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Short bio: Debra Macfarlane joined QAA in 2013 and is currently Director of Regulatory Services. She has a wide-ranging background in tertiary education as well as experience in industry. From 2021 to 2023, Debra was seconded to the Scottish Funding Council, developing a tertiary approach quality for Scotland's colleges and universities before returning to QAA in 2023 to implement those arrangements. Debra holds undergraduate and postgraduate degrees from the University of St. Andrews, a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice from the University of Glasgow and was a previous Robert T. Jones Memorial Scholar at Emory University in Atlanta.

Name: Clare Peddie

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Short bio: Professor **Clare Peddie**'s career has been focused on education at the University of St Andrews. In the School of Biology, she was the Director of Teaching and then Head of School before taking up the role of Vice Principal Education. She still teaches marine biology in the field at Undergraduate and Masters level and has interests in the role of experiential learning in effective teaching. Clare led the recent QAA Enhancement theme in Scotland, 'Resilient Learning Communities'. Clare is the deputy chair for the Quality Council of UK Higher Education and a Reviewer for the QAA.

Name: Eve Lewis

Position: Director

Organisation: Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs)

Country: Scotland

Short bio: Eve is the Director at student partnerships in quality Scotland (sparqs). She oversees the support to enable students to engage in national policy developments in learning, teaching and quality, most recently the development of Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework and the redevelopment of sparqs' Student Learning Experience model. Eve oversees student engagement and partnership in Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review (TQER) and in institutions' quality enhancement activities. She co-facilitates sparqs' Tertiary Quality Student Expert Group as well as sparqs' annual quality training programme for elected student officers.

Name: Rob McDermott

Position: Head of Learning and Quality

Organisation: Forth Valley College

Country: Scotland

Short bio: Rob has contributed to the development of the TQEF, influencing the review method, the institutional annual reporting mechanisms and the national enhancement activity, ensuring it meets the needs of the college sector. He has been a pioneer in adopting the sparqs Student Learning Experience Model using it innovatively to shape the college's learning and teaching strategy. He is an active member of both the College Development Network's Quality Forum and sparqs Joint Advisory Group. He led the college through the new TQEF review method – the first Scottish college to do so and is also a member of the reviewer pool.

Name: Adelayo Adebayo

Position: STEP Student Lead

Organisation: University of Stirling Students' Association

Country: Scotland

Short bio: Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP) is the national enhancement programme for Scotland's tertiary sector. STEP is designed to enable Scotland's colleges and universities to work together to improve and enhance learning, teaching, the student experience and staff development across tertiary provision. A core team of four individuals – two Topic Staff Leads and two Topic Student Leads, representing both colleges and universities – act as key sector-level leads, championing STEP across Scotland and driving forwards the enhancement ambitions of the sector. Adelayo Adebayo from University of Stirling is the STEP student lead for 25/26.

Paper

Title: The impact of student partnership – how embedding student partnership in the Scottish Tertiary Enhancement Framework is supporting responsiveness and resilience at an institutional and national level in Scotland

