

For each of the outputs, one to two members of the steering group take on a lead role, allowing officers to have a chance to take responsibility for the development of a national level resource while ensuring that membership of the steering group does not become overly burdensome. Student officers are incredibly busy, and the spaces we create for national level development work need to strike a balance between giving students new opportunities and ensuring that the responsibilities are proportionate and manageable alongside institutional commitments.

The focus of the SLP for 2021/22 was Promoting Equity of the Student Learning Experience. The outputs of the SLP for the 2021/22 academic year showcased a diverse range of student-created resources, from a set of case studies on equitable learning and teaching practices to a guide for student representatives in equity in the context of the blended learning environment (QAA Scotland, n.d.d).

The existence of the SLP therefore gives students in Scotland a collaborative space in which they can directly influence the enhancement of learning, teaching and quality at a national level. It allows students to take the lead on developing sector-level outputs, which in many cases take the form of resources created *by* students *for* students. The outputs are therefore able to contain elements of the students’ lived experiences of education, which in turn gives the resources an increased sense of authenticity and validity with the wider student population in Scotland.

Student engagement in sector policy development

sparqs plays a key role in creating spaces for students to influence Scottish national policy and key sector developments, such as those lead by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and QAA Scotland. In all of these interactions, sparqs emphasises the importance of hearing from diverse student voices in these spaces, recognising that students’ experiences of higher education are not homogenous and policy decisions will affect different students in different ways.

One example of significant policy development in Scotland where sparqs has supported student engagement in the process is the SFC’s Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability (SFC Review) (Scottish Funding Council (n.d)). This was an extensive Review of post-16 education, which considered the future direction of the delivery of further and higher education in Scotland. The Review occurred from June 2020 to June 2021, and sparqs facilitated student engagement at multiple stages throughout.

Throughout the review, sparqs delivered sessions at our summer training event *That's Quality!* and meetings of our respective networks for student officers and students' association staff, NEON and SESN, explained further below. These sessions provided context and background to the review and built the expertise of officers to ensure they had a meaningful role to play as the review developed. Staff from the SFC were invited to attend these events to provide more information on the Review and to hear students' feedback directly. By inviting external colleagues into existing student spaces, rather than asking students to attend additional events or meetings in unfamiliar spaces, students felt an increased confidence to engage in the Review and to contribute to conversations. These networks are also cross-institutional, allowing those developing policy and practices to hear from students from a diverse range of institutions across Scotland in one space.

Throughout the Review, sparqs also published several briefing notes. Some were targeted directly at students and outlined how they could engage with the Review at various stages, while others were aimed at institutional staff and offered suggestions on how to include students in the review process within universities and colleges.

During the third and final stage of the Review, the SFC created three reference groups: Accountability; Funding Model; and Research & Innovation. sparqs worked with NUS Scotland to support a team of students to participate in these groups, alongside a range of stakeholders from across the education sector and those in related industries such as graduate employers. While recognising the importance of inviting policy discussions into student spaces as illustrated above, sparqs also sought to ensure that students were invited into sector discussions alongside staff and sector colleagues.

Through the above activities the SFC was able to collate significant data on students' perspectives of post-16 education, and the final report includes content directly taken from sessions with students on their recommendations for enhancement.

Alongside support for one-off policy developments such as the SFC Review, sparqs supports students to engage in ongoing sector committees, including providing pre-meeting briefings on papers and logistical support. Committees where sparqs support student members include the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC) and the Quality Arrangements for Scottish Higher Education committee (QASHE), as well as topic-based groups such as national working groups on micro-credentials and Recognition of Prior Learning.

This illustrates that sparqs is able to take a coordinated approach to student engagement in policy development as a result of our existing strategic approach. Our approach is multi-faceted, ensuring that students can work in partnership with colleagues in spaces where policy and enhancement work is taking place, such as national committees and working groups, while also inviting sector colleagues and policy makers into student-led spaces such as NEON, where the conversation is prioritised around student voices and centred on student expertise.

Quality monitoring and review

As a principle embedded in Scotland's Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), student engagement in quality monitoring and review activity happens in a coordinated and supported way on a number of levels.

