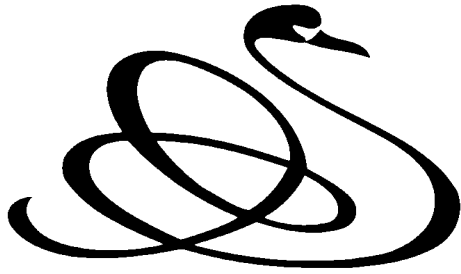


York Consulting

SCOTTISH FUNDING COUNCIL

**EVALUATION OF SPARQS
(STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN
QUALITY SCOTLAND)**

September 2006



York Consulting

Originated by: Gabriela Castro

Dated: 23rd August 2006

Reviewed by: Philip Wilson

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Acknowledgements

York Consulting Limited would like to thank all stakeholders involved for their invaluable contribution to this evaluation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) commissioned York Consulting Limited (YCL) to undertake an 'Evaluation of student participation in quality Scotland (sparqs) – the National Development Service for Student Representatives'.
2. The study involved consultations with over one hundred stakeholders, a review of over fifty documents, and visits to twelve institutions. Research covered the period from January to September 2006.
3. In order to understand the origins, operations, effectiveness and impact of sparqs, it is essential to acknowledge that the institutional contexts in which the service operates vary enormously. Each institution is unique in terms of its representation structures, management, student population, and interaction between Students' Associations (SAs) and institutional staff. The quality enhancement agenda is viewed and taken forward differently across institutions.

Operations

4. sparqs' activities can be divided into training activity and development work. Training activity covers training at all levels of student representation from class and faculty up to Board of management. This is mainly institution-based. Development work has been wide-ranging, from activities focused on the improvement of training through to research (mapping studies) and wider sector representation and networking (sparqs conference). This is mainly at the national level, although development work with individual institutions also takes place.
5. The nature of these two broad areas of activity is quite distinct. The training is relatively systematised once developed, whilst development activity is more ad hoc and project focused. This can cause some conflicts as training activity can 'crowd out' other project activity, particularly during busy periods.
6. sparqs provides standardised free training to all institutions who express an interest in receiving it. From 1,000 reps receiving course rep training in the first year, the service has now reached 1,700 in the last year. To this 70% increase in student rep training, an even more significant increase in other forms of training needs to be added. For example, Board of Management and advance course rep training have been added to the offer.

7. In addition to sparqs-led training, the UHI pilot started in August 2005 and involved training four UHI students who are now paid to deliver sparqs training. There is positive initial evidence of the pilot, which is being considered at the moment to be applied in the west of Scotland.
8. sparqs is perceived to have evolved organically, identifying gaps and addressing them. On numerous occasions, stakeholders from across all sectors reported that the quality of the work, the professionalism and the enthusiasm of the staff was a key strength of the initiative. Staff performance has been outstanding, but capacity constraints can lead to exhaustion and high dependability on key staff.
9. Regarding costs, the average cost per institution per year of funding can be estimated at £2,573 and the average cost per trainee at £58. If all students in FE and HE are taken into account, the cost per student in Scotland is 25p. The average cost per trainee is comparable to that of other half-day training sessions.

Effectiveness

10. sparqs has reached all FE and HE institutions across Scotland. Institutions engage differently with the service both in terms of the nature and the depth of engagement. This engagement also changes over time.
11. At one end of the spectrum, there are institutions which have very little engagement with sparqs, while at the other end there are institutions which proactively engage in a number of activities. There is also a group of institutions which are now building their own internal capacity following their work with sparqs.
12. At the institutional level, sparqs has contributed to a culture change in favour of student participation, apart from providing a training service.
13. Student reps learn about sparqs mainly through the SA or staff members. An estimate of the effective penetration rate of sparqs activities indicates that it is likely to be between 19% and 46% of all student reps. Student reps trained are generally very satisfied with the training, although there are external factors that influence training effectiveness.

Impact

14. At the sector level, one of the clearest impacts of sparqs has been the sending of a message that student representation matters and is taken seriously. Within this context, the impact of sparqs has been to contribute to a change in culture essential for the quality agenda to be achievable.
15. The impact of sparqs at the institutional level depends on the structures that are already in place and on how institutions utilise the resource that well-trained reps represent. sparqs is more likely to have a positive impact on students and staff if the senior management of each institution buy into the concept.
16. Mechanisms for assessing the impact of student participation in quality issues were rarely in place at institutions. In this respect, sparqs is looking to improve the way in which it monitors trainee progress, which will help to assess its impact.
17. Over half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that sparqs has had a clear impact on improving the quality of learning and teaching in their institution, 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.
18. Over three quarters of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that, "Students who undertake training with sparqs are better equipped for their roles". 88% of respondents felt that sparqs added to their development.

Conclusions

19. sparqs has so far achieved its overall objectives. It has supported students, institutions and students' associations by providing high quality free training and development activities. It has gained the respect of sector players and is now seen as a reference point in student participation issues, as well as a catalyst for change. There are areas for improvement such as tailoring of the training and building internal capacity at institutions at SAs.
20. Identifying good practice and advising the sector and the SFC have mainly taken place through the Mapping Reports and the Conference. An update on good practice and more proactive support to the SFC are potential areas for development.

21. There is no evidence that institutions could at this stage provide the support that sparqs brings to the sector, and there are no other organisations viewed by the sector as capable to achieve the same level of recognition and performance.

Future Options

22. There are four main options considered for the future:
- Option 1: Status Quo;
 - Option 2: Focusing on Training;
 - Option 3: Focusing on Development;
 - Option 4: Withdraw Funding.

Recommendations

23. To maximise existing and already stretched resources, sparqs should decrease its focus on course rep training provision and increase its developmental and support role. This is in line with Option Three above.
24. We recommend that sparqs undertake a needs assessment of each institution during the next academic year and draw up service agreements to clarify with the institutions and SAs what level of support they can expect from sparqs.
25. Other recommendations include building capacity within institutions, staff training, developing and delivering current development projects with caution, achieving more added value from the Steering Group, and establishing the Conference as an annual national event.

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) commissioned York Consulting Limited (YCL) to undertake an 'Evaluation of student participation in quality Scotland (sparqs) – the National Development Service for Student Representatives'.
- 1.2 sparqs is a development service run by the National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland and funded by the SFC. It was set up in the summer of 2004 with the aim of supporting students, institutions, Students' Associations (SAs) and the sector in general to improve the effectiveness of student participation in quality. It operates across the Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) sectors providing a range of free services targeted at improving quality through student participation.
- 1.3 The student participation in quality agenda itself is key to the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) in Scotland. sparqs is a focal point for student representation training and development in Scotland, and has also attracted attention from overseas. The main activities of sparqs involve training student representatives (reps) at different levels, training staff, supporting SAs, organising sector events, and providing best practice and consultancy services.
- 1.4 The aims of the evaluation were to:
- evaluate the success of sparqs in achieving the objectives of the service as set out by the Council;
 - measure the impact of the service;
 - provide advice on the future activities of sparqs and the promotion of student participation in quality.
- 1.5 The evaluation stems from the need to conduct an independent assessment of the progress of sparqs so far. It followed an earlier self-evaluation process that resulted in the original two-year contract being renewed for a further two years. It was a condition of the funding that the service would be evaluated independently.

- 1.6 This evaluation extended from January to September 2006, with all fieldwork completed by the end of July. The study involved consultations with over one hundred stakeholders, a review of over fifty documents, and visits to twelve institutions.
- 1.7 This report presents the findings of this evaluation as well as conclusions and recommendations for sparqs and the SFC. The structure of the report is as follows:
- **Section 2: Methodology;**
 - **Section 3: Background and Context;**
 - **Section 4: Operations;**
 - **Section 5: Effectiveness;**
 - **Section 6: Impact;**
 - **Section 7: Conclusions;**
 - **Section 8: Future Options;**
 - **Section 9: Recommendations.**

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 This section summarises the methodological approach to this evaluation, under the seven elements that underpinned it:

- scoping;
- interviews with the sparqs team;
- interviews with the Steering Group;
- case studies;
- interviews with institutions;
- student survey;
- miscellaneous.

Scoping

2.2 In order to form the progression of the study and provide a solid framework for this evaluation, the scoping phase consisted of:

- literature review – over fifty documents reviewed including sparqs reports and training materials, SFC briefs, and documentation from partners;
- design of questionnaires and topic guides – design of the questionnaire for the student survey and topic guides for interviews with six different groups of consultees, in consultation with the SFC;
- assessment of satisfaction data, engagement data, and other management information data – most of the primary data was provided by sparqs with the secondary analysis undertaken by York Consulting;
- benchmarking – this element was undertaken throughout the study and was partly supported by separate work undertaken by YCL in Wales for the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW).

Interviews with the sparqs Team

2.3 At the start of the project, interviews were carried out with the Director of sparqs, the Development Advisor, and both Training Advisors. These one-to-one meetings provided the evaluation with a greater understanding of the service and the context in which it operates.

