

2022 European Quality Assurance Forum

Shaping or sharing? QA in a value-driven EHEA

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Short bio (150 words max):

Megan Brown is a Development Consultant for sparqs, Scotland's national agency for student engagement in universities and colleges. Her main area of work is supporting students to engage in national policy developments in learning, teaching and quality.

Megan oversees sparqs' equality, diversity and inclusion work, including supporting and training student officers on representing diverse student voices. She is also responsible for supporting sector projects related to microcredentials and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

Megan is the sparqs lead for the QAA Scotland Enhancement Themes, including co-delivery of the Student-led Project (SLP).

Megan is a former member of QAA UK's Student Strategic Advisory Committee and sparqs' University Advisory Group. She is a graduate of The University of Edinburgh and the University of East Anglia and previously worked at Edinburgh University Students' Association.

Proposal

Title: "Same storm, different boats"¹ – A Student-Led Approach to Exploring Equity of the Student Learning Experience in Scotland

Abstract (150 words max): Scotland's Enhancement Themes Student-Led Project (SLP), a national initiative comprised of student representatives from across the country, selected the topic of 'Promoting Equity of the Student Learning Experience' for its 2021-22 focus.

The paper will consider the key learning points gained during our exploration of the concept of equity, identifying ongoing areas of challenge and sharing examples of positive practice. In particular, the paper considers the concept of equity in relation to student representatives, considering whether our rep systems are themselves accessible and inclusive for all students, and how our reps can be equipped to effectively represent increasingly diverse student cohorts.

The paper will also highlight the benefits of an approach to quality enhancement activity which recognises that, as those with direct lived experiences of the challenges of inequitable learning and teaching, students are those best placed to identify what they need to thrive in education.

The corresponding sub-topic of the proposal: Student participation in governance and quality assurance of higher education

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details. No

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Sectoral Context: Scotland's Enhancement Themes and the Student-Led Project

Scotland has an enhancement-led approach to quality. At its centre is the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), comprised of 5 pillarsⁱⁱ. One of these 5 pillars is the Enhancement Themes, which 'aims to improve the learning experience of students studying within the Scottish higher education sector'ⁱⁱⁱ. 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'^{iv}. The Theme has four priority areas: equality and diversity; community and belonging; supporting staff and student success; and accessible learning.

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 the group is always majority-student. Most of the members are sabbatical officers with an education remit, who represent their student body at the institutional level. We aim for a group which cover a broad geographical spread across Scotland, including those representing rural and remote locations. In 2021/22, the group was comprised of 8 student officers, 1 students' association staff member and 1 institutional staff member.^v

The Steering Group meets approximately once a month from September to May. The first meetings involve introducing members to the wider Enhancement Theme and discussions to select the SLP's chosen topic for the year. This decision is based on several factors, including the officers' manifesto commitments; current issues in the wider sector as identified by national quality reporting; national priorities such as governmental focuses; and, in many cases, simply the organic direction of lively debate and discussion amongst the group.

The Student-Led Project 2021-22

For 2021/22, the topic the SLP Steering Group selected is 'Promoting Equity of the Student Learning Experience'.

The selection of this topic was motivated in part by the students' observations of the significant changes to learning and teaching brought about by the pandemic. In some cases, the students observed that the move to digital had made elements of the student experience more equitable, and these are changes which institutions may wish to keep as we move out of the pandemic. In other cases, some changes made the learning experience less equitable for certain groups and demographics of students.

In light of this context, institutions in Scotland are currently reflecting on what they have learned from the pandemic, in order to continue to develop approaches to learning and teaching that maximise the benefits of a more blended environment and support the diverse needs of their student populations. This year's SLP builds on this momentum, encouraging institutions and students' associations to work collaboratively to build a student experience that supports all students, however and wherever they learn.

The SLP steering group identified 5 questions to explore over the 2021/22 year:

- What do we understand by 'equity' in the context of learning and teaching and the student experience?
- How can we promote the importance of equity to support the diverse needs of students? What changes are still required from the student perspective?

- Recognising the diverse needs of students, what are the barriers to students having an equitable learning experience?
- How do we make blended learning and teaching as engaging and inclusive as possible for all students?
- How do we continue to develop representative systems and equip student representatives to effectively support *all* of the students they represent?