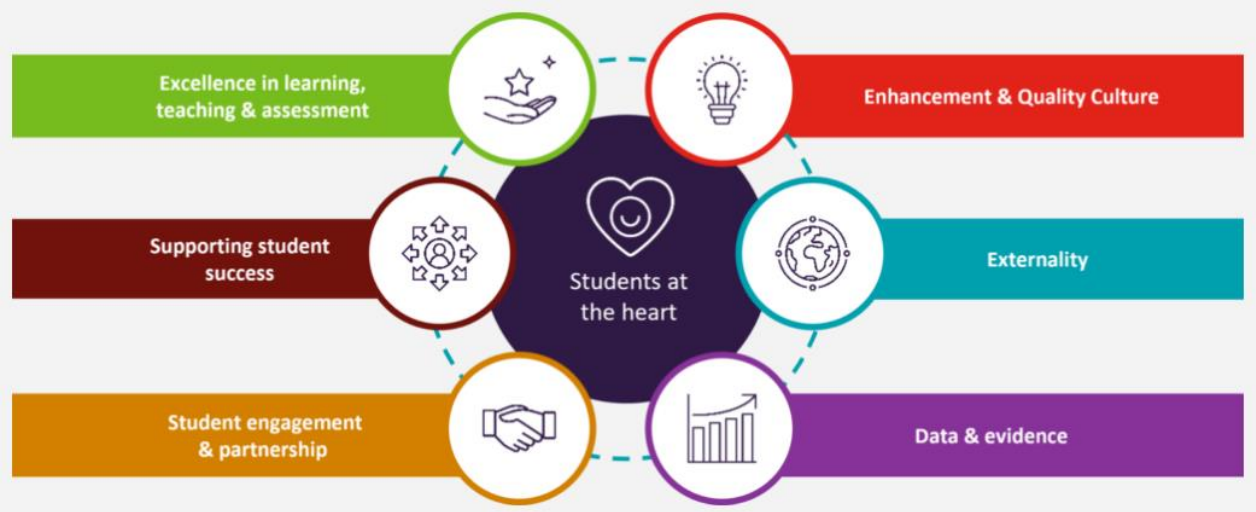
Abstract

The Scottish Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF) ensures that the student learning experience is at the heart of all self-evaluative and enhancement activity and to this end is it has embedded student partnership into all its quality mechanisms. We have investigated the impact of the TQEF on the student experience during the first year and half of this approach and identified how this has supported institutional resilience by enabling institutions to respond to new challenges from the student body. We have also identified how this approach has fed into our national programme of enhancement activity, ensuring this programme is addressing current challenges, is learning from experiences of students across the sector and is focussed on the student journey. The paper describes how students are partners in the TQEF, including their role in institutional self-evaluation and enhancement planning, annual reporting, external and internal review and the national enhancement programme, and it focuses on how this partnership has been a key element in the design process. It also describes the two key reference points., the *Student Learning Experience* model *and Scotland's Ambition for Student Partnership*, and their role in underpinning the framework and supporting institutional resilience. It explores the work to develop three interrelated lenses that were identified by students - Mental Health and Wellbeing; Equality Diversity and Inclusion; and Education for Sustainable Development – which operate as underlying themes for the student experience that have been integrated into the quality framework. Importantly, the paper goes on to identify early examples of how

this approach is having an impact from a college, university, agency and student perspective, concluding that student partnership is an essential component of a resilient tertiary education sector and identifying key principles for embedding this partnership effectively.

1: Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF)

The TQEF puts students at the centre of quality arrangements and recognises the valued role students have as partners in shaping their learning experience. 'Student Engagement and Partnership' is one of the six principles of the TQEF. Institutions are expected to embed student engagement and partnership across their quality processes at all levels of the institution and to



demonstrate these activities through the delivery mechanisms of the TQEF. In this paper, we will focus on the impact of student engagement and partnership. In the first 18 months of the TQEF, we have seen how the impact of student partnership has supported the agility of Scotland's universities and colleges and allowed them to respond effectively to the issues which are most affecting students' learning experiences. This paper will examine;

- How students are partners in Scotland's TQEF?
- The Student Learning Experience Model and Scotland's Ambition for Student Partnership
- Implementation and Early Evaluation
- Final Refection's on the approach

2: How students are partners in Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework?

The TQEF engages students in three ways

- Self-Evaluation and Action Plan (SEAP)
- Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review (TQER)
- Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP)

The **Self-Evaluation and Action Plan (SEAP)** is a document which enables institutions to reflect annually on institutional quality assurance and enhancement activities and outcomes, and to identify key strategic areas for enhancement. It is submitted to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) annually and is the mechanism through which the SFC seeks assurance on High Quality Learning and Teaching as part of their Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model.

Institutions are expected to engage with students in the preparation of the annual SEAP and in the monitoring of the implementation of the actions. The students' association should feel that the content of the SEAP reflects their own understanding of the student experience and of the activities developed and delivered in partnership with the institution throughout the year. It should be possible to see where the students' association has influenced strategies and projects throughout the SEAP, as well Being able to demonstrate how they have been able to shape their own work in response to evaluative activities.

Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review (TQER) is Scotland's new external review method for colleges and universities bringing 24 colleges (who deliver around 20% of all higher education in Scotland and enable over 8,790 students to progress into university each year) together with 18 universities into the same review method for the first time. TQER is a peer-led, enhancement-focused approach which has been co-created with staff and students from across Scotland's tertiary institutions. Student engagement and partnership is central to the TQER approach. The student learning experience is at the centre of the review process and the student contribution takes a number of forms:

- A Lead Student Representative (LSR) is the point of contact between the QAA Review Manager/the review team and students studying at the institution under review.
- Student reviewers are full and equal members of the review team. Every TQER has at least one student as a member of the review team.
- Student meetings which form the basis of the Initial Review Visit and will help shape the lines of enquiry for the Main Review Visit.
- Students are a source of evidence and co-author in the institution's Self-Evaluation and Action Plans (SEAPs).
- Students are a source of evidence and co-author in the institution's Strategic Impact Analysis (SIA) for the review.
- Participating in Formal meetings with the review team across a range of areas.
- Options are provided for alternative forms of student engagement e.g. visits to other parts of the campus or other sites of delivery, workshops or focus group discussions, and walkthroughs and demonstrations of innovative practice, to support the review team's understanding of the environment and culture of the institution; the extent to which it supports learning and the student learning experience; to understand how students and staff engage with the learning environment; and to continue to access the student voice.

STEP (Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme) is the national enhancement programme for the Scottish tertiary sector. It is designed to enable all of Scotland's colleges and universities to work together to improve and enhance learning, teaching, the student experience, and staff development across tertiary provision. At the core of STEP is the idea that by identifying and addressing the priority areas for Scotland's tertiary education sector together, we can effect sector wide change and progress in a way that would be impossible by each institution working individually. At the heart of the programme are collaborative enhancement projects that will produce outcomes and outputs of value to the entire tertiary sector.

Every institution identifies a student and a staff member to be part of the STEP Network. Students are key delivery partners in all 7 of the projects taking place during the current STEP cycle, leading national projects in partnership with staff.

3: The Student Learning Experience Model and Scotland's Ambition for Student Partnership

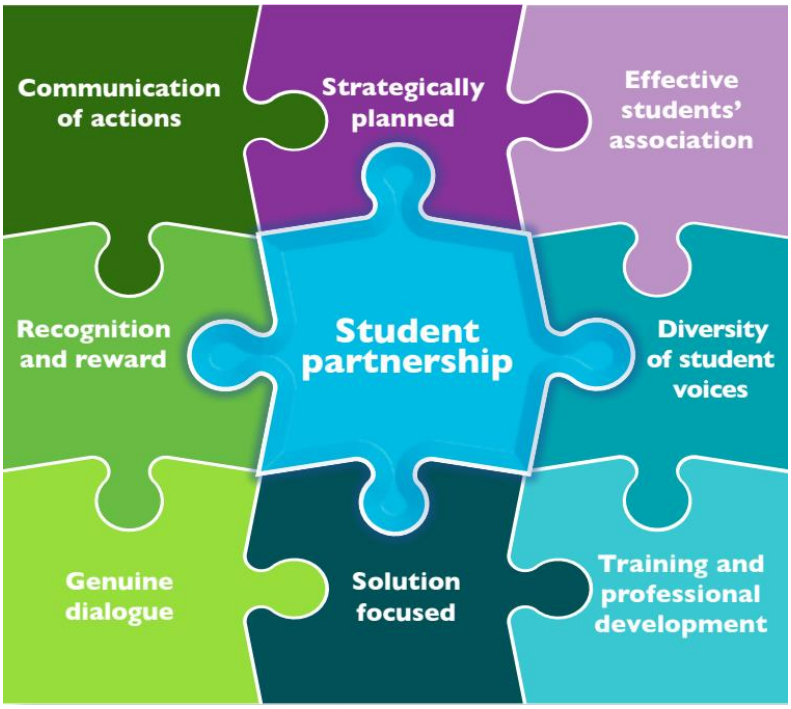
Sparqs has developed two tools which are sector which are sector benchmarks within the TQEF, the Student Learning Experience (SLE) model and Scotland's Ambition for Students.

Scotland's Ambition for Student Partnership and its accompanying features and indicators, supports institutions and students' associations to explore and evaluate their approaches to student engagement and partnership. Published in October 2024, the ambition statement is intended to be aspirational and to further establish Scotland's role as a sector leader in it approach to student partnership in quality. It is recognised that, whilst there is significant good practice already in place across Scotland; to achieve our ambition will require continued enhancement activity and this will be a journey for individual institutions and the sector as a whole.

