

**CALL FOR EVIDENCE –
SCOTTISH FUNDING COUNCIL
REVIEW OF COHERENT PROVISION AND SUSTAINABILITY**

Response from sparqs

Information about sparqs

sparqs (student participation in quality Scotland) is an agency funded by the Scottish Funding Council since 2003 to help facilitate student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement in the college and university sectors. We have four strategic priorities, which are:

1. **Diverse Voices** – We will focus on supporting all student voices to be heard, and for those voices to have a positive impact on learning, helping ensure all students, whatever their background, can access education, progress and achieve their potential.
2. **Diverse Settings** – We will identify settings where capturing the student voice will enhance decision making, particularly where this voice is not currently heard well and where it will help address challenges such as transitions across the learner journey, widening access, and retention and success.
3. **Learning and Teaching** – We will focus on ensuring student engagement mechanisms create opportunities for genuine dialogue and affect decision-making around learning and teaching practice and strategies at a local and national level.
4. **A Scottish Approach** – We will ensure student engagement remains at the heart of Scotland’s quality arrangements and decision-making processes. We will continue to develop joint ownership of the quality assurance and enhancement arrangements and the role of students in institutional self-evaluation and enhancement activity.

How has this response been put together?

This response has been put together drawing on the views, expertise and knowledge of the sparqs staff team, alongside informal discussions with other sector agencies.

The Learning and Teaching Mission

We recognise the multi-faceted importance of Scotland's institutions as economic providers, social and community enablers, as contributors to world-leading research, and pioneers of innovation and enterprise. They are also, fundamentally, places of learning and providers of a student experience which, at its best supports students to flourish and succeed personally as well as economically. The importance of an excellent student learning experience and its role in addressing social and other inequities must remain central to developments.

In 2007, the funding arrangements for colleges and universities were brought together by the SFC and the sector agreed a joint approach to quality, steered by the Joint Quality Review Group. Although much remained distinct between the two sectors, not least in terms of the approaches to internal and external reviews, the sector agreed on three key principles that would underpin quality arrangements in both colleges and universities. These three principles were:

- High quality learning
- Student engagement
- Quality culture

The experience of sparqs is that the developments following on from these principles in the college and university sector provided an environment where learning and teaching and the student experience became a more clearly defined, managed and professional aspect of institutional strategy. The concept of putting students at the centre, whilst resisting movements elsewhere to treat them as customers, became prevalent. Our quality frameworks, along with the commitment to student engagement, an **enhancement approach, self-evaluation** and **external peer review**, have created an environment where, for example, the dominance of research over teaching has been somewhat redressed without detriment to these other wider institutional missions.

Looking to the future then, in the long term, it is vital that we develop accountability mechanisms that continue to provide the right environment for a quality culture that supports institutions to provide excellence in learning and teaching. The importance of a 'sustainable ecosystem of education' that supports the needs of learners, the economy and society

and that enhances cultural life and international connections is undeniable. However, designing appropriate mechanisms to ensure a continued focus on the student experience and learning and teaching should remain a distinct element of our system.

The importance of this focus on the student experience must also be mirrored in our response to Covid 19. The effect of the pandemic is far reaching and has effects on finances, infrastructure, research etc. When considering accountability mechanisms and subsequent future planning, it is also important to fully review the effects of the pandemic on factors such as student mental health and wellbeing, the achievement of learning outcomes, the differences in experiences from across diverse groups of students, and a consideration of the overall quality of the experience, comparing pre-and-post pandemic experiences.

There needs to be deliberative steps to fully investigate the impact of the virus on the student learning experience and this should form part of our approach to quality over the next 12 months. In doing so, we should aim to support individual institutions to reflect on the effects, build on successes and redress disadvantage and to feed into a national action plan to ensure the effect of the pandemic on the lifelong learning and personal success of all students is addressed.

THE LEARNER JOURNEY

Current accountability mechanisms are focussed on the provider, namely college or university. Yet the student experience is increasingly not the preserve of a solo provider. To put students at the centre we need to look beyond the student learning experience within a 'type' of institution and explore the experience collectively, across their whole learner journey, considering the different routes into education and how we ensure opportunities for progression and movement within and across institutions, and prioritising the attainment and success of the students.

We need to design a system that ensures we can review the quality of experiences for those who enter and exit at different points and stages; of the transitions from school to college, college to university, and into employment and beyond. How can we create an environment where schools, colleges and universities work in partnership and foster links to support the whole student learning experience? How do we ensure students have had the right support and guidance at all stages, enabling

them to make informed decisions about their own journey? How do we ensure the quality of the learning experience of vocational training, apprenticeships and work-based learning opportunities is monitored and enhanced across all types of providers and employers?