The students chose to develop 5 substantive outputs over the course of the project:

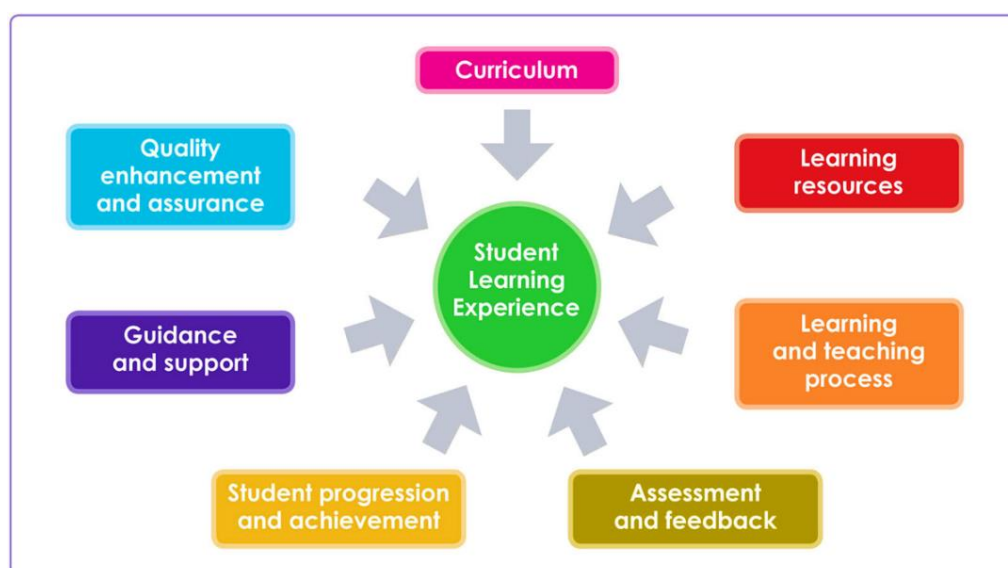
- A piece of desk-based research to collate a set of key existing theory, practice and resources related to equity in learning and teaching.^{vi}
- A 'top tips' document on how to develop equitable learning opportunities.^{vii}
- A workshop that explores how students' associations and institutions can develop course rep systems that effectively represent diverse groups of students.^{viii}
- A suite of case studies related to equitable learning and teaching practices *[to be published August 2022]*.
- An introductory guide for student reps on the topic of equity in learning and teaching *[to be published August 2022]*.

For each of the outputs, 1-2 members of the steering group took on a lead role. This approach allows all the 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 we are mindful that their role in national level development work needs to strike a balance between giving them new opportunities and ensuring that the responsibilities are proportionate and manageable alongside their institutional time commitments.

As we come to the end of the SLP for 2021/22, we are able to look back on a hugely valuable year spent developing our understanding of the concept of equity, identifying the challenges for institutions in creating an equitable student experience for all, and sharing examples of best practice from across Scotland with the sector. Below we will outline some of the key learning points we have gained throughout the year's SLP activities, as well as sharing some of sparqs' ongoing initiatives in this area.

Equity and the Student Learning Experience

To give a foundation to our discussions on equity, sparqs introduced the SLP Steering Group to our Student Learning Experience (SLE) diagram^{ix}. This diagram is used across a range of sparqs' activities including in our course rep training, where it helps course reps to break down the concept of the learning experience into more manageable bitesize chunks.



sparqs' Student Learning Experience Diagram

It is important that institutions and students' associations consider issues of equity across the entire breadth of the student learning experience. The SLP identified issues of equity across all of the elements in the above diagram and included this range of themes across our published outputs.

For example, during the pandemic, the move to online learning highlighted that some students did not have access to the **learning resources** needed to engage in their studies, including devices such as laptops and access to an effective internet connection. Although the pandemic brought these challenges to the forefront of institutions' attentions, equitable access to learning resources is not a new issue. For instance, in 2017, the Scottish Government estimated that a third of low-income households (on incomes of less than £15,000) in Scotland had no internet access at all. Many institutions have been able to provide equipment directly to students by donating laptops or providing dongles that improve the quality of internet connectivity. Nevertheless, as new students join the institution each year digital exclusion remains a barrier for many.

Let us also consider the issue of equity in the context of **learning and teaching processes**. For example, for some students the move to online teaching has removed barriers. There is no cost of travel to campus, students with parental or caring responsibilities may find it easier to structure their courses around childcare, and for students living far away from campus, such as those living in remote areas such as parts of the Highlands and Islands, they do not need to travel for multiple hours to get to campus. But for other students, the move online has created barriers. They may not have a stable WiFi connection, may have a lack of access to necessary equipment, and some students find the online space a challenging space to maintain focus and engage. Unlike a campus environment, students' home environments are not standardised and some may have distractions of home life that cannot be avoided.