The Partnership Ambition:

> Student partnership is embedded in Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF).
>
> Our ambition is to develop and mature this partnership, ensuring that students are central to shaping the quality of learning and making a positive impact on their own and others' experience, however and wherever they learn.
>
> Student partnership is achieved when there is trust and mutual respect for both student and staff expertise, a robust representative system which is accountable to the diverse student body, and student and staff capacity to co-create and implement solutions. Central to this is an equal partnership where students are essential to all levels of decision making, self-evaluative activity, enhancement planning and quality processes.

The ambition statement is underpinned by eight features. We will know that we have achieved a culture of student partnership when these features are embedded into institutions' systems and processes.

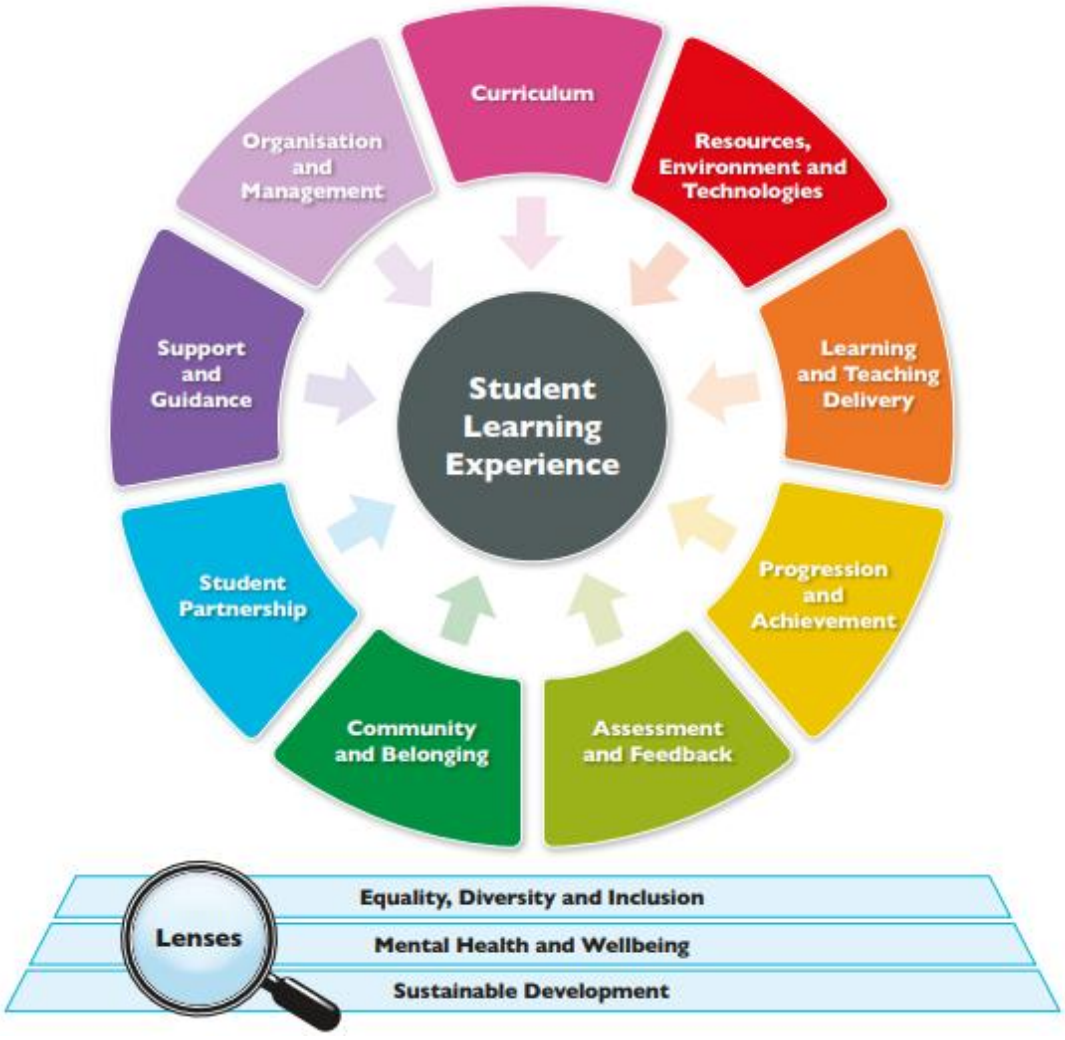


Each feature of student partnership can be explored further through indicators of practice. You can see the indicators of practice in sparqs' digital Partnership Ambition resource.

