

Newsletter and Blog content March 2012

If you would like to comment on any of these articles you can do so via the sparqs blog site: <http://sparqsblog.org.uk> ~ also accessible via www.sparqs.ac.uk

You can now also follow us on  for regular activity updates:
[@sparqs_scotland](https://twitter.com/sparqs_scotland)

[sparqs Annual Report launched](#)

Highlighting the range of activities undertaken by sparqs, report is now available to all.

sparqs is delighted to announce the publication of its Annual Report, outlining the range of work it has done in the past year.

It has been a busy year, with much change and development in the sector. To this end, sparqs' Annual Report is an opportunity to take stock of the impact that the agency has made on the sector.

Through a wide variety of work, sparqs has assisted students, students' associations and institutions both individually and collaboratively to develop skills, practice and understanding, and to enhance student engagement in the range of decisions made about the quality and governance of the learning experience.

From our wide range of training activities, to our numerous consultancy activities, sector-level research and international networking, sparqs has engaged in a wide range of work that aims to share and develop practice institutionally, sectorally and beyond.

sparqs staff will be visiting and contacting many institutions and students' associations in the coming weeks and months as part of our ongoing activities, and this will be an opportunity to talk more about the various aspects of sparqs' work and how we can support institutions and students' associations in their student engagement.

Our Annual Report is available online at: <http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/section.php?cat=102> and will be sent out soon in hard copy to contacts throughout the sector and beyond.

For further information email: info@sparqs.ac.uk

Recruitment of sparqs' Associate Trainers 2012-13

sparqs now welcoming applications for team of Associate Trainers. Closing date for applications: 3rd April 2012.

We are now welcoming applications for Associate Trainers to make up the team for the academic year 2012-13. They will deliver Course Representative Training to reps in institutions in one of the regions mentioned below:

- East of Scotland
- West of Scotland
- North of Scotland

We are looking for exciting, dedicated and enthusiastic course reps to become part of our team of trainers. Having trained over 1,500 reps this year alone and with the expectation of delivering even more we need some pretty special people.

If you know of anyone who may be interested please direct them to our web page <http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/section.php?cat=62> where they will find all the information they need to consider applying for the role.

To be eligible, an applicant needs to be a student in the forthcoming academic year, 2012-13, and have had experience as a Course Rep. Based on this, could Course Rep Training organisers please forward the attached information by email to current Course Reps.

If you need any further information about the Course Rep Training Scheme please email info@sparqs.ac.uk

A new QAA Code of Practice for Student Engagement

A consultation event for the new QAA code of practice chapter on Student Engagement is to be held on Thursday 15th March 2012 at Glasgow Caledonian University.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has launched a consultation on guidance to help higher education providers engage their students in quality assurance.

The guidance will form part of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code). QAA's Cathy Kerfoot said:

“Students are developing as active partners in their education, not just passive learners. This Chapter of the Quality Code will help providers develop their procedures to include opportunities for students to participate in quality assurance processes in a meaningful way. We recognise that, ultimately, it's down to each individual student to decide how much he or she wants to take part in procedures for quality assurance. However, we would encourage providers to create an environment that encourages students to participate, making it easier for students that want to play a greater role in quality processes to get involved.”

The Quality Code gives all higher education providers a shared starting point for setting, describing and assuring the academic standards of their higher education awards and programmes and the quality of the learning opportunities they provide.

sparqs has been a member of the advisory group putting together the first draft of the chapter. This has been an interesting process given the differences between Scotland and the rest of the UK in terms of student engagement. We feel it is extremely important that Scottish students and staff contribute to this consultation as Scotland may well have strong opinions in relation to some aspects. For example, the inclusion of reference to working in 'partnership' with students was controversial within the drafting process and is subject to further discussion.

Links to the consultation document, background info and guidance on responding can be found at: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Newsroom/Events/Pages/student-engagement-consultation.aspx>

The booking form to register for the consultation event on 15th March 2012 at Glasgow Caledonian University is also accessible via the above link. The event is free and we would recommend that people wishing to contribute do so via the event. If you are unable to attend and still wish to respond to the consultation, you can do so individually via the online survey on the QAA website. Closing date for responses is Wednesday 18th April 2012 and the final version of the chapter is due to be published by the end of June 2012.