Our Rep Guide to Equity in Learning and Teaching *[to be published in August 2022]* will introduce student reps to issues of equity across the student learning experience. If we want students to work in partnership with the institution, to identify where issues of equity exist within learning and teaching and to work together on solutions, then we need to equip our student reps to understand these issues and to recognise how and why students may experience education differently from one another.

One size does not fit all

As we progress through and out of the pandemic, institutions are beginning to make longer-term strategic decisions about their future provision following a sustained period of emergency planning. How do institutions decide what they will look like post-pandemic, if, as we illustrate above, a particular decision levels the playing field for one student while the very same decision makes it more challenging for another?

If we recognise that the different circumstances and needs of students lead to different requirements for their learning and teaching contexts, an institution which aims for equity therefore needs to offer students as much choice as possible in order to allow them to engage with their academic experience in the way the most suits them. Examples could include offering both online and in-person options for classes and offering a range of assessment types. This does not mean giving students an entirely unlimited choice of how their course is delivered and assessed, but perhaps offering 2-3 options, to ensure quality remains assured and that staff are not overburdened. But offering this type of semi-personalised approach and allowing some degree of flexibility will go far in allowing students to tailor their learning and teaching to their own skills, personal circumstances, and aptitudes.^x

Diverse student voices

As part of the SLP, we ran a workshop at QAA Scotland's Enhancement Themes Conference, exploring with attendees the roles institutions and students' associations can have in supporting student reps and rep systems to effectively engage with issues of equity^{xi}. As the student body becomes increasingly diverse, how do institutions and students' associations ensure their student rep systems reflect this diversity? We asked attendees to look at 3 sections of the rep system – recruitment; training and resources; and rep processes, systems and structures. Under each theme, we asked the groups to consider a set of equity-themed questions:

Recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you know which groups of students are well-represented or under-represented in your rep population? How do you know? • Do you gather demographics data on your student reps? In what ways could this sort of data be used by the students' association/institution? • What is your process for recruiting reps? Are there any elements of this process which could be barriers for particular student groups? • What can be done to ensure that institutions and students' associations are hearing from diverse voices and harder to reach groups of students? Do you know of any existing examples of good practice?
Training and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What format does your training take? Online or in-person? Synchronous or asynchronous? If synchronous, when is it scheduled? What are the barriers/strengths of your training format? • Does your rep training include content on hearing from and representing diverse voices? Are reps aware of the concept of equity, and how it relates to learning and teaching and to their roles? • What resources could you provide to reps to support them to understand issues of equity and to represent diverse voices? Do you know of any existing examples of good practice?
Rep processes, systems and structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there student groups at your institution that don't engage with the rep system? Who and why? • What kind of meetings are reps invited to attend? When and where are these meetings scheduled? Are there any barriers to attending? • Do you have a process where students can raise issues of equity directly with the students' association? • Are there opportunities for reps who are particularly interested in the topic of equity to get more involved in departmental and institutional initiatives throughout their time in the role? How could institutions and students' associations facilitate this and can you think of any existing opportunities where you could engage further with reps? Do you know of any existing examples of good practice?

Key reflections and suggestions of effective practice from the workshop included:

- Where possible, provide **choice** for reps to engage in their role; for example: different times of the day and locations of training, different formats of resources, alternative ways to contribute to student-staff committees such as sending in comments via email.
- Consider how to provide **online spaces** for your reps, such as a Microsoft Teams space, that allow reps to engage with one another as easily as possible.
- Reps should be trained and supported to **understand the diversity of the students** they represent, and how students may experience learning and teaching differently from one other. Training should include those groups who are protected under the Equality Act^{xii} as well as other groups such as direct entrants into second or third year (articulating students), student parents and carers, students whose first language is not English, and adult returners to education.
- Equip reps with the knowledge to **signpost to specialist services** (while reassuring them they do not need to be specialists themselves).
- If your students' association has **liberation officer roles** (or equivalent), ensure that your reps know about them and how to contact them.