Interviews with the Steering Group

2.4 Interviews were undertaken with eleven stakeholders covering all organisations represented on the Steering Group:

- Scottish Funding Council (SFC);
- National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland;
- Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE);
- Association of Scottish Colleges (ASC);
- Universities Scotland;
- Higher Education Academy (HEA);
- Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland;
- Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU);
- Independent Member; and
- Student Member.

Case Studies

2.5 Case studies were central to the methodology, adding significant value to the understanding of how sparqs operates and how it is perceived. Case studies consisted of visits to twelve institutions for either half a day or a whole day¹.

2.6 A range of stakeholders was consulted in each institution in order to reach a balance across institutions between institutional staff (teaching staff, quality assurance staff, and other), SAs (both officers and permanent staff), and students (student reps and non-reps, and those trained and not trained by sparqs). The balance within each institution depended mainly on logistical arrangements and individuals' availability.

2.7 The sampling methodology for selecting institutions aimed to achieve a representative sample in terms of level of engagement, age of the institution, location, and the composition of the SA in terms of sabbatical officers. sparqs contributed with information to aid this sample selection, which was discussed with the SFC prior to contacting institutions.

¹ It was not possible to organise visits with two institutions as intended because of the availability of consultees. These two institutions were consulted over the phone.

Interviews with Institutions

- 2.8 Telephone interviews were undertaken with thirteen stakeholders at eight institutions that were not part of the case studies. The aim of these interviews was to gather a wider range of views and give more stakeholders the chance to participate in the evaluation process.

Student Survey

- 2.9 An online survey of students was undertaken in order to explore the opinions and perceptions of students in relation to sparqs and student representation in general.
- 2.10 sparqs provided a list of course rep email addresses for 426 representatives trained in the last year². This was used as a starting point to target students. In order to boost the number of responses, the survey was marketed through letters to institutions and SAs, and promotional leaflets were distributed at some of the institutions that were consulted through the case study visits. Respondents were given the option to participate in a prize draw.
- 2.11 The survey was posted on a website and took around ten minutes to complete, depending on the level of engagement of the student with sparqs. The questionnaire consisted of open and closed questions, and some basic profiling information.
- 2.12 The survey was live between 22nd March and 14th May 2006, and it achieved a total of 141 valid responses from 29 institutions. The number of responses varied considerably across institutions. Most of the students who completed the survey were studying full-time. Regarding their involvement in representation, the great majority of respondents were student reps at the time of the survey, with only a few respondents having been reps before, but not during the time of the survey. There was only one response from a student who had never been a student rep. The survey enabled different routings for reps and non-reps, as well as for sparqs-trained reps and non-sparqs trained reps.

² contact information for reps trained in previous years is not kept on file

2.13 It must be emphasised that responses to the survey are treated as qualitative information in this evaluation since they are not statistically strong enough to derive quantitative conclusions. However, the survey provides some interesting findings and helps to illustrate the student perspective on a range of issues.

Miscellaneous

2.14 As the evaluation progressed, some other events were attended by consultants in order to further understand aspects of sparqs activities. These included:

- sparqs team meeting, Edinburgh;
- sparqs Steering Group meeting, Edinburgh;
- sparqs conference at Lauder College, Dunfermline;
- HE / QAA Briefing Day, Jurys Inn Hotel, Edinburgh;
- end of year course rep training, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh.

3 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

3.1 This Section starts by introducing the concept of student participation in quality. This introduces issues such as what representation means, how it takes place, who the student representatives are, and the structures in place for representation. The role of student involvement in the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) in Scotland is then explained in order to set out the policy context in which sparqs operates. The origin and evolution of sparqs is then described, before proceeding to map out its organisation.

Student Participation in Quality

3.2 Student participation emerged in the Higher and Further Education agenda in relation to democracy, citizenship and representation. Early developments involved institutions ensuring that the student body had a voice in their institutions, through establishing representation structures and participation in appropriate committees and panels. However, the national and international HE agenda now goes a step further and relates not only to students being represented, but to them being actively involved in quality assurance processes and quality enhancement.

3.3 This change in focus has taken place both within the UK and at European and international levels. The importance of student representation has been raised through the Bologna Process, which has emphasised that students should not simply be considered to be consumers within the sector, but have an active role to play in the quality enhancement agenda.

3.4 Students have different channels for influencing the quality of learning and teaching at their institutions, including:

- informal channels;
- class / course representation;
- department / faculty representation;
- Board of Management representation;
- internal subject review; and
- National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland.

3.5 Participation at each of these levels demands different commitments and skills from students as well as from staff and SAs.

3.6 The type of teaching and learning issues students can have an impact on are numerous and varied, and include:

- curriculum issues;
- assessment issues;
- materials and other support;
- support on placements;
- library and IT facilities; and
- timetable clashes.

3.7 There has been a clear message from both the SFC and sparqs that the focus of representation should be on quality issues rather than more general welfare issues, which are addressed through different channels.

3.8 Student participation in quality can involve³:

- opportunity (i.e. having the opportunity to attend meetings and events);
- attendance (i.e. actually attending those meetings);
- engagement (i.e. making efficient contributions and being proactive).

3.9 In order to influence quality, the opportunities and the attendance need to be in place, but it is important that students engage in quality processes and contribute efficiently and proactively.

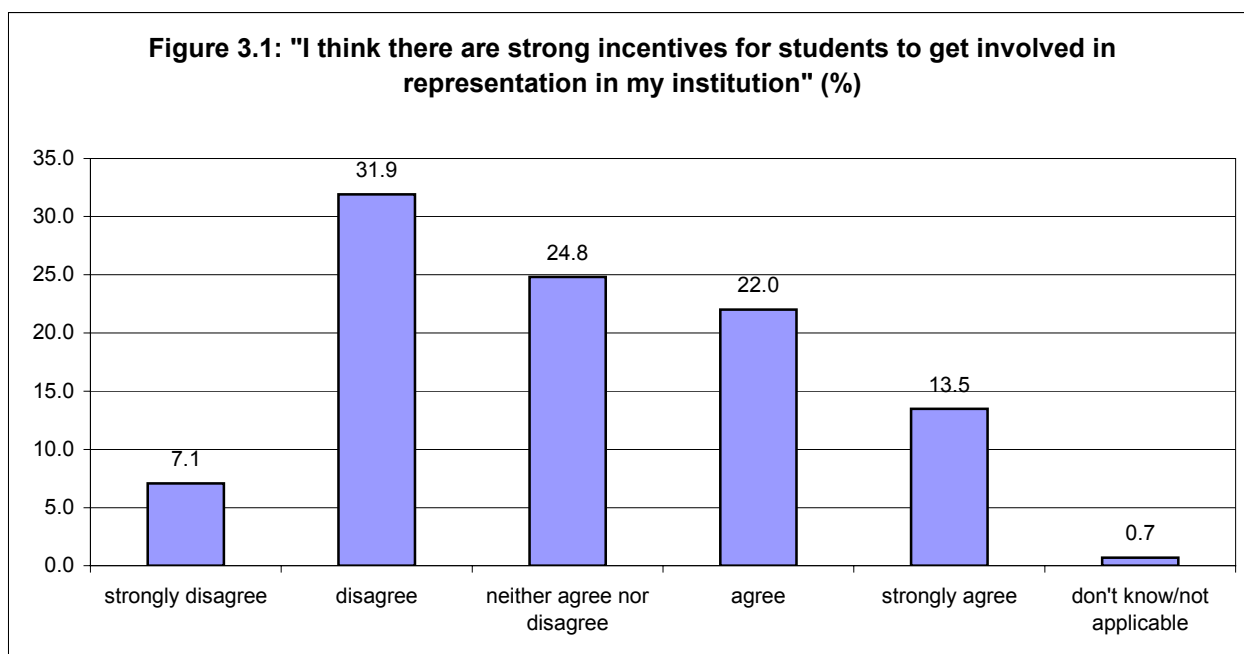
3.10 It is a recognised fact that the student body is heterogeneous both across and within FE and HE. The characteristics of the student body and the **student representatives** need to be understood in order to be better placed to evaluate the broader setting in which sparqs operates. Students vary in their skills, experience, age, background, previous experience of representation, and in their motivation for becoming involved. For example, some factors that can have considerable implications for engagement in representation and therefore in training are:

- only 16% of students in FE study full-time, so having extra time in college to engage in representation is not always easy;
- student officers are elected every year, which challenges the continuity of student representation systems;
- FE has a strong proportion of students in one-year courses, which can undermine their motivation for engaging in representation;

³ HE Mapping Report (sparqs).

- students in rural areas face considerable time and travel costs to engage in extra-curricular activities such as representation;
- not all institutions have sabbatical SA officers or paid SA staff, which has implications for the resources involved in co-ordinating representation and (sparqs) training;
- mature students are strongly represented in some institutions and courses, specially in FE, usually with family commitments that can make it difficult for them to engage in representation;
- post-graduate research students in HE will have very different issues and ways of representation than their taught undergraduate counterparts.