As a country, we have a strength within different parts of our sectors of working collectively to address challenges but the key challenges facing students can only be addressed if we have accountability and incentive mechanisms that work across all the parts of our sector and bring us all together to find solutions.

ENHANCEMENT

Scotland's enhancement-led approach is internationally admired and has had many benefits. We've seen substantial growth and change over the last two decades, but there are still challenges to address and issues to solve across the sector, including making significant progress with issues such as gender imbalances and widening access.

How as a sector do we set clear, collective aspirations, with planned approaches for enhancement, whilst maintaining our key principles of peer review, self-evaluation, externality and enhancement focus, which are both demanding of our sector but avoids reductive measures and target setting.

If we need to develop new ways of setting and measuring progress against agreed targets we need to do so in a way that nurtures quality culture, one that ensures an open, transparent and trusting environment in which we can share and analyse data collectively, with students a key part of the process. Only by better understanding the quality of the student experience for all students and planning actions collectively can we hope to address the inequalities of our sector.

There is power in a national collective approach to tackle some of these bigger challenges and we have seen success in this approach, most notably through the Enhancement Themes in universities and more recently through college activities which looked to address attainment and retention challenges, but we need to ensure we can use this approach to finally make progress in areas that have too long remained stubborn. Central to this approach is the role of students, who need to be a key

contributor to on-going discussions and decision-making, to help problem solve and work in partnership to develop solutions.

To create an environment where we can ensure all partners feel able to contribute fully and equally we first need to consider the environment in which we ask people to operate. We need to balance the need for target setting and assuring the public value of investment in our colleges and universities with fostering an attitude of openness and trust. We also need to create the right forums where discourse across various providers within the tertiary sector (e.g. school, colleges and universities) also interacts with discourse across different missions of the tertiary sector (e.g. learning and teaching, research, sustainability, internationalisation, etc) so that problems can be solved collectively rather than in isolation.

HOW AND WHAT WE LEARN AND TEACH

The curriculum is the main touch point for all students, and therefore a significant contributor to the overall student experience. We should fully seize the opportunity to develop a curriculum for our sectors – and our students – future, that is responsive and adaptable, and aware of the new and intersectional challenges our current and future students face.

We are well versed in the need for change but sometimes constrained by the systems that underpin the curriculum. Students are a significant asset in planning change within the curriculum, yet they are not given the appropriate environment to always work effectively as co-creators of what and how they learn. They have for many years led the demand for a change in teaching that focuses on sustainability and the environment, ethics, diversity and inclusivity but often do so by developing alternative curriculum or teaching activities rather than redesign.

If we are going to design a new curriculum for a new time, that will involve bringing together colleges and universities, employers and industry, and qualification bodies. But to really design for the future we need to harness the voice of students who are uniquely placed to provide us with the insight into what they need to be successful in the world ahead; we need to ensure they are full partners in any redesign for it to be successful.

We must also be cautious about the opportunities Covid-19 seems to present and be careful to not rush into making significant changes in the

way students learn due to anecdotal evidence or pure financial and practical reasoning. We need to explore the pedagogical benefits and limitations of teaching and learning in an online environment, whilst carving out time to listen to the lived experience of those students who have first-hand knowledge. Students have to want and need the experience that comes from a more digital environment and we need to take time to reflect on how online teaching has affected all students, and particularly the additional impact that will have been felt by certain groups.

A move to greater digitalisation seemed inevitable even before the pandemic but it needs to be planned and resourced. Digital learning cannot be traditional learning transferred to an online environment. Whilst we recognise there have been many innovations in the way students are taught, there is still a reliance on traditional practices (lectures, seminars etc) and there is scope to further develop teaching in the classroom without the need to move wholly or substantially online.

We also need to consider the role of internationalisation and mobility within our curriculum; how can we take hold of opportunities to bring the world into our curriculum, and in return, provide our students with not only the tools and skills, but the opportunities and attributes to venture out and into the world.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Scotland is internationally recognised and respected for our approach to student engagement. We as a sector endorsed 'A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland', a framework which promotes a shared understanding of the key elements and effective features of student engagement, and sparqs as an organisation continues to support and develop this area of work across every institution in Scotland, and beyond. We have promoted the 'Scottish approach' internationally, from Australia to Armenia, to closer to home in Ireland.

We recognise the growth of the role of student associations, especially in colleges, over recent years, and the significant role student officers and student representatives have in contributing to the enhancement of the student learning experience.

As we consider how we move forward, students must be central to our decision making as well as continued partners in the processes and mechanisms we collectively design. We must also ensure there continues to be adequate support for these students, with appropriate training, resources and networks to nurture and sustain their engagement long-term.