- Engage with your existing reps on institutional and national equity initiatives - **work in partnership** with reps to identify issues and solutions.
- **Postgraduate students**, in particular research students, are often an under-represented group in the rep population. Solutions include dedicated roles for PGR students (instead of grouping PGT and PGR under one 'postgraduate' role) and linking rep systems with existing postgraduate groups and structures such as societies or institutional postgraduate committees.
- For some students, the **time commitment** of being a rep may be too high. This can be a particular barrier for students who work alongside their studies and do not have time to take on significant extra-curricular commitments. Consideration needs to be given to the size and scope of the rep role and ensuring that it does not become burdensome. For senior reps, undertaking a role which is expected to take up a larger amount of time, paying these students or giving them an honorarium to recognise their contribution should be considered.
- Even before COVID-19, some students' associations had begun to move their training online and this number unsurprisingly increased during the pandemic. Many students' associations have found that the move to **online training** has made it easier for students to engage and removed barriers to accessing training such as needing to travel to campus. Students' associations should review their rep training in the context of equity and consider continuing to offer an online training option.
- As a sector, we need to recognise the importance of the **individual student story** – reps shouldn't always need to demonstrate that there is an issue by proving it impacts a large group of students. Depth of feeling is as important as breadth of feeling, and focusing only on issues which affect large cohorts can risk **tyranny of the majority**.
- Capture who your reps are through **diversity monitoring**.

Diversity of student reps - you can't manage what you don't measure

This final reflection – capturing who your reps are through diversity monitoring – is an aim shared by sparqs. The course rep role should be open to all students, regardless of their demographic profile. As we have identified above, students do not have homogeneous experiences and we cannot assume that one student's experience of a course is the same as another's. There is a risk that, where a group of students is underrepresented and their voices unheard by the institution and the students' association, that these students are further disadvantaged by this exclusion.

Since 2017, sparqs has run a national project – 'Monitoring the Diversity of Course Reps' – to advance the equality and diversity of student representation and to create an evidence-base for further research and activity at institutional and national level^{xiii}. At its core is a questionnaire covering 15 demographic areas and administered to course reps during their training. In 2021/22, the project received responses from over 3000 reps in 23 institutions across Scotland.

Each year, participating institutions receive an institutional report for internal use, in order to identify under-represented groups in their rep populations and consider initiatives they may be able to introduce to ensure that they capture the voices of all students. The data collected is also aggregated into a national dataset. As the project develops further, sparqs aims to build an increasingly complete understanding of course rep diversity at the national level in Scotland, in order to develop cross-institutional initiatives which aim to create rep systems which are as equitable as possible and remove barriers to entry and participation.

Conclusions

This year's Student-Led Project has given us an invaluable opportunity to spend dedicated time considering the issue of equity in the student learning experience. All the resources created during the SLP have been student-led from start to finish. As experts in their own learning, students are uniquely placed to deliver activity on issues of equity. As people with direct, lived experience of the challenges of inequitable learning and teaching, students are best placed to identify what they, and those in similar circumstances to them, need to succeed and thrive in higher education.

The Student-Led Project model is an approach that is undoubtedly transferable to the settings of other countries and their quality systems. As long as you have a group of engaged student representatives,

and provide them with sufficient support and structure throughout the programme, you will reap the benefits of resources made *by* students, *for* students. This initiative truly embodies the oft-quoted slogan within social justice movements of ‘nothing about us without us’, empowering students to take the lead on issues which affect them and set the agenda for change^{xiv}.

Discussion questions for the session:

1. Where are the opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to impact on institutional and national strategies for equity in learning?
2. What can be done to ensure that institutions and student representative bodies are hearing from diverse voices and harder to reach groups of students?
3. Are your student rep systems equitable? Do you know which groups of students are well-represented or under-represented in your rep population, and why?

References:

ⁱ Paraphrased from Helen Barnard, Acting Director, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *JRF responds to ONS figures on ethnicity and coronavirus*, 2020, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/press/jrf-responds-ons-figures-ethnicity-and-coronavirus> - accessed 20th July 2022

ⁱⁱ *Quality Enhancement Framework*, QAA Scotland, <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/quality-enhancement-framework> - accessed 20th July 2022

ⁱⁱⁱ *Enhancement Themes*, QAA Scotland, <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/en/quality-enhancement-framework/enhancement-themes> - accessed 20th July 2022

^{iv} *Resilient Learning Communities*, QAA Scotland, <https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/resilient-learning-communities> - accessed 20th July 2022

