13th European Quality Assurance Forum

Broadening the scope of QA

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Call for contributions: paper submission form
Deadline 24 July 2018

Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

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Short bio (150 words max):

Simon Varwell has nearly twenty years' experience in higher and further education, as a students' association officer, in students' association and institutional staff roles and, for the last eleven years, with sparqs – Scotland's national agency for student engagement.

He has a wide range of experience of consultancy at institutional, national and international levels, designing and delivering training to staff and students, and producing guidance and toolkits on various aspects of student engagement. He has presented keynotes, papers and workshops at a variety of forums, and has worked on many of sparqs' international projects from Ireland to Armenia.

His current and recent work include the development of resources on engaging students often regarded as non-traditional, such as those studying online or transnationally and both taught and research postgraduates.

Proposal

Title: Engaging diversely: how online students, postgraduates and others can (and should!) be full partners in quality.

Abstract (150 words max):

Even the most pioneering approaches to the student voice in quality can run the risk of over-dependence on a narrow perspective – one that is disproportionally full-time, on-campus and undergraduate. A major challenge for broadening the scope of quality assurance is to ensure that student engagement reflects the full experiences of an institution's student profile.

European higher education is challenged to engage all students regardless not just of their social background but also of their level of study and method of delivery. The Scottish experience, certainly, is

characterised by a rise in online distance learning (ODL) and transnational education (TNE), and engagement practitioners are also exploring more deeply how taught and research postgraduates can also shape their individual and institutional experiences.

Drawing on practices across Scotland, including institutional work and sectoral tools, this paper will outline the methods and opportunities of engaging students regardless of what, how and where they learn.

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

Text of paper (3000 words max):

SECTORAL CONTEXT

Scottish higher education has an increasingly diverse student profile, yet mechanisms of engagement can often still be traditional in nature.

For instance, diversity in the methods of delivery is clearly rising. Transnational education (TNE – delivering accredited courses in campuses in other countries) is a growing feature of Scotland's higher education sector – as it is across the wider United Kingdom[i] - and online distance learning (ODL) is similarly growing to provide a more accessible curriculum. The lifelong learning agenda in Scotland is also promoting postgraduate study, often on an online and part-time basis as part of career development.

However, approaches to student engagement can frequently be characterised by conventional on-campus approaches such as in-class discussions or focus groups, and in-person meetings, whether of programme, faculty and institutional committees or students' association (students' union) democratic structures.

Yet the challenge is to ensure that quality assurance and enhancement activity explore the full range of what and how students learn, and this has been an increasing focus of Scotland's enhancement-led, student engagement-rooted model in recent years. Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR), Scotland's peer-led model of periodic institutional review, recently completed its third cycle and a number of publications from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland, the review body responsible for ELIR, drew out key themes from that cycle that relate to often traditionally less engaged students. Topics of those thematic summaries include widening access, postgraduate experiences, and collaborative provision (including partnership working in other countries)[ii].

QAA Scotland also run a series of short projects called "Focus On" which again have strongly featured the experience of students in less traditional learning methods, and these have covered issues such as the postgraduate research (PGR) experience and building learning communities at a distance.

Meanwhile there has also been national focus in Scotland on more demographic dimensions, which are beyond the scope of this paper, including students from deprived backgrounds[iii] and ensuring improved gender balance in the student profile across all subjects[iv].

Indeed, responding to diversity is one of the key features of Scotland's Student Engagement Framework[v], a resource developed and owned by the sector that aims to outline the areas in which students should be engaged and the underpinning principles by which this should be done.

The Five Key Elements of Student Engagement	The Six Features of Effective Engagement
Students feeling part of a supportive institution	A culture of engagement
Students engaging in their own learning	Students as partners
Students working with their institution in shaping the direction of learning	**Responding to diversity**
Formal mechanisms for quality and governance	Valuing the student contribution
Influencing the student experience at national level	Focus on enhancement and change
	Appropriate resources and support

That emphasis on diversity reflects both the social and educational diversity:

> "When considering diversity we need to pay attention to protected characteristics as covered by equalities legislation, mode and level of study and socio economic background and related aspects of widening access."[vi]