3.11 In this heterogeneous setting, the incentives for becoming a student rep vary. **Figure 3.1** below shows that 39% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that there are strong incentives for students to get involved in representation in their institutions, while 36% agreed or strongly agreed. This polarisation of responses clearly shows that institutions vary considerably with respect to their incentives for participation. This is likely to impact on rep recruitment, retention, and effectiveness, and on the penetration and impact of sparqs training.



3.12 In order for students to be equipped to participate effectively in the Quality Enhancement Framework⁴ (QEF) across all institutions, it was acknowledged that they would need training and support. This led to the SFC's involvement in setting up sparqs, as discussed below.

Student Representation and the Quality Enhancement Framework

3.13 sparqs can be regarded as a direct product of the (QEF) in Scotland. The QEF stressed the importance of student involvement in quality and raised its profile in national policy. It consolidated and gave a clearer focus to concepts and activities that in some cases were already present in both the HE and FE sectors.

3.14 The QEF in Scotland was a result of the move from quality assurance to quality enhancement. It is strongly based on institutions taking ownership, trust in institutional systems, partnership work, and embracing the student perspective and being responsive to student needs. The five pillars of Quality Enhancement are:

- internal review;
- institutional audit;
- public information on quality;
- quality enhancement engagements; and
- student involvement.

3.15 Historically, these issues referred to HE but both Funding Councils decided to commit to the student involvement in quality agenda. sparqs is equally funded by both Councils, known jointly as the Scottish Funding Council since the merger in October 2005.

3.16 The SFC produced guidance for institutions on how to engage students and on its expectations of what institutions would do, also suggesting measurements of effectiveness of student involvement.

⁴ The QEF is being reviewed at the time of producing this report, and current developments will set out the way in which the QEF will develop in the next five years, with the consequent implications for sparqs.

3.17 The stakeholders consulted who referred to the QEF were convinced that it has gathered support and momentum in Scotland, and that it is now firmly established, creating an atmosphere favourable to sparqs' own development.

sparqs: Origins and Evolution

3.18 Within the policy context set above, the Scottish Funding Councils (SHEFC and SFEFC) issued in February 2003 an invitation to tender for the establishment of a national development service to support student engagement in the quality process. The idea behind this development was that students and institutions should be supported in order for students to be able to play an important role in improving the quality of learning and teaching in their institutions.

3.19 It is clear from the invitation to tender that the emphasis of the SFC when arranging to set up this service was on enhancing rather than on replacing existing activities. It focused on quality issues rather than on welfare issues. It also acknowledged the differences between the type of issues faced by HE and FE students, although delivering a service for both sectors jointly was seen as more efficient and of a higher profile.

3.20 The proposal put forward by NUS Scotland built on a consortium approach, was successful, and sparqs was established in summer 2003.

3.21 Originally, sparqs had a Director, a Training Advisor and a Senior Training Advisor. The Development Advisor replaced the Senior Training Adviser post when the holder left.

3.22 The first tasks faced by sparqs were to undertake the mapping exercise and to get institutions and SAs engaged. The mapping studies facilitated contact with key players, which raised sparqs' credibility in its early days.

Remit

3.23 The remit of sparqs as established by the Funding Councils is to:

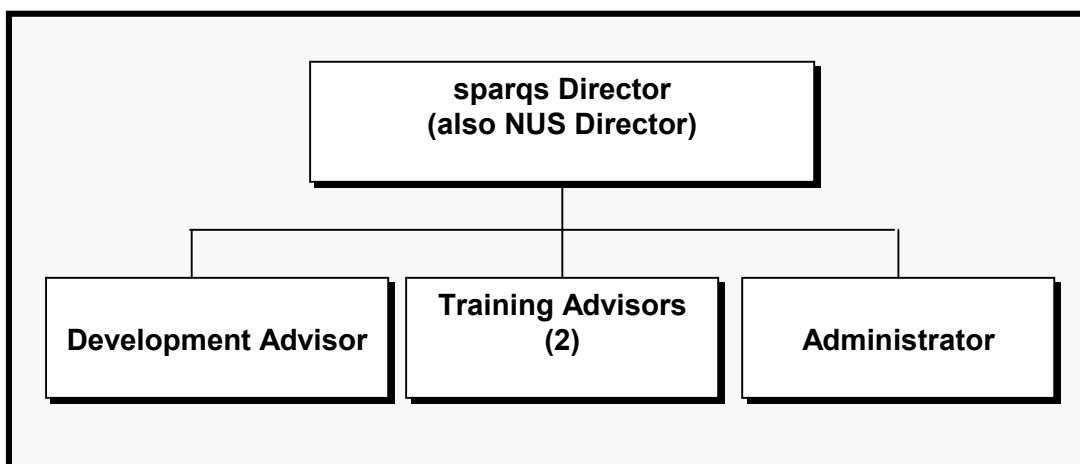
- support students;
- support SAs;
- support institutions;
- identify good practice;
- advise the sectors and the Funding Councils.

3.24 More specifically, its mission is to *“assist and support students, SAs and institutions to improve the effectiveness of student engagement in quality processes, and will provide advice to the Councils and institutions on good practice in the engagement of students in institutions’ quality processes”*.

3.25 This evaluation also explores the perceptions of the funders and deliverers with respect to the remit of the service. In this respect, the SFC and sparqs agree that the remit of the service is to deliver an agreed service. Interviews undertaken as part of this evaluation evidenced that sparqs currently exists mainly to train reps, not to direct developments or to represent. Developments that do not relate to the core remit are to be agreed with the SFC while representation falls under the remit of the NUS.

Organisational Structure

3.26 sparqs is run by NUS Scotland but it is in itself an independent organisation. All sparqs employees are employed by NUS and line managed by the Director of sparqs, who is also the Director of NUS Scotland. NUS Scotland is accountable to the SFC for the performance of sparqs. The organisational structure is summarised below:



3.27 The sparqs team consists of five staff members in the following roles⁵:

- **Director** – (part-time) line management and strategic responsibilities, provides link with NUS Scotland, participates in Steering Group;
- **Development Advisor** – operational responsibilities, assessing need and promoting sparqs, mapping study, main responsibility for building the reputation of sparqs across the institutions and the wider sector;
- **Training Advisor** – designing, evaluating and delivering the majority of the training, contributions to development activities;
- **Administrator** – supporting the rest of the team.

The Steering Group

3.28 The Steering Group meets quarterly. Its remit is as follows:

- to act in an advisory capacity to support and develop sparqs;
- to assist sparqs in building effective lines of communication with the committee partners' membership (where applicable);

⁵ Please note that there were staff role name changes at the time of writing this report. The Development Advisor is now a Senior Development Advisor and the Training Advisor is now the Development Advisor.

- to assist sparqs with the dissemination of information regarding services to the committee partners' members, colleagues and collaborators (where applicable);
- to assist sparqs by providing advice and support through the committee's knowledge and expertise of quality issues in the Further and Higher education sector, to enable sparqs to achieve its aims and objectives; and
- to receive quarterly financial statements from sparqs and advice accordingly.

3.29 Currently, the Steering Group is formed by representatives from sparqs, NUS Scotland, SFC, ASC, SFEU, Universities Scotland, HEA, HMIE, QAA Scotland, two Student Members and an Independent Member. There have also been talks about setting up separate advisory groups of students and staff.

Other Providers

3.30 In addition to sparqs, there are other providers of student rep training. These are mainly the SAs themselves, the institutions themselves, and NUS Scotland.

3.31 The Second Annual Report of the Evaluation of the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) Higher Education Quality Enhancement Framework (summer 2005) reported that 69% of student representatives had not received any training. For those who received training, the main providers are illustrated on **Table 3.1** below⁶.

Table 3.1: Training by Type of Rep and Provider		
Provider	Course Reps (%)	Institutional Reps (%)
Students' Association	84	55
NUS	-	29
sparqs	16	22
Institution	-	11

⁶ Figures over 100% indicate that providers are not mutually exclusive.

3.32 This shows that sparqs is not the sole provider of training for course reps or institutional reps, and that it operates in conjunction with other key players. According to these figures, sparqs training represents around 16-22% of the total rep training in the sector. However, the high proportion of students trained by SAs might be a misperception that the SA is actually delivering the training when it is in fact sparqs that is delivering it. This misperception is a matter of branding and can lead to an overestimate of SA training.

4 OPERATIONS

4.1 This Section outlines the key aspects of sparqs' operational activity under the following headings:

- range of activities;
- key outputs;
- operational management;
- strategic support;
- costs;
- benchmarking.

Range of Activities

4.2 The major activity undertaken by sparqs is course rep training, where sparqs designs and delivers training to class/course representatives in both FE and HE institutions. This and other significant activities are listed in **Table 4.1**. All the activities offered by sparqs are free at the point of use and are entirely voluntary.

Table 4.1: sparqs Activities	
Institutional Level	
•	Class/course rep training: consists of half day training covering the role of the rep, key skills, and the quality framework.
•	Faculty rep training: higher level training for reps at the faculty level.
•	SA officers ELIR training: introduces the enhancement-led approach in Scotland, the characteristics of ELIR and the underpinning themes. Training explains the ELIR process and the team involved.
•	End of year training: as opposed to most of the course rep training, this training takes part at the end of the academic year
•	Training for student members of internal subject review panels: provides information on internal reviews, benchmarks and codes of practice, situates the internal review within the QEF and describes the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, explains student feedback and monitoring arrangements, explains the difference between enhancement and assurance, and explains the role of the Student Member within the process.