The ambition statement, features and indicators of practice are designed to be a practical tool for institutions to embed partnership working across their activities and processes. Ways to use the Partnership Ambition include:

- Undertaking a high-level evaluation of your partnership activities across the institution, including as part of your annual Self-Evaluation and Action Plan.
- Evaluating student partnership within a particular department or subject level.
- Choosing a specific feature and/or group of indicators to explore and evaluate in more detail.
- Using the tool as a sector benchmark when writing the 'Student Engagement and Partnership' section of your Strategic Impact Analysis as part of TQER.

The Student Learning Experience (SLE) model



The SLE model (published in October 2023) is designed to sit at the heart of conversations with students. It breaks down the wider, more amorphous, concept of the student experience into nine 'building blocks'. Each building block has an accompanying set of ten reflective questions. The questions support dialogue between students and staff on various aspects of the building blocks. They help develop an understanding between students and staff of strengths within the student experience, as well as areas for development.

Significantly, a distinct aspect of the SLE model is that the building blocks, lenses and reflective questions are founded upon the views of students across Scotland on what makes an excellent quality learning experience. There are many ways that institutions and students' associations can use the SLE model to collect evidence and data on the student experience. These include:

- Supporting student representatives to gather meaningful feedback from the students they represent, at both course level and at institutional level.
- As a basis for discussions between students and staff, e.g. at student-staff liaison meetings, to prompt conversations on what is working well and what could be improved within the student experience.
- To collate evidence on the SLE at a course, institutional and national level, to support institutions in self-evaluative activity and enhancement planning as part of internal and external review.

The SLE model is underpinned by three 'lenses'. These are areas of focus that can be applied across all nine of the building blocks and were a strong theme across all the student input to the SLE. The three lenses are Mental Health and Wellbeing; Equality Diversity and Inclusion; and Education for Sustainable Development. These lenses operate as underlying themes for the student experience and institutions and students' associations are encouraged to consider all elements of the wider student experience through these areas of focus. The lenses are being developed alongside students and experts within each of the field with each building block having lens specific descriptors reflective questions and support materials to help facilitate discussions across the SLE.

4: Implementation and early evaluation

The aim of the TQEF in putting students at the centre will be monitored and evaluated over the next seven years. The evidence we have been able to draw on during the first 18 months of implementation has been;

- A thematic review of the first SEAP reports submitted by institutions December 2024[1].
- A thematic review of institutional visits carried out by sparqs between October 2024 and January 2025[2] and other ongoing evidence from sparqs interactions with institutions and their students' associations.
- The experiences of the first two institutions undergoing review in A/Y 2024/2025.
- The outcomes from the STEP programme during its discovery phase A/Y 2024/2025

The findings are grouped together as follows;

- Adoption and use of the models and work to develop partnership activity within institutions,

[1] Self-Evaluation and Action Plan Thematic Report (Scottish Funding Council August 2025)
[2] sparqs institutional visits (Oct 2024 - Jan 2025): Key Themes across the Student Learning Experience and within Students' Associations (sparqs, April 2025)

- Developing Partnerships in TQER
- Developing Partnerships in STEP
- The Impact on the Student Learning Experience and Institutional and Sector Resilience

4.1: Adoption and use of the models and work to develop partnership activity within institutions

The adoption and use of models and evidence of work to actively enhance partnership working and focus institutional enhancement activity on the student learning experience has been evident in the first eighteen months of the TQEF. The review of the institutional SEAPs[3] found that 50% of submissions had already used the SLE model as part of their internal evaluations. sparqs' institutional visits [4] found that there has been significant activity across the sector working on embedding and using the SLE model, several instances of institutions starting programmes to enhance their partnership work with sparqs facilitating workshops at several institutions and another institution conducting a high level mapping exercise against the features of the ambition to support their development of their Student Partnership Agreement.

