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Short bio:

Stef Black is a graduate of Bangor University, Wales, with a BA (Hons) in English Literature and Journalism, and a Masters in Literature. She started her career at the University of Glasgow, working with postgraduate taught and research students, before moving to the University of Stirling Students' Union, where she undertook the role of Policy and Research Coordinator. There, she focused on enhancing student engagement in quality processes, developing educational representation roles and enhancing policy and governance. Stef now works for sparqs, a publicly-funded agency for Scotland's university and college sectors which aims to support student engagement in the quality of the learning experience, and has been there for two years. Her main areas of work include the development of Student Partnership Agreements, enhancing engagement with data in colleges and universities, and supporting developments in student representative training and enhancements in online training across the Sector.

Proposal

Title: Facilitating students to be co-creators of their learning and teaching; a Scottish sector insight.

Abstract:

This paper will explore current practices popular in the Scottish higher education sector, which institutions and student associations use to enhance partnership working and enable students to co-create their educational experience, particularly in the evaluation of their learning and teaching. We will look at three main tools; firstly, the development and implementation of Student Partnership Agreement's (SPAs) to build effective partnership working. Secondly, the practice of Student-led Teaching Awards (SLTAs) as an alternative vehicle for evaluating learning and teaching. Finally, the

role of a robust student representation system to aid institutions in collecting and responding to feedback, as well as considering how best to foster an environment that supports students to give meaningful, purposeful feedback.

Key words: Enhancement focussed, student-led, feedback and evaluation.

Text of paper:

The Scottish higher education landscape is unique; rooted deep into our structures and processes is the valued role of students in all aspects of their learning and teaching. From shaping the curriculum to monitoring quality, students are at the heart of the framework that underpins the sector. In 2011, sparqs (Student Partnership in Quality Scotland) undertook extensive research with staff and students across universities and colleges to better understand the perceptions around student engagement. This research was the foundation for a new resource, entitled the *Student Engagement Framework for Scotland*; a document owned and endorsed by the key sector agencies in Scotland, and consisting of five key elements of student engagement, and six features of effective student engagement. [1]

These five elements explicitly call for the involvement of students in their learning and teaching, in particular; "*student's engaging in their own learning*" with 'learning' covering learning, teaching and assessment, and *"students working with their institution in shaping the direction of learning."* Going even further, the framework establishes six key features of effective student engagement, 'a culture of engagement', 'students as partners', 'valuing the student contribution', 'focus on enhancement and change', 'responding to diversity,' and 'appropriate resources and support'.

sparqs works with institutions across Scotland to help shape and enhance the delivery of their work which supports the expectations of the elements, and builds on the key features, in particular 'students as partners', as well as continuing to initiate a meaningful partnership between students and their institution.

As such, many institutions in Scotland have developed and implemented three tools to enhance student involvement in their learning and teaching; Student Partnership Agreements, Student-led Teaching Awards, and student representative systems. Specifically, Student-led Teaching Awards and student representative systems can be used as alternative tools to involve students in the evaluative processes of their learning and teaching, with an emphasis of them being student-led, student-owned and student-focused, as opposed to the more traditional means of student evaluative processes, such as national surveys, or end-of-module evaluation forms, which tend to be academic, or sector led.

In this paper we will explore the background and components of each of these tools, how a Student Partnership Agreement can be used as the foundation of a good working relationship that then

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[1] Student partnerships in quality Scotland (sparqs) Education Scotland, HEA Scotland, NUS Scotland, QAA Scotland, Scotland's Colleges, SFC, Universities Scotland (December 2012). *A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland.* http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/SEFScotland.pdf

enables the development of other new initiatives, and how they can be adopted throughout institutions to facilitate ways to ensure students can be co-creators of their learning and teaching.