- Staff training: mainly for SA staff: information on sparqs, sharing of good practice and information on course rep training, internal subject reviews, faculty rep training. Linking the SAs and the QEF. Also staff development session in colleges.
- Joint QAA briefing events: information for student reps, SA officers and SA staff on key developments in the sector. Opportunities for discussion and sharing good practice.

National Level:

- Enhancement theme pilots: introduction to the themes and explanations on how and why to get involved.
- Developing support resources (website, leaflets, handbooks).
- Mapping studies: reports on student involvement in quality (FE/HE).
- Sector events and conferences.
- Projects: identified through the mapping studies and addressing distinctive issues in FE and/or HE sectors:
 - supporting faculty reps (HE);
 - involving part-time students (FE);
 - effective staff-student liaison meetings;
 - increasing the involvement of postgraduate students (HE);
 - increasing the participation of younger men (FE);
 - communicating between course reps and students.
- Piloting other training models: including the student trainer model at UHI and interactive training models.
- Ad hoc training/consultancy/sector representation.

- 4.3 sparqs' activities are divided into those at the institutional and the national level. At the institutional level, sparqs offers student rep training at different levels, support to SAs, and staff briefing. At the national level, sparqs offers development work including the development of resources and opportunities for networking. National activities tend to be more developmental in nature, while activities at the institutional level tend to respond mainly to the need to train students to become more effective reps. Training is relatively systematised once developed, whilst development activity is more ad hoc and project focused. This can cause some conflicts as training activity can 'crowd out' other project activity, particularly during busy periods.
- 4.4 An important aspect of sparqs activity which is implicit within the above areas is the 'selling' of the concept of student participation in quality, through awareness raising and generating demand for sparqs services. This was undertaken alongside these other activities. In particular, the fieldwork for the mapping study created opportunities to meet a range of contacts at institutions.
- 4.5 Below the delivery issues associated with the following key activities are outlined:
- student rep training;
 - mapping studies;
 - conference;
 - development work.

Institutional Level

- 4.6 Contact at the institutional level occurs at the start of every academic year, when institutions and SAs are informed of the activities on offer and engagement is negotiated on a one-to-one basis. Then institutions and SAs choose which activities to engage in and how to structure the communication with sparqs. As contact develops, the communication between sparqs and the institutions becomes more fluid and needs are discussed in greater depth.

Student Rep Training

- 4.7 Student rep training is the main activity undertaken by sparqs at the institutional level. This has reflected its remit and the origins of the service, and is discussed in some detail below.
- 4.8 sparqs provides standardised free training to all institutions who express an interest in receiving it. The service went from training 1,000 students in the first year to training approximately 1,700 last year (2005/06). The feedback they have received from the training sessions was very positive.
- 4.9 The number of institutions visited for course rep training and the approximate number of reps trained from in the last academic year are illustrated on **Table 4.2** below.

Table 4.2: Training Volume (approximate figures), 2005/06			
HE		FE	
Sessions	Students	Sessions	Students
34	539	71	1,195

- 4.10 These figures illustrate the approximate **volume** of training for a one-year period (approx. 1,700 reps at just over 100 sessions). The clear focus on FE provision is partly due to the absolute number of reps and to the demand and need for training. Actual and expected attendance do not always coincide. This can be mainly be attributed to internal logistic and recruitment arrangements at individual institutions, and is outside the control of sparqs.
- 4.11 There are differences in term of activities between **HE and FE**. In FE, sparqs are encouraged to create demand for their services, mainly because of a lower general starting point with respect to student involvement in quality processes. In HE, their role is first to monitor and respond to demand, rather than to create it.

National Level

The Mapping Studies

4.12 The mapping studies of student representation in both FE and HE can be regarded as one of the most valued contributions of sparqs. The following Section will elaborate on the mapping studies as sparqs outputs, here the main findings are summarised to provide an overview of the context within which sparqs operates.

4.13 For the FE sector, some of the main findings are:

- all colleges had students represented on their board of management, but representation was patchy across other committees;
- 13 out of 46 colleges surveyed had paid sabbatical officers;
- 45 colleges offered some form of course representative system;
- there are variations in practice across different subject areas;
- few colleges had remits for their student reps;
- half of the staff surveyed felt it was difficult to get students to discuss teaching and learning issues instead of more general student experiences.

4.14 For the HE sector, the main findings are:

- participation is encouraged at all levels and systems are in place to obtain student feedback;
- faculty-level representation is generally poor;
- institutions differ in the extent to which they embrace involvement, attendance and engagement;
- informal contacts are essential to student participation;
- course representation was generally in place but reps were not maximised as an institutional resource;
- training and support is generally patchy, with some institutions providing none at all.

Conference

4.15 sparqs hosted a conference on Student Involvement at Lauder College in February 2006. The conference served to launch the two Mapping Reports, to discuss progress in student involvement across the country, and to provide an opportunity for networking. It also informed a large audience of the next steps of sparqs work, which helped to gain further support. Over 150 people attended the event, including students (mainly SA officers and course/faculty reps), SA staff, senior management, teaching and other staff (mainly quality assurance staff). The structure of the day was organised around presentations by key sector stakeholders with small breakout workshops.

4.16 Below is a summary of the conference programme:

- Introduction, Director of Learning Policy and Strategy, SFC;
- Launch of the Reports, sparqs Development Advisor;
- “Student Representation in Scottish FE Colleges”, Assistant Chief Inspector, HMIE;
- “Developing Student Involvement in Higher Education”, Director QAA Scotland;
- “Developing Student Involvement in Further Education”, College Principal;
- “Developing Student Involvement: the Student Perspective”, NUS Scotland President.

4.17 The first group of workshops covered a range of relevant topics:

- student involvement in internal subject review;
- using a virtual learning environment to promote communication between representatives;
- accrediting programme representatives;
- the advantages of sabbatical officers;
- student involvement in observation of teaching;
- using the student voice to create quality improvement.

4.18 Afternoon workshops focused on the areas for development and on sparqs' **new projects** identified through the mapping studies:

- supporting student engagement from students not undertaking full-time studies (FE);
- supporting effective engagement of students at the faculty level of the institution (HE);
- focusing discussion at course level meetings on learning and teaching issues rather than on the generic experiences (FE and HE);
- effective representation in engineering and construction subjects (FE);
- effective engagement of postgraduates, particularly research students, in institutional systems (HE);
- issues of communication between representatives (FE and HE).

Development Work

4.19 A number of development projects have explored alternative methods of delivery training. These have involved use of technology (CD-Rom) and students as trainers.

4.20 The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) pilot started in August 2005 and involved training four UHI students who are now paid to deliver sparqs training. The pilot has been greatly supported by UHI as an institution, who also pay trainers' expenses. There is still a role for sparqs to support this system centrally⁷.

⁷ For more information on the UHI pilot and the way in which sparqs and UHI have worked together, visit: <http://www.sparqs.org.uk/students.aspx?pageID=2.9.1>

- 4.21 There is positive initial evidence of the pilot, which is being considered at the moment in the west of Scotland. Interviews were undertaken with three out of the four student trainers, who were all mature students full of enthusiasm and praise for the project. The institution has clearly embraced the participation agenda and students are actively involved in quality processes. This is important in a setting with a fragmented population since it shows that the senior management supports this agenda and provides leadership for its development. The student trainers are providing an additional service without imposing taxing demands on sparqs. The individual college consulted as part of the UHI network felt it could not have delivered this service without the support from sparqs, and that it may have been regarded as influenced by institutional values if not delivered by students.
- 4.22 However, the pilot still faces some of the wider issues that sparqs face, such as student apathy. It also relies on the popularity of student trainers and on how much they are willing to act as role models and promoters of sparqs. There is also the risk that peer-led training could actually damage the sparqs brand if not managed properly.

Key Outputs

- 4.23 sparqs' operations are considered below in terms of key outputs for the three years of operations.
- 4.24 In the first year of operation (2003/04), sparqs' performance focused on setting up the service and engaging with institutions. Some of the achievements included:
- developing the service (staff recruitment, office set up, website set up, two year development plan, setting up management procedures, building initial communication links with key stakeholders, drafting of initial resource materials, launch event);
 - consultation on activities (with institutions and SAs, also with NUS);
 - programming of activities (consultancy meetings, training reps, tailoring the training);
 - researching the activities (mapping reports, consultancy support);

- building effective communication links (including memorandum of understanding);
- developing feedback and evaluation mechanisms.

4.25 In the **second year** of operations (2004/05), the internal achievements were:

- involvement with HMIE and QAA;
- success in securing funding for 2005/07;
- training delivery;
- development of support materials including alternative means of delivering training;
- started work in UHI pilot;
- undertaking the Mapping Studies.