However this paper will focus primarily on certain aspects of the mode and level of study, namely online distance learning (ODL), transnational education (TNE) and the engagement of taught (PGT) and research (PGR) postgraduates. This is to enable a deeper look at these areas of recent work in Scotland, especially projects undertaken by sparqs, that have broadened approaches of engagement to ensure ODL, TNE, PGT and PGR students are fully involved as partners in conversations about their learning experience.

sparqs' role in these developments reflects its important position within the Scottish sector, and its uniqueness in Europe and the wider world. As its full name suggests, Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs) exists to work with Scotland's higher and further education sectors, specifically with institutions, students' associations and national agencies, to develop the role of students as partners in quality. This key role for students is embedded as one of the five key pillars of Scotland's Quality Enhancement Framework[vii], is endorsed at ministerial level by the Scottish Government, and is one of the defining characteristics of Scottish higher education.

sparqs, funded publically by the Scottish Funding Council for Further and Higher Education (SFC), provides a range of training, consultancy, events and research to institutions and the sector[viii]. While it drives the national student engagement agenda through that activity, the agency also is informed and guided by the perspectives presented by the institutions and students' associations with whom it is funded to work. The areas of work mentioned above and which this paper outlines in more detail are therefore conceived through sector demand and shaped by partnership working with staff and student officers in institutions and sector agencies.

At the heart of sparqs' development of the engagement of a broader range of students are two connected activities that reflect Scotland's partnership model: training and support of students and student representatives, and building capacity within institutions to enhance on their structures and cultures of engagement. This paper will explore those two activities in turn.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT OF STUDENTS

Ensuring that the full range of student views is heard is a challenge for the three main levels of student representative – at the course level, faculty or department level, and the institutional level. This is also a core part of sparqs' work, with around 4,000 student reps a year trained either directly by sparqs staff or indirectly through institutional training teams supported by sparqs.

At the heart of sparqs' course rep training is the idea of thoroughly researching students' views to ensure that all students are being represented and not merely a self-selecting few. Course reps – who are the main bridge on quality matters between students, teaching staff and the students' association – are equipped in their training to use a variety of means of communication. Conducting research only in face-to-face environments will potentially exclude students studying online or part-time.