At the level of institutional review, the Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) model in place from 2002 has been underpinned by sparqs' work to support student engagement in both the review approach and preparation. sparqs works in partnership with QAA Scotland, the quality body for higher education in Scotland, to continuously improve student engagement in the Review process from initial design onwards. Each ELIR team has at least one student reviewer as part of the team. The training for these students is delivered by QAA Scotland and sparqs is invited to deliver a specific session on student engagement in review, in order to equip them with the skills and knowledge they need to be effective reviewers. Student reviewers in ELIR are full members of the review team, with an equal role to any other reviewer in the process. sparqs has also provided ELIR guidance to institutions and students' associations on how they can work together to engage students when they are preparing for and responding to reviews.

Another feature of the QEF is Institution-Led Review (ILR), where subjects, themes and service areas are reviewed by institutions themselves over a six-year cycle. Again, sparqs' support has featured on both sides of the table, with materials for both the training of student reviewers as well as a toolkit for those staff and students preparing for ILR (sparqs, n.d.d).

This has all been true up to 2022, during which the university quality enhancement model has moved to an increasingly tertiary approach. This was recommended in the SFC Review outlined above and was particularly motivated by a desire for greater integration and cohesion in post-16 education. As the future quality model manifests itself in the near future, a coordinated and systemic approach to supporting student partnership in quality processes will continue to feature, including in the design of the new model itself.

At a more granular level, approaches to quality within courses and programmes of study vary across the sector, but there is nonetheless a systemic approach to supporting this. A major part of this, and indeed a central tenet of sparqs' work, is a nationally coordinated programme of course representative training, through which thousands of students are trained at course, programme or module level to represent the views of their fellow students on the learning experience and work with teaching staff and the students' association to develop enhancements. This training is underpinned by a self-study module and specialist training for particular student groups such as apprentices or taught postgraduate students (sparqs, n.d.a).

The content of the training revolves around a number of key concepts and models that provide a structured approach for those undertaking the role. One is sparqs' Student Learning Experience diagram (sparqs, n.d.b; Figure 1), providing seven headings under which sit various specific questions reps can ask their fellow students in order to develop detailed evidence and perspectives. The second is the ABCD of Effective Feedback (sparqs, n.d.c; Figure 2), developed by sparqs to help reps convey ideas and suggestions in a way that is accurate, balanced, constructive and diplomatic.

sparqs delivers this course rep training in two main ways. One is through a team of Associate Trainers, students recruited annually to work part-time to deliver training to course reps where institutions request that direct provision. Secondly, sparqs trains institutional teams of course rep trainers, who may include students' association staff or officers or specifically recruited student trainers and who will deliver training to reps within one institution. This delivery is supported by sparqs through training for both groups, and support to develop training materials that are customised to institutional contexts. Training trainers in both these models represents an innovative and enabling peer-led training approach, as well as the creation of a space in which trainers can learn from each other through a three-day residential.