4.26 In the **third year** of operations (2005/06), sparqs internal performance focused on:

- organising and hosting the Conference on Student Involvement;
- launching the two Mapping Reports;
- supporting pilots to meet increasing demand;
- developing training and materials further to address the needs of the sector;
- securing a permanent member of staff previously on a temporary contract;
- setting up the projects emerging from the Mapping Reports;
- working alongside HMIE and the HE Academy;
- working with similar projects in England and South Africa.

Development Plan

4.27 Progress towards the **development plan** is generally positive, with few areas lagging behind. These are mainly in developing e-learning materials for course reps, in providing support materials and resources for student officers in FE to understand and engage with their quality framework, and in undertaking a survey of existing accreditation courses within higher education and production of a “benchmark statement”.

Resources

4.28 Performance has been affected by resource constraints. It is widely accepted that resources are low rather than the remit being too wide. This is in part because the amount of work has been underestimated and in part because demand has grown.

4.29 The list of projects outlined in Section 5 shows the number and range of the activities undertaken by sparqs, with its staff complement of 5 people (3 of whom deliver training). One of the consultees summarised the general view that sparqs has a “*massive task*” to face because of the volume of activity and because of the complexity of the context in which they operate.

4.30 There are many causes of activities expanding leading the service to be under-resourced. Firstly, as sparqs’ reputation through its work spreads out and improves in the sector, there is more demand for its current services, for example, for the course rep training. In addition to that, better and more frequent contact between sparqs and SAs/institutions sometimes results in additional services being requested for by institutions, for example, asking sparqs to help with internal representation structures or with accreditation issues. Also, as the SFC sees the success of sparqs, it is more likely to demand more and wider services to address the needs of the sector, as it has done in the case of Board of management training. Lastly, through the work and the mapping studies, additional areas for improvement have been identified leading to more work.

4.31 There were also concerns expressed by a number of sector stakeholders that sparqs has grown organically and not in a planned manner. This “*chaotic development*” has been criticised by a number of national stakeholders. There is clearly scope for a more thought out and focused evolution now that the service is established and known, also in part to address the increasing breadth and volume of provision as discussed above.

Operational Management

4.32 Operational management of sparqs is clearly defined and benefits from NUS experience. There are regular team meetings, reviews of objectives and tasks, with staff updating their knowledge and the service delivery on a regular basis.

4.33 One of the clearest findings from the consultations was that the sparqs staff are central to way in which the service has been perceived and received across the sector. In particular, stakeholders mentioned on numerous occasions the quality of the work, the professionalism and the enthusiasm. It was acknowledged that the sparqs team work over and above what is expected, and through this work have gained the respect of students, SAs, institutions, and national stakeholders.

4.34 In particular, there were numerous positive comments across a range of stakeholders about the Development Advisor, who is considered to have been critical to the success of sparqs. One interviewee said that they had been “*very impressed with sparqs and [the Development Advisor] in particular*” while another senior member of staff stated that “*[their] hard work and tactful diplomacy have helped to make it effective and a success*”.

4.35 There were concerns regarding sustainability should the Development Advisor leave sparqs. In this regard, one consultee stated that “*there is a major dependency on [the Development Advisor]. It would be a hard job to fill at such a high level of performance*” and another one consultee added that sparqs has “*exceptional staff... what would happen if they lost [the Development Advisor]?*” .

- 4.36 Some of these concerns are accepted to be common across all small organisations, especially when staff are highly knowledgeable, respected, and specialised. The risk of losing key staff has been addressed by sparqs and the SFC, through a focus on ensuring that the knowledge is transferred into processes and other channels.
- 4.37 There was also recognition that the hard work has its downsides. In interviews with the sparqs team it was clear that the job can be at times exhausting, because of the “autumn bulge” in training in terms of amount of work to be delivered. For example, in 2005/06 72 out of the 89 (81%) course rep training sessions delivered took place between September and December 2005.
- 4.38 The repetitive nature of the work and the amount of travel involved also have a negative impact on staff morale and potential performance. It was mentioned that for example NUS Scotland employ development trainers for two to two and a half years, recognising that there is a level of attrition for this kind of role. More recent project work and development activities are helping to make the job of the trainer more diverse, which is likely to improve retention and job satisfaction. This is likely to be helped also as sparqs restructure the training delivery by region.
- 4.39 There is a perception that the roles of the Director and the Development Advisor are very interlinked. The difference between both roles is explained by sparqs acknowledging that the Director is in charge of the “*strategic lead*” and the Development Advisor looks after the “*strategic implementation*”.
- 4.40 Recruiting staff has not proved to be excessively challenging. NUS Scotland as the employers have been selective in terms of the experience and skills required. All staff have previous experience of student representation, either from working as sabbatical officers or as staff in SAs. They bring to their role an understanding of either the HE or the FE sector, experience on the ground in terms of institutions and SAs, and some training background. As mentioned earlier, due to personal circumstances there was high turnover of staff at the start of the project, but this was resolved.

sparqs and NUS Scotland

- 4.41 As the organisation responsible for running sparqs, the NUS provides support such as office space, HR support, and marketing advice. This is generally seen as a strength of the link between NUS and sparqs. In turn, sparqs has opened doors for NUS Scotland for example at non-affiliated institutions that have now become affiliates, and has raised the credibility and the reputation of NUS in Scotland.
- 4.42 The perception of the relationship between NUS Scotland and sparqs from national and institutional stakeholders is that it has improved since the set up of sparqs. Most of the consultees were satisfied with the way in which the interaction between both organisations works at present, after some initial frictions were solved.
- 4.43 In this respect, a steering group consultee summarised that *“the balance between being funded by SFC and residing within the NUS is very well managed”* and that *“the NUS are rightly very proud of the success of sparqs”*. This view was supported by other stakeholders including NUS Scotland, who said that they are *“immensely proud”* of sparqs.
- 4.44 Although not all consultees were unconditionally supportive of NUS running sparqs, very few consultees managed to think of any other organisation that could fulfil the NUS role. Organisations such as the QAA and HEA were considered to be too biased in favour of institutions rather than students to be suitable alternatives. In general, there was an acceptance that sparqs residing within NUS was its natural niche place within the sector. The challenge continues for sparqs and NUS to manage that relationship successfully, with the input from the Steering Group.

Strategic Support

- 4.45 The concept of a Steering Group was pivotal to the development of sparqs and its partnership approach.
- 4.46 It was a common finding across stakeholder interviews that the Steering Group has evolved positively over time, from a start characterised by confusion over its remit and an emphasis on each partner’s interest, to a more collective and ‘critical friend’ perspective.

- 4.47 Partnership work is seen to have been successful and based on genuine collaboration and a broad consensus, with clear trust and faith in the partners. The Steering Group model is seen as crucial to sparqs' overall acceptability and image across the sector, especially in its earlier days.
- 4.48 However, it was widely recognised that the input from the Steering Group could be improved to add more value to the work of sparqs, rather than just legitimising its work. There are steps currently being taken in this direction, including contemplating the idea of having an away day to open up discussion and maximise the benefit for sparqs from having a highly experienced Steering Group.
- 4.49 The main criticisms from the Steering Group consultees were that meetings are arranged at short notice and involve large amounts of paperwork.
- 4.50 The relationship between sparqs and the SFC is recognised to be a healthy and productive one, with the SFC giving sparqs enough freedom to work but also monitoring it through the self-assessment, Steering Group meetings and this evaluation. sparqs perceives the SFC to be “*removed*”, but as an organisation sparqs is careful to support the SFC without falling into “*lobbying*” it.

Costs

- 4.51 The SFC allocated £266,363 (inclusive of VAT) for the two first years of sparqs. After a successful self-evaluation, the SFC allocated a further £382,000 for the third and fourth years. Therefore, the average annual cost of funding sparqs is £162,090.
- 4.52 Since there are 63 HE and FE institutions in Scotland, the average cost per institution per year of funding is £2,573. Since sparqs is funded equally by the FE and HE sides of the SFC, the average works out cheaper for FE than for HE institutions because of a larger number of colleges than HEIs.

4.53 It is estimated that there are approximately 675,120 students in FE and HE in Scotland in 2004/05⁸. If all students enrolled in FE and HE are taken into account, the average cost per student per year of funding is less than 25p.

4.54 As stated before, sparqs trained 1,700 in the last academic year. This means that the cost of sparqs funding per trained reps is around £95. However, it must be stressed that not all of sparqs funding is allocated to course rep training, so these figures are overestimates of what training per student actually costs.

4.55 A more accurate estimate of cost per trainee can be obtained by working out the proportion of the total sparqs time (and cost) dedicated to training. This can be estimated as follows:

- Development Advisor: 15% of time;
- Training Advisor: 80% of time;
- Training Advisor: 90% of time;
- Administrator: 60% of time (average time supporting other three staff).

4.56 If the costs are apportioned evenly across the four members of staff (which is a broad assumption in the absence of salary information), then the total cost for training is £99,280. This results in an average cost per trainee of £58. This cost is comparable to that of other half-day training sessions, so it evidences a cost-effective set up.