Student Partnership Agreements:

Student Partnership Agreements, known as SPAs, were first introduced to the university sector in 2013, with the launch of sparqs guidance on how to develop and implement one.[2] As the ethos of the Scottish sector focusses on partnership and enhancement, SPAs were considered an appropriate alternative to Student Charters, which are common in English universities, and focus on the rights and responsibilities of the student at their institution.   In contrast, SPAs are a tool by which institutions and students' associations work together to promote how students can engage with staff at their institution to improve the quality of learning and teaching, and then also an opportunity to agree a set of priority areas upon which the students' association and institution will work in partnership to deliver.

SPAs are not contracts to be held to account over; rather they should be live, responsive documents that reflect the current practices of associations and institutions, as well as their future aspirations and goals that they want to deliver on, together. Although they take into consideration other relevant documents, such as strategic plans and existing priority areas, SPAs should be a result of ongoing dialogue between students and staff, and contain significant elements of original content. They should be continuously reviews and reflected upon, and be one of the main sources for associations and institutions to refer to in their plans of work for the year ahead.

As such, SPAs are one of the main tools used in the Scottish sector for developing and progressing projects that put students at the centre of their learning and teaching, and considers the benefit of their involvement in the design, delivery, and evaluation of their own education. By fostering an environment that recognises the importance of partnership working, and the advantage of student-led evaluation, associations and institutions can work successfully together to ensure that level of involvement is supported and maintained.

Since their inception, 16 of Scotland's 19 universities have developed (or are in the process of developing) an SPA, or equivalent document, and they continue to evolve to suit the ever-changing needs of an institution, and the sector.   We are seeing SPA's encompass more than just strategic level objectives; they are an opportunity to respond to student opinion, year-on-year, contextualising current trends and key topics of individual institutions, and their student demographic. Depending on your situation, SPAs can give you the chance to think big and be ambitious, or alternatively, be the first step in developing a positive partnership between staff and students, institution and association. By developing this positive partnership, you are taking the first step to embedding a culture that not only supports partnership, but that exhibits it at every level throughout the institution. What this then

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[2] sparqs, (November 2013). *Guidance on the development and implementation of a Student Partnership Agreement in Universities*.

creates is a structure in which students are enabled to be involved in all aspects of their learning and teaching process; from the development and implementation, to the evaluation and review, thus empowering student to co-create their own experience.

The impact of these SPAs is clearly seen across the sector, and the engagement from students in all aspects of the process continues to grow; one institution funds staff-student projects in which the work will help them achieve objectives relating to the themes they have in their SPA. The project is co-led between at least one staff member and one student, thus ensuring student involvement in not just the development of the SPA, but also the outputs. Other institutions have recently developed an evaluation or report as part of their SPA, reflecting on the previous iteration and considering what was achieved. These extracts allow for the institution to say, 'as a result of partnership activity, our achievements include...' further showing the impact and influence of the Student Partnership Agreement. Examples of these include; university-wide assessment and feedback actions, early access to examination timetables, student representative system reviews, the development of a student mental health agreement, and the implementation of school-level SPAs which then feed into an overall institution-wide SPA.

Student-led Teaching Awards:

Student-led Teaching Awards, informally known as SLTAs, have gained traction in the Scottish sector since their inception in 2009. Initially funded as a pilot-project by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the National Union of Students across Scotland, they were developed as a tool to facilitate student-led nominations of excellent teaching staff. Their role was to celebrate excellence, putting a focus on the positive aspects of learning and teaching, culminating in an end-of-year award ceremony. The schemes are student-owned, designed and operated, usually managed by the association, but within an agreed association–institution partnership. They promote a culture of student-centric evaluation, derived from unsolicited nominations, resulting in more honest, and authentic feedback.