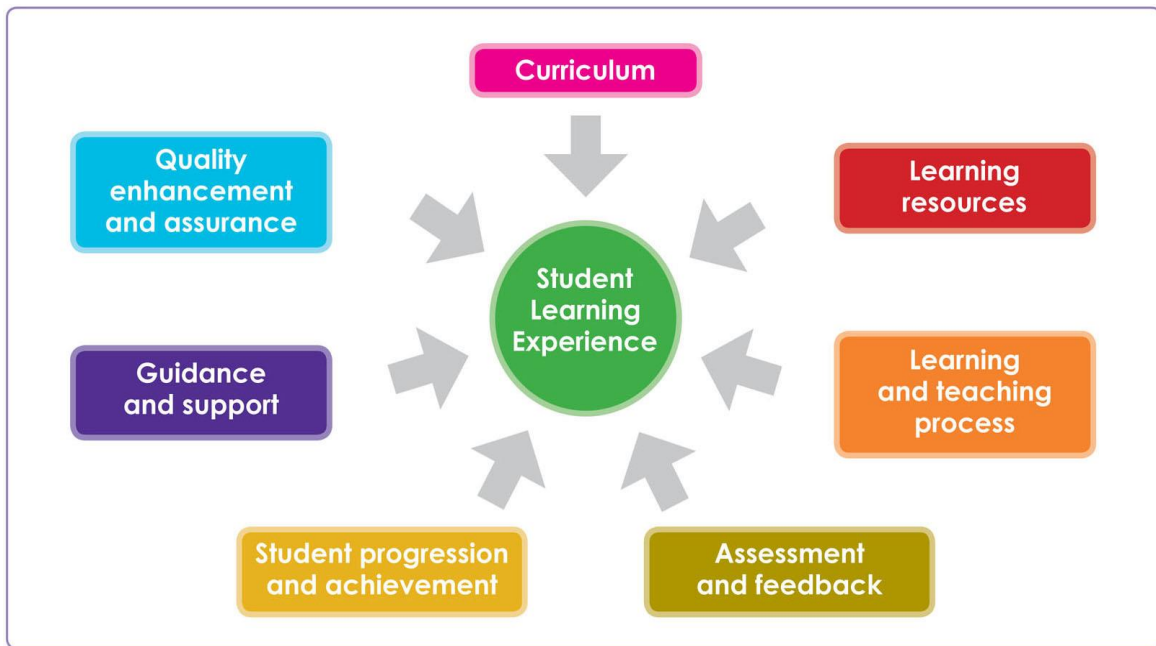


Figure 1: sparqs' Student Learning Experience diagram



Figure 2: sparqs' ABCD of effective feedback

This support is complemented by a systematic approach to developing course representation systems, including through working with coordinators for course rep training and resources relating to the course rep role for teaching staff (sparqs, n.d.e).

Professionalisation of student engagement

At the heart of effective student engagement are those in coordinating or leadership roles with operational responsibility for such activity. These can include senior students' association officers with education remits, staff who lead student engagement responsibilities, and those who provide professional support to feedback and representative systems.

A fundamental challenge for such roles is to articulate these student engagement responsibilities. While various conceptual expressions of student engagement exist (Varwell, 2021), a practical framework for staff has been developed by sparqs in the form of the pioneering Professional Standards Framework for Student Engagement (sparqs, n.d.f). This resource outlines values, knowledge and activities in student engagement roles, an effective understanding of which is crucial to those participating in partnership spaces at a national level, and which is certainly important for those coordinating partnership within institutions.

Indeed, this framework emanates from a national forum, sparqs' Student Engagement Staff Network (SESN), where staff with operational responsibility for student engagement or academic representation in institutions and students' associations gather under sparqs' facilitation to learn, share and develop as practitioners (sparqs, n.d.g). Gathering a handful of times a year, these meetings impact on individual practice through learning about key sectoral developments, create a space for informing national decision-making, and provide a platform for sharing practice.