4.57 A summary table of costs is provided on **Table 4.3** below:

Table 4.3: Costs	
	Estimate (£)
Total average yearly cost	162,090
Total cost of institution	2,573
Total cost per student	0.25
Total cost per trainee	95
Total apportioned cost per trainee	58

⁸ Further Education Students at Scotland's Colleges (Scottish Executive): 398,120. Higher Education Students In Scotland (Scottish Executive): 277,000.

4.58 Internally, **short-term funding** can be seen as a problem for sparqs. There is a roll down plan in place should funding be stopped. However, the current work load including projects started recently and the encouragement from the SFC show that current and future activities have not been halted by a concern regarding funding.

Benchmarking sparqs

4.59 sparqs is itself a pioneer initiative and it is therefore difficult to benchmark it against other initiatives. In this respect, the 2004/05 sparqs Annual Report states that *“sparqs is a unique organisation: at the current time there is no other service of its nature providing free training, support and resources to student representatives in the rest of the world”*.

4.60 There has been interest in this initiative both from within and outside the UK. Within the UK, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) is considering setting up a similar service. YCL has recently undertaken a study for HEFCW on the extent and effectiveness of student representation structures in the HE sector in Wales. This report included recommendations regarding the option to set up a development service for student representatives.

4.61 In England sparqs is also regarded as a model for student rep support. The former Learning and Skills Development Agency and NUS recently launched a research project called “Involving Learner in Quality Improvement”. The project aims to *“identify effective practice in gathering and responding to student feedback, and in ensuring learners are actively, constructively and representatively involved in maintaining and improving the quality of educational provision within the learning and make recommendations for effective ways in which such practice can be extended.”* Lessons learnt from sparqs will be examined and applied to the rest of the UK. The project will build on recommendations emerging from Sir Andrew Foster’s review of further education, and to inform the agenda of the new Quality Improvement Agency for Lifelong Learning (QIA), which has replaced the LSDA.⁹

⁹ <http://www.officeronline.co.uk/blogs/ellierussell/271895.aspx>

4.62 Outside the UK, there has been interest from South Africa, Canada, India, and the Asia-Pacific region. At the time of writing this report, a representative from sparqs had planned a visit to Canada with the QAA. Another member of staff was attending a conference in India for the Asia Pacific Quality Network.

4.63 **Table 4.4** provides a summary of benchmarking sparqs outside Scotland.

Other Training

4.64 The core activity of sparqs is the course rep training. However, other activities were originally planned and others developed over time. Other provision has increased because of more demand from stakeholders and as a result of the gaps in provision identified by sparqs in the Mapping Reports and through day to day work.

4.65 The evaluators also attended a **sparqs-QAA Briefing Day**, finding it well organised and resourced. All presentations and group exercises ran smoothly and there was a clear structure to the event. All the sparqs team was present. The event served as an update on the sector and helped particularly to inform the incoming sabbatical officers. It gave students the chance to network and share experiences.

4.66 **Peer-led training** within the UHI network has been working positively. This evidences the importance placed by sparqs on sustainability issues. If the pilot is successful, it could be extended across the west of Scotland and could eventually be extended further. This would bring in new challenges for sparqs. Firstly, the peer-led training delivery and organisation will need to adapt to urban central-belt institutions with different characteristics from the UHI network institutions. Secondly, the role of the sparqs team will undoubtedly change, focusing on training and supporting trainers in a more developmental role. It will be possible to initially assess the success of the roll out of this pilot at the end of the 2006/07 academic year.

Table 4.4: Benchmarking

Country	Issues	Source
Wales	Mapping study to find out if a service similar to sparqs would be needed.	York Consulting Ltd report for HEFCW
England	sparqs regarded as model for current development in FE.	http://www.officeronline.co.uk/blogs/ellierussell/271895.aspx
South Africa	Sparqs is regarded a model for QA developments and a South African team has visited Scotland to liaise with sparqs.	South African Council on Higher Education Annual Report 05/06 http://www.che.ac.za/document/d000126/7-CHE_Annual_Report_05/06.pdf
Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN)	Study visits and collaborate efforts to be planned with “experience bodies” such as ESIB and sparqs. Focus on HE.	http://ww.apqn.org/events/past/details/32/presentations/files/report_pg13.pdf#search=%22sparqs%20AND%20india%22
India	Setting up “Students Participation in Quality Assurance” by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council	http://www.hindu.com/2006/03/27/stories/2006032703930600.htm
The National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB)	Working on the same field as sparqs promoting student participation in quality internationally, with participation from NUS Scotland	www.esib.org

4.67 **Other types of student rep training** have been valuable to equip those students at higher levels of representation. Faculty rep training, internal subject reviews training, and Board of Management training have received positive feedback from students as well as from staff and senior managers who work closely with these reps.

4.68 **Staff training** has been a significant success, with engagement from staff from a wide range of institutions, including those who do not take part in sparqs course rep training. Feedback sought during case study visits and interviews from those attending staff training was positive, highlighting the quality and professionalism of the delivery. Opportunities for networking and sharing good practice were particularly valued. Staff training was welcome and seen as needed substantially more across most institutions

5 EFFECTIVENESS

5.1 This Section presents the findings regarding the effectiveness of engagement and delivery of sparqs and is structured as follows:

- effectiveness of engagement:
 - working with the institutions;
 - working with student reps;
 - working with the wider sector.
- effectiveness of delivery:
 - institutional level;
 - student rep training;
 - sector developments.

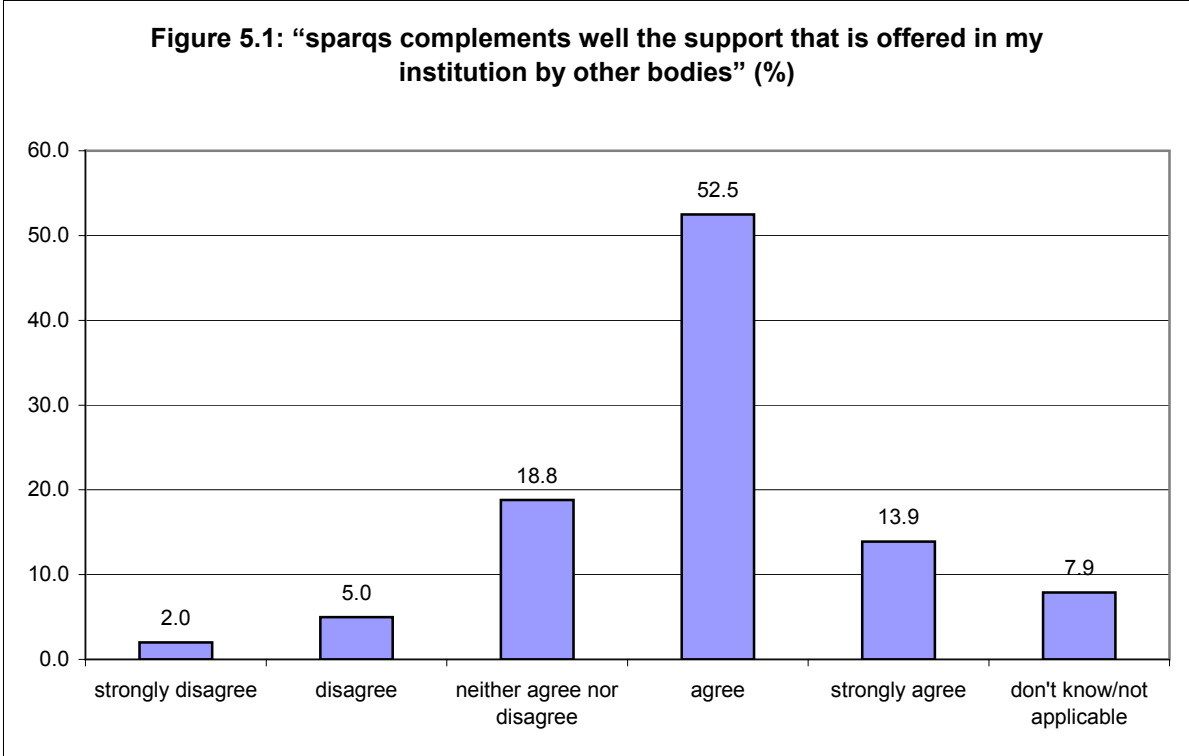
Effectiveness of Engagement

Working with the Institutions

Coverage

5.2 The HE and FE sectors in Scotland involve over 60 institutions with the consequent range of senior managers, staff, SAs, and students themselves. Engaging with such a varied group of stakeholders with different agendas and interests is significantly challenging.

5.3 Regarding the fit of sparqs provision with existing provision, the student survey shows that around two thirds of respondents expressed the view that sparqs complements well the support that is offered in the institution. Responses are illustrated on **Figure 5.1** below.