Initial research carried out after the pilot project by HEA highlighted that, *"SLTAs have proven to be a novel, positive way to celebrate excellence in learning and teaching practice…an immensely popular and morale-building opportunity to bring students and staff together to celebrate success…and a promising way to find out more about what students' value most in their learning experience, and their conceptions of excellence in learning and teaching".*[3]

Over the years, and as more associations have developed SLTA schemes, the focus of an SLTA scheme has moved more towards that final point, using them as a tool to find out what students' value. Associations have seen the potential in the nomination data as a unique way to evaluate learning and teaching, and make changes based on the analysis. Indeed, associations have noted that a main

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[3] Robert A. Davies, Murray J. Hope, and Alastair D. Robertson (2012). *Student-Led Teaching Awards: lessons from a leading higher education initiative in Scotland,* pg. 8.

advantage of operating an SLTA scheme is that "students feel empowered and are given a platform to express what they find valuable in their learning experience".[4]

Whereas once institutions would maybe only receive 200-400 nominations, in more recent years many receive at least over 1,000 with some as many as 3,000+.   As such, the data is both quantitive and qualitive, rich in candid student feedback relating directly to their learner journey.   This increasing active participation from the students continues to promote the cycle of the SLTA journey; the more students who engage, the more data, and the more you can influence, which in turn, demonstrates to students the stature and respect commanded by these teaching awards, and so the cycle continues.

With the continued increase, a significant number of associations now produce reports based on the analysed data to disseminate best practice across an institution. This analysis not only allows them to see the successes, but gives them the opportunity to work in partnership with their institution to embed such positive practices across areas in need of support or development. One institutions' report '*What Does Good Teaching Look Like to Students'* detailed what characteristics students perceived to be indicators of excellence, as well as a breakdown of nomination profiles and key themes for that year,[5] whereas another's report compared data from the last 7 years' to see the changes amongst student cohorts and what they valued over time.

SLTAs not only provide an opportunity for internal analysis of student opinion with regards to learning and teaching, but also nationally. In 2018, the Quality Assurance Agency for Scotland (QAA) produced a report analysing just under 5,000 nominations from 10 SLTA schemes across Scotland, specifically looking at student perceptions of 'good' feedback.[6] This report further highlighted the importance of SLTA schemes as a tool for capturing student evaluation of their learning and teaching, and the other factors that influence their experience.

Although the original ethos of the awards still exists, and celebrating excellence is still a key component, the shift towards a more analytical approach of the data, rather than just commending great teaching, means intuitions now have access to a uniquely alternative format for gathering student opinion. What is even more significant is that students have direct ownership and access of a means to evaluate their own educational experience, which is treated with respect and recognition, by both association and institution. This means all students can engage in a conversation around the quality of their education.

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[4] Ibid, pg.10.

[5] Edinburgh University Students' Association (November 2016). *What Does Good Teaching Look Like to Student? An Analysis of Teaching Awards Nomination Data* https://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/pageassets/representation/campaigns/teachingawards/research/Teaching-Awards-Research-Presentation-Launch-Event.pdf

[6] QAA Scotland (August 2018). What does Student-Led Teaching Award nomination data tell us about student perceptions of 'good' feedback https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/focus-on/full-research-report---student-led-teaching-awards.pdf?sfvrsn=6d71fe81_12

The future potential of SLTAs are limitless, and even goes beyond just a tool to evaluate learning and teaching. There is the opportunity for a thematic review across all evaluative practices; taking a cross-section of other, more traditional forms of feedback, such as module evaluations or national surveys, and seeing if similar trends are present between those and student-led evaluative tools. It will be interesting to see where similarities and differences occur, depending on the mechanism used to elicit the feedback, and the students' opinion of that mechanism.

Student Representation Systems:

Student representation systems come in all shapes and sizes, and there is no one structure that fits all. Across Scotland, each institutions' rep systems are reflective of the institution they represent, designed, and implemented to ensure student involvement in as many ways as possible, and at all levels. By operating a student representative system, which might include roles such as class/course reps, or faculty/school reps, institutions are embedding a structure that facilitates the collection of student opinion, as well as an already establish mechanism for communicating back any changes made because of that feedback. Student rep systems support a culture of student-led evaluation, asking students to consider challenges that need addressed, as well as areas of success that others can learn from. This is the very essence of their role, and most job descriptions for student reps highlight this as the key responsibility; gathering and evaluating student opinion, developing solutions to challenges, and feeding back changes as a result.