Both institutions undergoing the first TQER reviews have carried out significant pieces of work responding to the signalling of the importance of student partnership in the new arrangements and their own ongoing commitment to this work. Both institutions undertook work in advance of being notified they were to be first institutions to undergo review.

> "The focus on partnership and the developing ambition for student partnership made us sit back and reflect on what genuine partnership looks like. We wanted to start to move beyond just thinking about feedback loops to start to create something that was authentic. We've looked at the contribution students make at board, but also right across our committee structures, and looked at how we can develop these spaces to allow for a valuable partnership approach with students. We've included mentoring and support for student members on board and committees as part of our work to empower students to use these spaces for genuine dialogue. We can see them shaping conversations in spaces such as our sustainability committee and take an active part in discussion around resilience and mental health and wellbeing. They are part of the difficult conversations, such as the closing of a campus, as we consider our approach to significant financial pressures."

Senior Manager from the first college to undergo a TQER

[3] Self-Evaluation and Action Plan Thematic Report (Scottish Funding Council, August 2025)
[4] sparqs Institutional Visits (Oct 2024 – Jan 2025): Key Themes across the Student Learning Experience and within Students' Associations (sparqs, April 2025) https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/sparqs%20Institutional%20Visits%202025%20Report.pdf (Accessed 15th of October 2025).

> "Our Reimagining Representation Project predated the launch of Scotland's Ambition for Student Partnership, but was influenced by its development alongside the wider emphasis on partnership, rather than engagement, within the emerging TQEF. We have always worked closely with our Students Association but wanted to enhance this relationship and take active steps to develop this partnership."

Senior Manager from the first university to undergo a TQER

As in the previous example this project focused on student partnership within committee structures. It included facilitated events by sparqs to explore the nature of the partnership and is reported to have initiated a culture change bringing wider actors e.g. directors of learning into the discussion. Both institutions reported that they are bringing students into discussions much earlier in the process where challenges are being identified and options scoped rather than at a consultation phase.

4.2: Developing partnership in TQER

Both institutions undergoing the first TQER reviews reported that they actively considered their approach when preparing for review to increase student partnership in all aspects understanding that the method had an increased expectation in this regard.

This included, ensuring students were full partners in the preparation of the written submissions before review visits and providing support to students in navigating and contributing to all aspects of the review process. In one case this involved recruiting a dedicated staff member and in both included working with sparqs to plan and develop this support. Briefing and debriefing sessions were established to ensure students were prepared for the review visit meetings with students.

Although they reported some individuals found it hard to contribute, overall student input during the review was exceptionally positive. Students reported that they greatly valued the opportunity to contribute, appreciating being heard and finding the experience of reflection and engagement deeply rewarding. The engagement with students not involved in the formal student representation processes, increased in the interaction between students and more senior members of staff and one of the institutions had so many students wanting to participate in review meetings that the review had to adapt approaches to ensure they could participate. Following the review some students got more involved in student representation including standing for sabbatical elections as well as becoming class reps. They reported this depth of student involvement not only enriched the review but also reinforced the importance of partnership in institutional enhancement.

The communication of the outcome of review activity allowed for continued meaningful communications with the whole student body at both a formal level (email, ebulletins, social media) as well as less formal catching up in corridors where a senior manager was asked about the outcome of the review..

Student Feedback

Positives

"*It was really pleasant to be part of the team and it seemingly went really smoothly.*"

"*I found it great and empowering to hear fellow students speak up about their experience.*"

"*The materials used in the briefing and circulated before the meeting were useful and clear.*"

"*I felt like my opinion was valued, and I appreciated being informed about how my feedback will be used.*"

Opportunities

"*Some students did not speak at all... one student in particular spoke quite a lot... it undermined the intended constructive conversation.*"

"*It would have been nice to be able to meet with the other attendees in the session before to get a gauge of their experiences as well.*"

An important development has also been the use of the two models in reviewer training with several peer reviewers reporting that the training around using them to frame review has helped them not only consider the effectiveness of partnership during review but also increased their confidence to use the models in their own institutions.