Such training also requires to be customised to particular student groups. In 2017 sparqs produced a resource to develop course rep training for postgraduate taught (PGT) students[ix]. The tool helps institutions to create training that is customised not only to institutional context but to the PGT experience. For example, the Student Learning Experience diagram on which sparqs' generic introductory training[x] is adapted to accommodate the language and learning experience of Masters-level study.
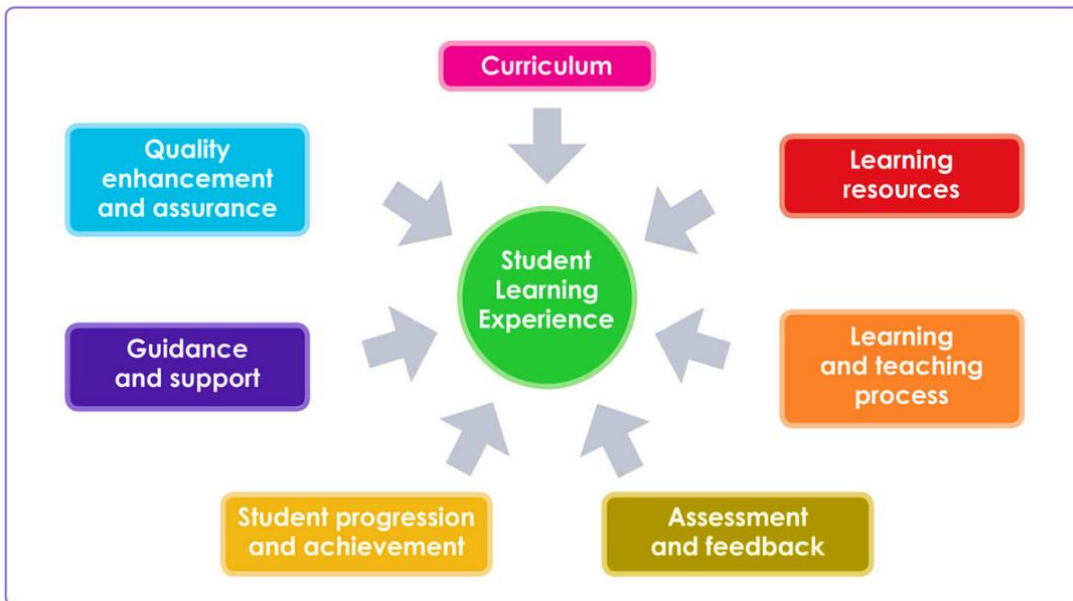
sparqs' Student Learning Experience Diagram
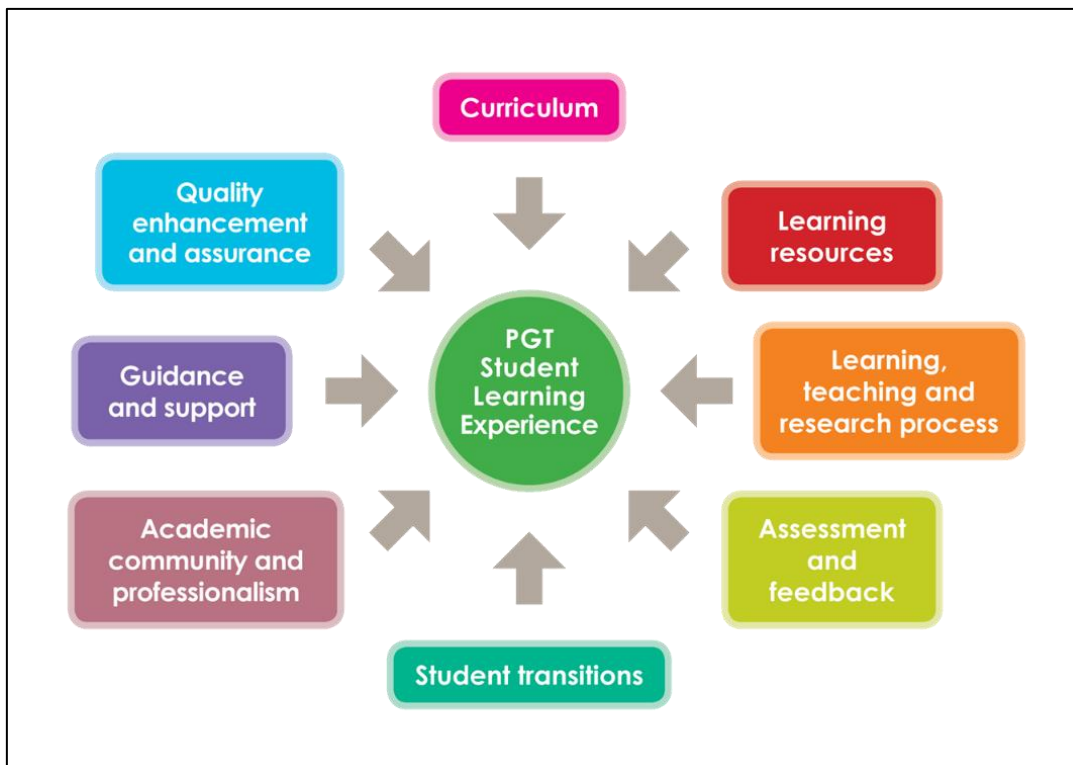
sparqs' PGT Student Learning Experience diagram

This allows PGT reps to be equipped in a way that is centred on them as full and equal members of the university community, rather than as an extra constituency or somehow "special case" that doesn't quite fit in the norm.

Meanwhile, the development of online course rep training within virtual learning environments (VLEs) allows for course reps who are not campus-based to receive an equivalent level of training in an environment that is relevant to their learning experience. Universities and students' associations who

have developed such training have found it also acts as a support to on-campus students who either do not participate in in-person training or who wish an ongoing reinforcement of the knowledge. This is an example of student engagement as a whole benefitting not by creating a resource for a limited non-traditional constituency but by building a general resource around that minority group.