For further information contact Eve Lewis, Head of sparqs, at eve.lewis@sparqs.ac.uk

Supporting student engagement in your school, faculty or department

sparqs' consultancy theme on departmental representation has produced a new toolkit for universities, colleges and students' associations.

One of the recent topics explored through sparqs' collaborative, theme-based approach to its consultancy work has been departmental representation.

This draws on sectoral interest in developing practice at this crucial middle level, the conduit between individual courses and the strategic level. Often called faculties, schools or sectors, departments undertake vital work in managing and enhancing the quality of the learning experience, but student representation at this level can often lag behind the level of engagement at the course and institutional level.

By drawing on the perspective of a working group of staff and students throughout the university and college sectors, sparqs has developed a toolkit that aims to provide guidance and support to institutions who wish to develop or introduce representation at this level.

The toolkit contains good practice from around the sector and explores the nature of departmental reps and councils, and how they can be supported, engaged and rewarded. Download the toolkit here: <http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/consultancy/section.php?cat=57>

For further information please contact Simon Varwell, sparqs Development Advisor, at simon.varwell@sparqs.ac.uk

Enhancement Themes Conference – Developing and Supporting the Curriculum

The QAA Scotland Enhancement Themes Conference on 7th & 8th March 2012 will have a strong student presence and will provide an ideal opportunity to outline the issues emerging as important to students and showcase the support offered by sparqs.

sparqs will launch a video at its stall during the Enhancement Themes Annual Conference on 7th & 8th March 2012. The video has students from colleges and universities across Scotland taking about 'How they would like to learn' and 'How they would like to engage with their education'. This work follows on from the NUS Scotland discussion paper outlining different factors that will influence the future student body and what changes may need to be made for them to make the most of their learning experience. This is one of the many ways in which we hope to develop student engagement with the theme, 'Developing and Supporting the Curriculum'. The discussion paper will be available on the QAA website shortly.

At the conference sparqs will also be facilitating three workshops; one workshop will explore how to engage students with enhancement themes. There will be a workshop that will give participants a flavour of our 'Staff Workshop' which is specifically aimed at giving staff information on how to effectively involve students in quality enhancement. The third workshop will be facilitated by some of our Associate Trainers and will explore in detail the issues highlighted in the NUS Scotland discussion paper.

The student voice will be apparent at the conference through the plenary delivered by the student members of the steering committee. sparqs has worked closely with these students to support them in gathering and collating student opinion about the theme and has facilitated several events to this end. Some of the key points emerging from students are: less lectures and more hands-on teaching; getting to choose when, where and how you can study; better use of interactive technology; more international experiences; and more work experiences.

sparqs has been incredibly involved through various forums, with the new Enhancement Theme, which commenced this academic year. We are aiming to have as many students as possible engage with the theme both this year and the coming years. We have run a workshop for student members on institutions teams, allowing them to dive into the enhancement theme and what it means for them at their institution. They were encouraged to form action plans that would engage the student body with the questions and ideas surrounding the theme and making it important at a local level. The student members make up the Student Network for Enhancement Themes and sparqs maintains communication between them and the student members on the steering committee.

More details of the range of work we are undertaking to ensure students are fully engaged with the theme will be promoted at our stall at the conference and we look forward to seeing you there.

For further information contact Megan McHaney, sparqs Development Advisor, at Megan.McHaney@sparqs.ac.uk

College community of interest to develop practice in student representation

A new network for staff with student engagement roles has been established by Scotland's Colleges with support from sparqs and NUS Scotland. It will be launched at an event at Angus College on 19th March 2012.

The engagement of students in quality and governance has increased considerably in the college sector in recent years, and this presents challenges and opportunities not just for student officers themselves but also for the staff who support them.

Given the wide range of areas student representatives are involved in – from shaping college strategies and engaging with review activities, to engaging in the creation of the learning experience and providing effective representation to college committees – the activities of students' associations must be effective and well-informed. This requires a continuity and guidance in the form of staff, who in turn require support in their vital roles.

To this end, Scotland's Colleges, sparqs and NUS Scotland have worked together to create a Community of Interest for Student Engagement - Student Governance and Academic Representation. It aims to create an active network of staff practitioners involved in supporting representation by building their skills and knowledge.