4.3: Developing Partnership in STEP

As in other mechanisms within TQER, deliberate steps have been taken to move partnership with students further within the STEP programme. Student partnership has helped identify challenges and solutions. For example, responding to students concerns about the selection process for students leading to a communication gap between students and the students' unions, QAA Scotland and sparqs developed additional guidance for institutions on how to select their STEP Student Leads, ensuring that clear lines of communication were set up between the students' union and the student lead so that the union could effectively support them. In addition, guidance was given on how to establish handover documentation, in order to support continuity during the inevitable changeover of student leads from one year to the next, as students completed their studies or finished their time in office.

Feedback from students taking part in STEP has been positive. STEP University Student Lead Adelayo Adebayo had the following to say regarding her experience in Year 1 of the programme:

> "As one of the STEP Topic Leads, I have seen students actively engaging and keen on ensuring student engagement is a huge part of the development of the program from attending discovery days to shaping projects that will influence and improve student engagement across institutions. One of the most valuable aspects of STEP is the opportunity it gives both FE and HE students to interact and collaborate on issues affecting students from assessments policy and practice, learning and teaching, student support, belonging and progression to produce outcomes and outputs of value to the entire tertiary sector."

4.4: Impact on the Student Learning Experience and Institutional and Sector Resilience

sparqs institutional visits found significant evidence of institutions using the SLE to focus discussions with students. The thematic review of these visits shows just how rich the conversations are and a focus on conversations linked to key challenges facing the sector such as the use of technology, forms of delivery AI and digital inclusion, student mental health and wellbeing, impact of the cost-of-living crisis and community and belonging.

One institution has developed a series of lunchtime staff development sessions focussed on the model - Exploring and celebrating the student learning experience through the Student Learning Experience Model (SLE) the https://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/learning-and-teaching-academy/events/

Both institutions undergoing the first TQER reviews have also seen their partnership work impact the SLE and institutional resilience. One has focussed on using the SLE to frame its institutional learning and teaching strategy cm1421-student-learning-experience-strategy-25_30.pdf. They reported wanting to ensure that everything they do was focussed on the experience of students and felt that the use of the model in this context put resilience and community front and centre of their approaches.

The other could identify several pieces of work where their partnership approaches were changing their ability to respond to challenges effectively. One example was their work on gender-based guidance(GBV) as part of their mental health and wellbeing strategy leading them to be the first institution in the UK to gain the GBV Charter https://www.emilytest.org/charter-about/

Importantly, they also described how student partnership in a curriculum delivery review into the provision of joint degrees has shifted the emphasis to 'value to students' balancing responding to institutional challenge around efficiency of resource within the tighten financial context with safeguarding the student experience.

At a sector level the STEP programme is a key mechanism for supporting institutional resilience and the significant student partnership with the programme has seen a clear activity focus resulting from this student partnership.

Mirroring, the findings of the sparqs institutional visits, students identified the ongoing impact of the cost-of-living crisis on their studies and wider student experience in the the Discovery Year. As a result of this evidence one of the seven projects developed under the STEP banner is, 'Strategies to Support Student Engagement and Partnership within an Increasingly Time-Poor and Cash-Poor Student Population'. This two-year project explores how financial and time pressures affect student engagement and partnership. It will pilot approaches to make student voice and representation more accessible, as well as create sector-wide resources for learners before arrival and during induction.

5: Final Reflections on the Approach

The culture of student partnership in Scotland is underpinned by an expectation of trust and openness between students and staff and this is a key factor in the success of the TQEF in creating a more resilient and robust system. When students work in partnership with staff to identify issues and design solutions on an ongoing basis, issues are raised more efficiently, and institutions can have more confidence that they are making changes on the issues that matter most to students. The early finding of the implementation TQEF is providing evidence that the sector is embracing this approach, and we will continue to monitor its development. Our evaluation model will ensure that we monitor not only the adoption and practices and processes but also the impact of these on the SLE. As the sector enters one of its most challenging periods of change and financial restraint we are committed to supporting the role of students to be key in meeting these challenges.

References

[1] Self-Evaluation and Action Plan Thematic Report (Scottish Funding Council, August 2025)

[2] sparqs Institutional Visits (Oct 2024 – Jan 2025): Key Themes across the Student Learning Experience and within Students' Associations (sparqs, April 2025)

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