Of course, student reps operating at a higher level, such as within faculty or executive structures, also require to be supported to ensure that the views they gather and use are representative of the whole student profile, especially where they themselves might not be from that group. For instance, a student faculty officer might be an on-campus undergraduate, but will generally require to engage with students and their representatives who are (for instance) part-time, online or PGT students or those based on other campuses (both nearby and transnational). Understanding the profile of students you are charged with representing is a crucial first step to ensuring effectiveness in the role, as well as ensuring maximum impact on the quality process.

sparqs runs an annual training and induction event for students' association executive officers with education remits, posts which typically have the status of a full-time one-year sabbatical. This event, called That's Quality![xi], equips new post holders with the skills and knowledge to understand and engage with the key trends and processes of quality assurance and enhancement, including the pillars of Scotland's Quality Enhancement Framework. There is also a strong focus on developing an understanding of the diversity of the student view, and 2018's event included content on the national widening access agenda and gender equality among other related topics.

Such student officers can also learn through involvement in national projects exploring key areas of less represented students, and indeed will often do so on the back of personal manifesto commitments to address such perceived shortcomings.

BUILDING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

While students who represent (or who are from) non-traditional student groups can be equipped to ensure strong representation in quality, they can only be as effective as the institutional structures in which they then participate. Therefore the other key challenge for broadening the scope of quality assurance and student engagement to include traditionally under-represented students is to ensure that institutions have the capacity to hear and respond to such students.
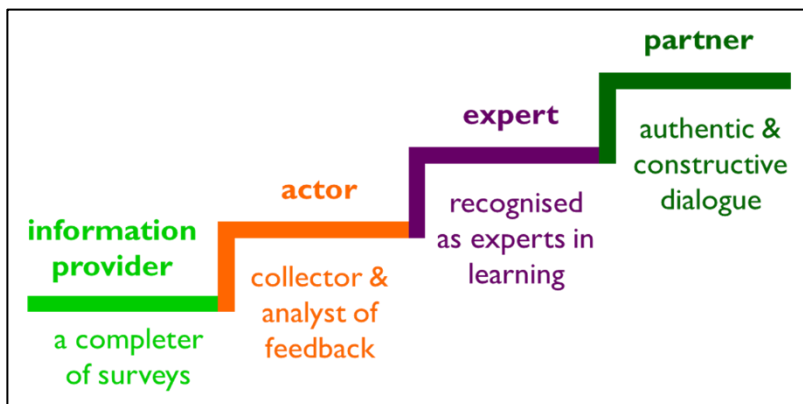
Such support provided by sparqs to institutions strongly reflects the way the agency is responsive to the Scottish sector's needs, through the publication of toolkits and practice guides created in partnership with universities and students' associations.

One example of this is sparqs' resource on engaging ODL students in shaping quality[xii]. This was developed as a result of requests from a number of institutions at their Annual Support Visits with sparqs, meetings which are valuable opportunities for sparqs to learn about and respond to the needs and priorities of institutions and students' associations in student engagement. By drawing together those with involvement in engaging ODL students – such as academics, quality managers, students' association staff and student representatives – sparqs was able to:

1. Assess the challenges and opportunities for ODL engagement within institutions and students' associations;

2. Define the nature of the online distance learning experience in Scottish HE;

3. Identify good practice and areas for development for ODL engagement;

4. Work with staff and students to create a resource, containing guidance, case studies and tools which can be used by staff and students within universities.

One key exercise in the guidance, reproduced below, encourages institutions and students' associations to reflect on the role of ODL students in shaping strategy – and specifically where they might be placed on a ladder of information provider, actor, expert and partner. The role of expert for ODL students is a fundamental one, able as they are to express a perspective that may not be understood by those who represent them.

By discussing the role ODL students currently or should play in different areas of strategy within the institution or students' association (such as the university learning and teaching strategy or students' association course rep policy), priorities for development can be agreed.

Information provider – a completer of surveys	• Completing module evaluation surveys. • Completing institution-wide surveys. • Completing the National Student Survey. • Giving feedback in focus groups. • Answering questions posed in VLE discussions.
Actor – collector and analyst of feedback	• Shaping the content and tools of feedback. • Responding to and adding to others' comments. • Identifying common themes in feedback. • Identifying priorities for decision-making.
Expert – recognised as experts in learning	• Providing detailed case studies and anecdotal evidence about their learning experiences. • Expressing perspectives that can demonstrate the experiences of a particular type of student, such as an under-represented group. • Meeting with internal or external review teams.
Partner – authentic and constructive dialogue	• Being full members of committees, working groups or review bodies. • Being representatives who are a full part of students' association structures. • Proposing ideas, rather than simply commenting on those of others. • Learning together with management. • Sometimes leading on areas of work, in agreement with staff, such as communicating with and engaging other students, or chairing meetings.