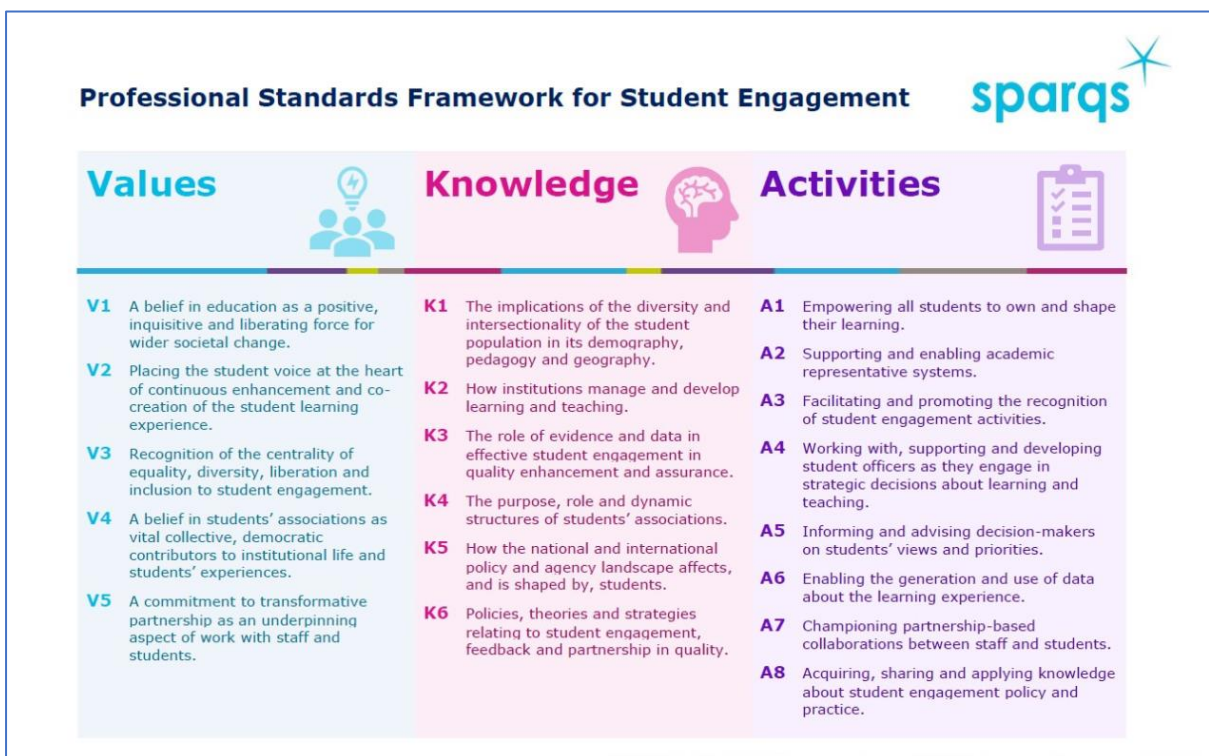


Figure 3: Professional Standards Framework for Student Engagement

Similarly, sparqs' National Education Officers' Network (NEON) provides a forum for elected students' association officers with education responsibilities to share experiences, and forms a space in which national consultation with student leaders can take place.

These roles are supported beyond NEON by our annual training, That's Quality! (sparqs, n.d.h), and a guide for those staff who are responsible for their induction (sparqs, n.d.i). This national programme of induction and support creates a strategic approach to ensuring student officers understand their complex role, the various national policies and processes they can contribute to, and how to inform sector decision-making through coherent collation of student views and analysis across institutions. This creates a benefit both for the officers themselves but also for sparqs in terms of understanding officers' priorities and responding accordingly in facilitating national decision-making. Fundamentally, it takes an enabling approach, equipping student engagement staff and permanent staff within students' associations to manage their student officers' induction in a manner that is appropriate and contextualised while not ignoring national implications.

Conclusions

The three spheres of activity relating to policy, quality monitoring and professionalisation of course overlap within sparqs' work and in that of institutions, student bodies and practitioners. They also all point to a shared set of conclusions about how best to create and use spaces for collaboration at a national level in order to gain from and support student engagement.

Our first conclusion is, fundamentally, that such spaces should exist in the first place. For students to shape a national picture of the quality of the learning experience, they must be in a (physical or virtual) space, with each other and with staff decision-makers. Vital to this, in turn, is a resource capacity to train, support and coordinate such engagement – both by working with student contributors as well as continually shaping the practice of institutional and national agency decision-makers in reflecting on what effective partnership with students looks like. In Scotland, sparqs provides this resource through the central administering of student places on national committees, provision of training, and enabling input into national strategies for student engagement in quality. It also develops the capacity for student engagement at this level through forums such as NEON and the Enhancement Themes Student-Led Project.

This links to our second conclusion, which is that students must be equipped to be a part of these spaces and not merely in attendance, a distinction at the heart of many frameworks and interpretations of student engagement (Varwell, 2021). Students require not merely to be in the room where national conversations take place, but effectively trained to do so, legitimised in their role through representative and accountability structures, enabled to make meaningful change and "to shoulder a collective responsibility with respect to the outcomes of such processes" (Tanaka, 2019). Again, nationally coordinated resource enables this to happen, as does an honest reflection on the part of sector agencies and leaders on how to cede power and create "liminal spaces" (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019) even in formal policy contexts. Experiences and expertise in Scotland, among both staff and students, suggests that this is achievable for the betterment of learning and quality, and transferable appropriately to sectors across Europe.

Discussion questions

1. What are the benefits of a coordinated approach to national level student engagement spaces?
2. What is required for a coordinated approach to national level student engagement spaces in terms of, for instance, underpinning resources and policies?
3. How can a coordinated approach to national level student engagement spaces be most effectively owned in partnership by staff, students, institutions, student bodies and sector agencies?

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