The Community of Interest has been funded for six months in the form of a part-time secondment, a post held by Susan Gall, Student Engagement Officer at Banff and Buchan College. It will be targeted at staff members in colleges with roles relating to learner engagement – such as students' association managers, learner engagement officers, staff-student liaison officers and similar titles.

It will be launched at an event at Angus College on Monday 19th March 2012 – about which practitioners will be contacted separately – and a small number of subsequent networking and development events will be held thereafter.

Although the Community of Interest will very much be guided by the priorities of the sector's practitioners, the project will map the role of learner engagement staff across the sector, create and manage a mailbase and web resource to facilitate networking and sharing, and provide briefings and resources for the enhancement of practitioners' knowledge and skills.

For further information please contact Simon Varwell, sparqs Development Advisor, at simon.varwell@sparqs.ac.uk

SPOTLIGHT ON: Clydebank College

This issue's SPOTLIGHT ON focuses on Clydebank College, which has increased the quality and quantity of its student feedback by appointing a Learner Feedback Assistant, for which they received a Highly Commended award at the Scotland's Colleges 2011 Annual Awards.

Obtaining student feedback is something that most institutions have struggled with. Finding the balance between getting the information the institution needs to improve its provision and ensuring the students are asked in a way that increases responses while at the same time not overwhelming them with consultation can be difficult to achieve.

Following a review of the quantity and quality of learner survey responses in August 2010 Clydebank College took steps to enhance mechanisms for generating feedback, to ensure a more focused and consistent cross college approach.

It appointed a Learner Feedback Assistant, working within the Quality Department, to implement, and build on, feedback processes.

The Learner Feedback Assistant has come into contact with staff across the whole college including teaching and support staff. He provides tailored focus groups where required to support the self-evaluation process i.e. feedback on refectory services or admissions process. He works with curriculum staff, including generating feedback from particular groups i.e. from the Supported Learning students along with the Classroom Assistants or for evening or community students.

The post was evaluated at the end of 6 months for impact on the staff and learner responses. Staff were very positive about how the Learner Feedback Assistant has interacted with learners and the usefulness of feedback gathered. Requests to use the Learner Feedback Assistant have increased from all areas of the college including support areas. A further evaluation showed that the level of formal complaints had reduced from 64 the previous session to 17. The College recognises that this was largely due to the informal approach the Learner Feedback Assistant took in defusing a complaint and meeting with learners to get things resolved.

Initially a Future Jobs Fund post the Learner Feedback Assistant is now funded from the College's staff budget and the contract is being continued into 2013.

The Learner Feedback Assistant attended external NUS and student engagement events, including attending each sparqs training session delivered in the college and the sparqs Train the Trainer course.

To find out more contact either Cathy MacNab at cmacnab@clydebank.ac.uk or, Scott Dorman, Learner Feedback Assistant, at sdorman@clydebank.ac.uk

Accrediting course reps through HEAR

How can you formally recognise the role of course reps? By utilising the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) section 6.1, reps can have their achievements recorded.

sparqs has been exploring the issue of how to formally recognise the role of course reps with a working group made up from staff and students from six universities. It was identified that some guidance on how to recognise the work of reps, but also how universities could support them, would be useful.

sparqs is producing guidance for universities on different approaches to recognising the role of course reps with a view to acknowledging their work through the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR), section 6.1. By identifying what is expected of reps in universities, the guidance provides information on how best to support reps in their work to ensure they can be as effective as possible.

sparqs will be holding an event to launch the guidance on including course reps within section 6.1 of HEAR. The full day event will be held at Edinburgh Napier University on Tuesday 15th May 2012. See the following link to the sparqs website to book your place:

<http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/events/event-detail.php?event=32>

Aimed at Quality staff, staff from Registry or Academic Affairs and Students' Association officers, the event will also explore different ways of recognising the role of course reps for inclusion in section 6.1 and what support could be provided to enable student reps meet the chosen criteria.

For more information contact Stephanie Millar, sparqs Development Advisor, at stephanie.millar@sparqs.ac.uk

SLEEC (Student Learning Enhancement and Engagement Campaign)

Launched almost a year ago, SLEEC has been busy supporting students in campaigning on aspects of their learning experience. The most recent event took place in early February.