Similarly, one of sparqs' current projects is to produce guidance on the engagement of postgraduate research (PGR) students[xiii], who are distinguished even from post graduate taught (PGT) students by virtue of not following a curriculum, being similar in many ways to staff, working on often intensely narrow specialisms, and having intimate working relationships with supervisors and other staff unlike the dynamic for undergraduate or PGT students.

In much the same way, sparqs has drawn together interested staff in academic, management and administrative roles related to PGRs, PGR students, and their representatives, to identify the scope of the challenge in engaging PGR students, and to produce guidance for institutions and training for student reps.

One early question in the project is how institutions and students' associations can be equipped to explore the most effective model of representing PGR students. Three options will form an exercise in the forthcoming guidance:

1. **Autonomous** – A PGR community as a self-governing special interest group, for example as a society affiliated to the students' association or as a separate, parallel PGR students' association.

2. **Academic** – A small team of dedicated PGR student officers within the students' association, each representing PGR students within broad subject areas or units of PGR administration.

3. **Executive** – Responsibility for all PGR students lying with a senior officer of the students' association, normally the Vice-President (Education) or equivalent, who themselves will likely not be a PGR student.
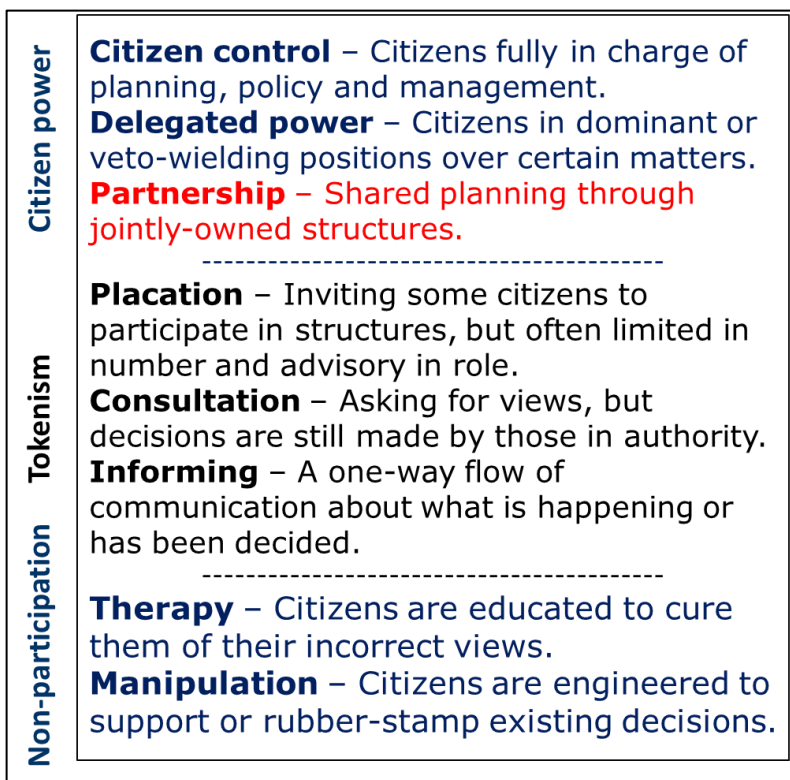
By comparing the characteristics and implications of each model, institutions and students' associations can agree in partnership an approach that is most appropriate to their context.

The key to building institutional capacity in engaging certain student groups is staff and students having an honest discussion in partnership about the role those student groups play – or should be playing.

While the staircase model on the previous page is one simple framework for such a discussion, a more detailed tool is Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation – a seminal tool for measuring engagement and participation, and which is of immense value in reflecting on students as citizens of their institution[xiv].

Invariably, the level of the ladder varies for different types of students, with traditionally less engaged students mentioned in this paper often being judged to be at a lower rung.

By identifying the features of higher levels of participation, development work can be agreed – for instance through the tools outlined in this section – to achieve deeper engagement.

Citizen power

Citizen control – Citizens fully in charge of planning, policy and management.
Delegated power – Citizens in dominant or veto-wielding positions over certain matters.
Partnership – Shared planning through jointly-owned structures.