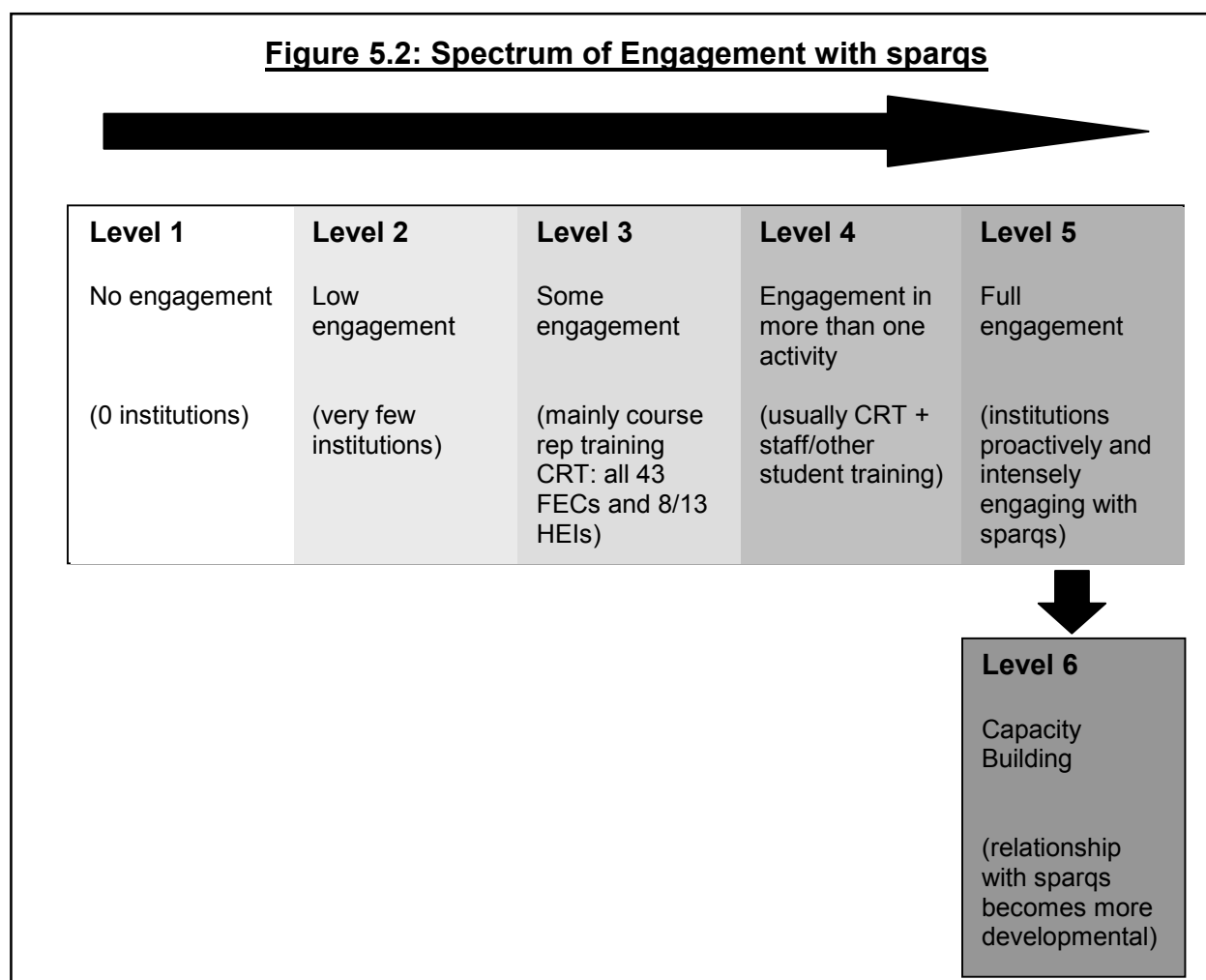
5.4 Institutions that did not engage with sparqs in course rep training expressed admiration for the service’s performance. One consultee stated that “the remit fits well even if we do not use the services”. Institutions with low engagement were positive about the service and explained that their low engagement is due to the institution’s circumstances and not to a lack of esteem towards sparqs.

Spectrum of Engagement

5.5 sparqs has succeeded in making contact with all institutions and SAs in Scotland and renewing this contact every year. Each institution has been regarded as unique and has been respected and supported. Activities have not been imposed on any institution, at the same time as queries and demands from a number of institutions for specific or extended services have been addressed.

5.6 Institutions and SAs engage with sparqs in different ways and to different levels. Some institutions engage through institutional staff while others channel their engagement through the SAs. A number of institutions engage through a mixture of both players. Engagement varies on how many sparqs services are used and on how closely relationships with the sparqs team are developed.

5.7 For the purpose of this evaluation, a spectrum of engagement presented in **Figure 5.2** has been constructed to illustrate the range of possibilities. It must be emphasised that this spectrum refers to the engagement with sparqs and not to the status of student participation per se at each institution.



5.8 The spectrum ranges from no participation on the left-hand side to full engagement on the right-hand side. A detached capacity building stage is also included. The spectrum can be used to illustrate the engagement of institutions with sparqs at a particular point in time, but also to illustrate the evolution in terms of engagement for individual institutions.

5.9 The following observations can be made:

- at the left hand side of the spectrum (level 1), there are no institutions that have not engaged with sparqs at all. The only institution that has not worked with sparqs in Scotland is currently in talks with sparqs to negotiate how to work together;
- there are a number of institutions that have low engagement with sparqs (level 2). This includes the institution mentioned above and was the starting point for a number of institutions;
- most institutions are placed in levels 3 and 4. A bulk of institutions engage with sparqs solely for course rep training and are placed in level 3. This was the starting point for a considerable number of institutions, who bought into this service originally and then progressed across the spectrum. In 2005/06, 8 out of 13 HEIs and all 43 FECs were receiving course rep training. A significant number of these institutions are now in level 4, engaging in more than one activity. This normally represents course rep training and an extra service (such as staff training or higher representation training) or staff/higher representation training plus involvement in the mapping projects for those who do not engage in course rep training;
- in addition, there are a number of institutions that are fully engaged with sparqs (level 5). This involves not only engagement in a number of initiatives and services but also a more proactive approach to engage with sparqs and more regular and open contact. This sometimes leads to using sparqs' consultancy and ad-hoc support;
- outside the spectrum there is a further category of engagement which involves entering a capacity building stage (level 6). The relationship with sparqs then becomes more developmental. There is evidence that a small number of institutions are currently entering this phase of development.

5.10 It is a finding in itself that all 63 FE and HE institutions in Scotland have engaged with sparqs in some way.

- 5.11 Quantifying the number of institutions that are at each stage of this spectrum is subjective and challenging. This is because engagement changes every year and is difficult to pigeon-hole into categories. Moreover, engagement from the SA and the institution can vary. However, it is useful to reach an estimate of the likely position of institutions across this spectrum, since this will aid the future options and recommendations of this evaluation.
- 5.12 The box below helps to illustrate particular examples gathered during case study visits of how engagement works in practice for institutions at level 3 and level 6 of the engagement spectrum.

Institution A – Engagement Level 3

Institutional Staff from Student Support Services (SSS) lead in engaging with sparqs. They make contact during the summer to discuss needs for the coming year. SSS organise the practicalities of hosting the training, while sparqs organise the delivery and materials. A trainer from sparqs delivers training in the autumn to a group of students that can vary in size, with little input from the SA, which is highly resource-constrained. Continuity is given by the institutional staff and not by the SA.

Institution B – Engagement Level 6

This institution has been engaging with sparqs for three years and has valued its input. This has been mainly course rep training but also support in development work. Both the SA and the institution embrace the student participation in quality agenda and are proactive in finding ways of listening to the student voice. Following the initial involvement with sparqs, the institution has developed their own class rep training that is designed to dovetail with the training that sparqs offer.

- 5.13 Looking at the case studies summary on **Table 5.1**, it can be seen that one third of institutions fall onto level of engagement 3 and another third onto level 4. 17% of case studies fall onto category 5 and a further 17% fall onto category 6. From sparqs engagement data it can be concluded that this is the likely spread of institutions in terms of engagement with sparqs, with very few institutions falling into category 2.
- 5.14 This table also shows that the level of engagement and the value placed on sparqs are correlated. It also illustrates that the SA involvement with sparqs is independent of the level of engagement. This is likely to be explained by the fact that if the SA does not engage with sparqs, the institution is likely to see it as their remit. It is also partly explained by the lack of resources of some SAs specially in FE.

Table 5.1: Summary of Case Studies – Engagement with sparqs

	Sector	Region	Start of Engagement	Level of Engagement (1-6)	Value of sparqs (1-5)	Student Association Involvement (1-3)	Numbers Trained (CRT) 05/06
Institution 1	HE	Lothians	2004/05	3	3	3	0
Institution 2	HE	North East	2004/05	5	4	2	78
Institution 3	HE	North East	2004/05	6	5	3	7
Institution 4	HE	Lothians	2004/05	4	4	3	12
Institution 5	FE	Lothians	2003/04	4	3	2	26
Institution 6	FE	West	2003/04	6	4	3	0
Institution 7	FE	South	2004/05	3	3	1	31
Institution 8	FE	West	2003/04	4	4	1	11
Institution 9	FE	North East	2004/05	3	3	1	13
Institution 10	FE	Lothians	2004/05	3	4	0	27
Institution 11	FE	North East	2004/05	5	4	2	38
Institution 12	FE	Highlands and Islands	2003/04	4	4	n/a	75

Notes

“**Level of Engagement**” (1-6) is defined as per the spectrum above.