Some form of rep system operates at every university in Scotland, many with multiple tiers due to the ever-increasing numbers of student involvement and the importance placed of the roles. The students who take on these representative roles are trained and supported by their association, institution, and nationally by sparqs, to undertake the role and be a voice for multiple student cohorts. This is key to ensuring that student rep systems can effectively be used as a source for evaluating learning and teaching, by creating a robust, developed system, with reps who are suitably trained and supported, and who understand the function of their role and the purpose behind their work.

The role of student reps has become ever more prominent in the Scottish education sector, and with this, a more respected profile for the roles and their responsibilities. Whereas once student reps may only have sat on local course-level committees, many now sit on university-wide learning and teaching committees, or are even involved with national sector agencies. Institutions are further utilising the role by embedding them into the evaluative processes of the university, and we see across the sector

student reps being involved in annual monitoring and programme review, as members of institution-led review panels, and in the development of new programmes and courses. With this, student reps are playing a pivotal role in the ongoing evaluation of key learning and teaching aspects, both within their own institution, but also as part of Scotland's national framework.

sparqs is involved in the development and training of student representatives in many Scottish institutions; our course rep training materials are used across the sector, by our own trainers as well as institutional trainers. Our training asks student reps to consider the way they approach feedback, and we developed a tool known as the *ABCD of Effective Feedback* (a diagram of which can be seen to the right) for reps to use as part of their role when eliciting student evaluations. [7]
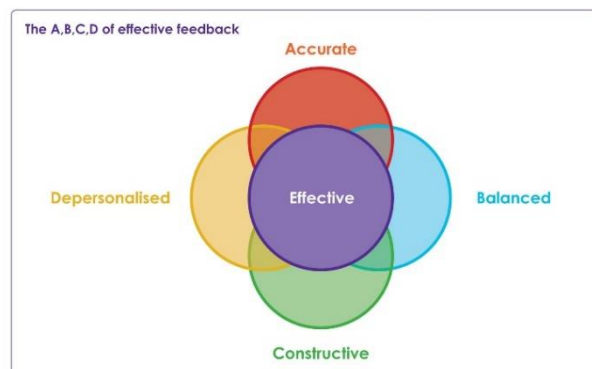
We ask reps to consider how **A**ccurate, **B**alanced, **C**onstructive and **D**epersonalised feedback can be advantageous and have the most impact when communicating issues or desired changes to the learning and teaching processes at their institution. This can be one of the ways that begins to foster an environment that encourages and supports students to give purposeful feedback, by asking them to recognise the significance of their feedback, and thus how best to structure and communicate it.

With the proper training and support, these rep systems play a crucial role in the way learning and teaching is evaluated, as the peer-to-peer support and communication ensures an open and honest dialogue around issues and concerns, as well as an exploration of positive attributes and best practice, which can then be more widely circulated through committee structures that have learning and teaching remits, and that these student reps may already be a part of. By placing a significance on the role of student reps, institutions have demonstrated the value the see in using reps as a way to comment and evaluate their, and their peers, learning and teaching experiences, which allows the system to grow and further foster student-led evaluation.

Conclusions:

These three practices are just some of the tools currently used across Scotland to embed student engagement in learning and teaching, and offer alternative ways to evaluate the learning and teaching going on at your institution. SPAs can be the catalyst for driving forward a partnership approach, which can then help facilitate and embed students in such evaluative processes like Student-led Teaching Awards and student representative systems. They naturally cohabit in many institutions, interlinking and overlapping, enabling the idea of 'students a partners' to be a more widely recognised and accepted principal. This then encourages more initiative thinking as to how to further engage and enhance student involvement in the evaluation of the learning and teaching practices, and hopefully

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[7] sparqs (updated 2017). *Introductory Class Rep Training Workbook*.
https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/students.php?page=94

continues to foster an environment that supports and enables students to be co-creators of their learning and teaching.

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