^v Acknowledgement must be given to the contributions of all the members of the 2021-22 SLP Steering Group. These are: Damilola Adesanya, President Education & Welfare, Robert Gordon University Students’ Union; Calum Brown, Vice President Education, University of Stirling Students’ Union; Mia Clarke, Vice President Education, Glasgow University Students’ Representative Council; Heather Innes, Vice President Higher Education, Highlands & Islands Students’ Association; Zechariah Laari, Vice President Academia, Dundee University Students’ Association; Amy McLuckie, Co-President, Scotland’s Rural College Students’ Association; Kevin Miguim, Vice President Education, University of the West of Scotland Students’ Association; Viki Soper, Access, Participation and Success Officer, Open University in Scotland; Stewart Squire, Democratic Support and Policy Coordinator, Dundee University Students’ Association. The Steering Group was chaired by Ondrej Kucerak, Vice President Education, Aberdeen University Students’ Association, who gave enormous time and energy to this project.

None of the work detailed in this paper would have been possible without the dedication, creativity and enthusiasm of all of the Steering Group Members and of QAA Scotland and sparqs staff. Patrycja Mitrut, Development Consultant at sparqs, had an integral role in the development and creation of the outputs of the project, as both a co-author of several outputs and as a strategic lead. Thanks must also go to Demelza Curnow and Caroline Turnbull, QAA Scotland, who provided invaluable support and advice across the entirety of the project. We must also acknowledge the wider QAA Scotland team for their delivery of the Enhancement Themes, of which the SLP is one component of a much wider series of work which has, at its centre, the aim of continuously improving the student experience for all.

^{vi} *Student-Led Project Desk Research*, Viki Soper, Mia Clarke and Patrycja Mitrut (Student-Led Project), <https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/en/resilient-learning-communities/promoting-the-equity-of-the-student-learning-experience> - accessed 20th July 2022

^{vii} *Top Tips to Develop Equitable Learning Opportunities*, Amy McLuckie, Kevin Miguim and Patrycja Mitrut (Student-Led Project), <https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/en/resilient-learning-communities/promoting-the-equity-of-the-student-learning-experience> - accessed 20th July 2022

^{viii} Workshop delivered at 8th June 2022 at QAA Scotland’s Enhancement Themes Conference 2022, <https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/news-events/conference-resilient-learning-communities-inclusive-flexible-and-accessible-june-22> - accessed 20th July 2022

^{ix} *Student Learning Experience*, sparqs, <https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/resource-item.php?item=205> – accessed 20th July 2022

^x There is a great deal of literature out there which identifies benefits for students of flexibility and choice in learning and teaching. Some examples:

Rapanta, C., Botturi, L., Goodyear, P. et al. *Balancing Technology, Pedagogy and the New Normal: Post-pandemic Challenges for Higher Education*. *Postdigit Sci Educ* 3, 715–742 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-021-00249-1> - accessed 20th July 2022

Singh J, Steele K, Singh L. *Combining the Best of Online and Face-to-Face Learning: Hybrid and Blended Learning Approach for COVID-19, Post Vaccine, & Post-Pandemic World*. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*. 2021;50(2):140-171. <http://doi.org/10.1177/00472395211047865>

Miller, Jack. (2013). *Student Choice, Instructor Flexibility: Moving Beyond the Blended Instructional Model*. *Issues and Trends in Educational Technology* 1. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304590766_Student_Choice_Instructor_Flexibility_Moving_Beyond_the_Blended_Instructional_Model - accessed 20th July 2022

^{xi} *Enhancement Conference 2022*, QAA Scotland, <https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/news-events/conference-resilient-learning-communities-inclusive-flexible-and-accessible-june-22> - accessed 20th July 2022

^{xii} *Equality Act 2010*, Legislation.gov.uk, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents> - accessed 20th July 2022.

^{xiii} *Monitoring the diversity of course reps*, sparqs, <https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/institute.php?page=718> – accessed 20th July 2022

^{xiv} The phrase ‘Nothing about us without us’ came into prominent use in English through disability activism during the 1990s. Disability rights activist James Charlton describes: “I first heard the expression... in South Africa in 1993. Michael Masutha and William Rowland, two leaders of Disabled People South Africa, separately invoked the slogan, which they had heard used by someone from Eastern Europe at an international disability rights conference.”

Charlton, James I. *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment*. 1st ed., University of California Press, 1998. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pnqn9>. Accessed 20 Jul. 2022.