Tokenism

Placation – Inviting some citizens to participate in structures, but often limited in number and advisory in role.
Consultation – Asking for views, but decisions are still made by those in authority.
Informing – A one-way flow of communication about what is happening or has been decided.

Non-participation

Therapy – Citizens are educated to cure them of their incorrect views.
Manipulation – Citizens are engineered to support or rubber-stamp existing decisions.

An adapted representation of Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation

CONCLUSIONS

By providing support and training to student representatives and by facilitating institutional capacity-building, it is possible to broaden the scope of quality assurance and enhancement to better engage students who do not fit into the traditional model of learning.

For universities, students' associations and indeed whole sectors wishing to focus more deeply on the engagement of students studying online, transnationally or at postgraduate levels in the shaping of quality, there are several useful steps that can be taken.

Firstly, it is important for there to be a clear map of the student demographic, understanding the range of extent of different ways of learning. From there, it is possible to engage those students and those they work with in identifying successes and challenges, and to build capacity from there. This requires to be done in partnership, and there are several models, guides and toolkits on how this can be done, including those published by sparqs.

Practice in the Scottish sector has illustrated that these conversations and developments can successfully take place at institutional and national level, using the range of resources and forums Scotland's Quality Enhancement Framework has generated and in the ethos of partnership embedded into the Scottish approach. This paper has hopefully outlined how such resources and approaches could be adopted by others across the European sector to broaden quality assurance and to represent the full diversity of the student profile.

References:

See endnotes below.

Discussion questions:

1. How can institutions and student bodies and indeed whole sectors reflect fundamentally on who their students are, how they learn and how they can be engaged? While statistical information will illustrate the range of methods of learning on a very basic level, how can universities and student bodies work in partnership to use that data to shape the strategies that guide how those students are supported and engaged?

2. Are institutional and students' union structures both geared to engage students from less engagaged methods of learning? Are those structures well engaged with each other in a way that promotes partnership, shares expertise and avoids duplication or contradiction in engagement activity? Does such partnership working inform shared strategies or formal self-evaluation processes?

3. What does partnership mean for students less typically engaged in quality, such as online learners or postgraduates? How can tools such as Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation generate an understanding of where different students (as "citizens" of their institution) might sit? What work would move those students higher?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2018 to QAForum@eua.eu. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.

[i] *The Scale of UK Higher Education Transnational Education 2015-16*, Universities UK International, 2018, https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/the-scale-of-UK-higher-education-transnational-education-2015-16.aspx - accessed 23 July 2018

[ii] Thematic reports from ELIR, QAA Scotland, http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review/thematic-reports - accessed 23 July 2018

[iii] *A Blueprint for Fairness: Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access*, the Scottish Government, https://beta.gov.scot/publications/blueprint-fairness-final-report-commission-widening-access/ - accessed 23 July 2018

iv Gender Action Plans, Scottish Funding Council, http://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/corporate-publications/corporate-publications-2016/SFCCP052016.aspx - accessed 23 July 2018

v *A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland*, Scotland's sector agencies, https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/SEFScotland.pdf - accessed 23 July 2018

vi Ibid.

vii Quality Enhancement Framework, QAA Scotland, http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/quality-enhancement-framework – accessed 23 July 2018

viii More information about sparqs' work can be found at www.sparqs.ac.uk

ix *Training for taught postgraduate course reps*, sparqs, https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/students.php?page=634 - accessed 23 July 2018

x *Introductory course rep training*, sparqs, https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/students.php?page=94 - accessed 23 July 2018

xi *That's Quality! Universities*, sparqs, https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/students.php?page=141 - accessed 23 July 2018

xii *Engaging online distance learning students*, sparqs, https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/resource-item.php?item=250 - accessed 23 July 2018

xiii *Engaging postgraduate research students* (forthcoming 2019), sparqs. More information on the project can be found at https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/institute.php?page=700

xiv *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*, Sherry R Arnstein, https://lithgow-schmidt.dk/sherry-arnstein/ladder-of-citizen-participation.html - accessed 23 July 2018 (Originally published as Arnstein, Sherry R. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," JAIP, Vol. 35, No. 4, July 1969, pp. 216-224.