SLEEC is a joint project between sparqs and NUS Scotland. Issues explored through SLEEC have included the updating of the quality arrangements, Public Information, Key Information Sets and Student Partnership Agreements.

At its most recent event in February, SLEEC encouraged participants to explore three key areas; Widening access and your institution, Employability and Jobs, and Technology and Modernisation. Participants also discussed issues relating to:

- Public Information and Student Partnership Agreements.
- National collection of student satisfaction data in colleges.
- Articulation and advanced entry.
- Non-recognised qualifications in colleges.

For each topic the students were asked what is going on currently at their institution, what they can do locally, and what needs to happen nationally. There was a huge range of conversation where students identified that there needed to be adequate support for all students and their needs, less lectures and more interactive seminars with reliable, accessible technology and peer learning for both students and staff. It was expressed that there is a mismatch between the skills that graduates need and the skills they actually graduate with, along with the desire to have more work experience as part of their studies. It was also noted that some developments should happen in colleges at a national level and HMIE reviews may be a good starting place for this.

SLEEC has three main elements which are shaping policy, supporting education campaigns in students' associations and providing resources. The campaign provides opportunities for students to gain the knowledge and skills to influence what is happening on big education issues. This includes sharing ideas and good practices, but also provides support to help associations engage with their own representative structures and students on national and local issues.

sparqs looks forward to exploring these issues and more with NUS Scotland in the coming months.

For more information visit <http://bit.ly/SLEEC> or contact Megan McHaney, sparqs Development Advisor, at Megan.McHaney@sparqs.ac.uk

[Forthcoming events to highlight sector resources](#)

Numerous resources, toolkits, guides and materials exist throughout the sector. sparqs will hold events later this year to showcase these to practitioners.

While student engagement is of crucial importance as both a means and objective at the strategic level, there is also a practical level too.

Many materials and resources are created to help staff and students in a very real and practical way to consider how they can identify and develop ways of engaging students in shaping their learning experience.

sparqs has, over recent years, produced a range of very interactive, participative tools that can help universities, colleges and students' associations, and has often helped institutions to develop their own customised resources. These cover topics as diverse as student engagement in college boards of management, departmental representation, feedback on assessment, student officer approaches to the learning experience, and the development of course representatives.

To celebrate, highlight and share these resources, sparqs will be holding two events in May or June, one for each of the university and college sectors. The aim of these events will be to gather a range of staff and students such as quality managers, student engagement

practitioners and students' association officers in a highly interactive and participative environment. The events will present a range of resources to encourage participants to think about how they can use them in very meaningful ways to enhance student engagement within their institutions.

Further information will be available via our website in due course, or by contacting Simon Varwell, sparqs Development Advisor, at simon.varwell@sparqs.ac.uk

sparqs Strategic Thinking Day

Through transporting ourselves to a future 5 years from now the sparqs team and representatives from all our major stakeholders were able to start creating a vision for the future to help shape our new strategic plan.

Our strategic thinking day at the beginning of February was attended by around 30 participants from right across our range of stakeholders. It was an interesting and extremely valuable start to our strategic planning process. The day facilitated a wide discussion around the challenges and opportunities the future will hold before encouraging us to think creatively about what successful student engagement might look like in 5 years time and how sparqs will have helped the sector get there.

We are still going through the various outputs from the day but some impressions of the types of things raised include:

- Aiming more work at students rather than representatives.
- Expanding support for representatives to carry out their role, including web based resources.
- Ensuring students can use the systems we support to facilitate change.
- Creating opportunities to support student engagement nationally at a subject level and/or in professional areas.
- Exploring links with employers.
- Exploring the opportunities Curriculum for Excellence may offer.
- Supporting student engagement through regionalisation.
- Further embedding support for student engagement within institutions.
- Further supporting a culture of engagement across Scotland and influencing national developments.

We are extremely grateful for the time and inputs from our many stakeholders and these will be instrumental in shaping our ideas. Thanks also to Pauline Holland from Sensemaking Consulting who facilitated the day for us. There were many more thoughts and ideas emerging which we will spend some time capturing before we begin to draft a new strategy. We will be consulting widely as these ideas come together before launching our new strategic plan for the next five years in Autumn 2013.