“**Value**” (1-5) represents the value placed on sparqs by the institution as a whole (students, SAs, staff and senior management). This is a combination of the performance and impact of sparqs at the institution and more subtle perceptions regarding the value it adds to the institution and the sector.

Scale: 1: no value; 2: low value; 3: some value; 4: good value; 5: exceptional value.

“**Student Association Involvement**” (1-3) represents the level of engagement of the SA with sparqs (not with student representation in general). Scale 1: no or very low involvement with sparqs; 2: some involvement; 3: high involvement.

All the scores attached above for engagement, value and SA involvement derive from the case study visits and are therefore likely to reflect the opinion of a limited number of stakeholders at a particular point in time. All values refer to engagement with sparqs and not with student participation in quality more generally.

Changes over Time

5.15 Engagement varies for the same institution over time. A first group of institutions has been engaged with sparqs since its origins and continues to be engaged. A second group of institutions did not engage at the start but are now engaging. The reasons for not engaging earlier are usually either uncertainty regarding sparqs' activities or the brand itself, or internal considerations such as shortage of staff to engage with sparqs or internal restructuring of representation systems. A third group of institutions have expressed that they were originally heavily involved with sparqs but now are developing their own training based on sparqs training, which is regarded as more tailored to the institution, and are therefore relying less on sparqs' services. In these cases, sparqs has acted as a prompt and a catalyst for internal institutional change.

Engaging Institutions in Development Activities

5.16 Identifying where training and support needs lay in each institution has been another important achievement, obtained through the Mapping Studies but also through day-to-day contact with institutions and through delivering training itself. Evidence of how solutions have been sought to address gaps in provision are the development of alternative training tools such as video-conferencing and CD roms.

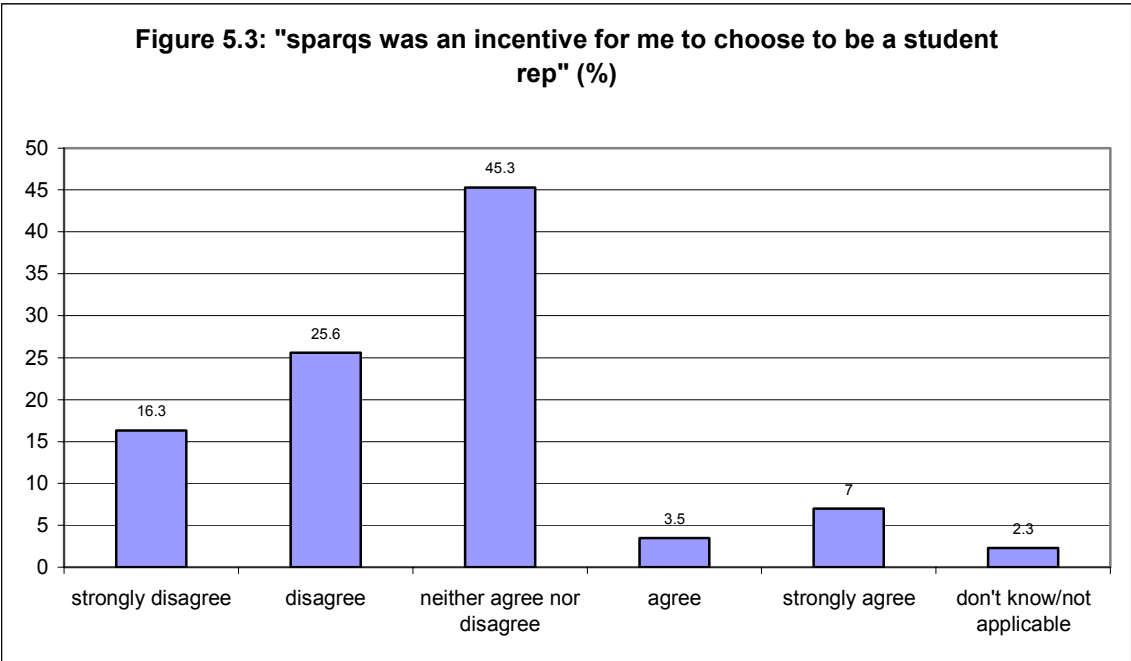
5.17 sparqs has found a niche position within the sector that allows it to support institutions and SAs while having a healthy relationship with the SFC and NUS Scotland. Its training complements NUS training at the grassroots level, enhancing the provision that NUS Scotland has for sabbatical officers. Interviewees were in general agreement that sparqs complements what the SAs and the institutions have to offer. In general, there was no feeling that sparqs, institutions and SAs were stepping on each others toes.

Working with Student Reps

Incentives

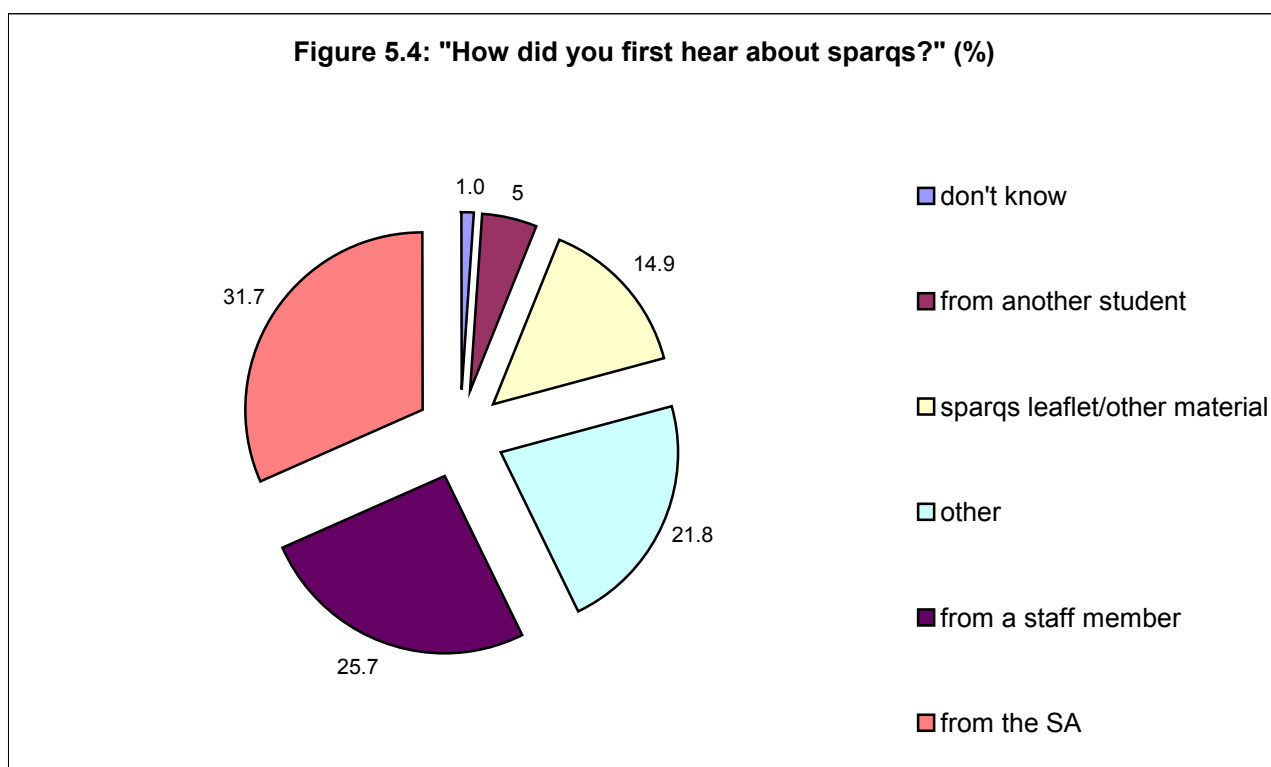
5.18 The first stage in student participation is getting students involved. Incentives for becoming a rep vary across institutions as explained in Section 3. The influence that sparqs has at this stage is limited since they work with already elected reps.

5.19 As **Figure 5.3** below shows, only 11% of reps who had sparqs training said that sparqs was an incentive for them to become reps. This finding is in line with what was expected since sparqs does not influence the recruitment and motivation of reps directly. Recruiting reps is an institutional responsibility often divided between programme leaders and SAs.



Process of Engagement

5.20 The process of engagement with sparqs for student reps is usually indirectly through the institution and/or the SA. The web survey undertaken as part of this evaluation explored how students originally came across sparqs. As **Figure 5.4** below shows, the two main channels of information were the SA (32%) and members of staff (18%). This emphasises the importance of SAs and institutional staff to raise internal awareness of sparqs and as a result make sparqs training better attended.



Penetration

5.21 Engagement can also be measured within an institution. The volume of reps trained by sparqs can vary considerably in the same institution for different years. One HEI visited reported that 100 reps attended the training on the first year, while only around 5 reps attended on the second year. In this particular case, this is thought to be due to internal restructuring of representation systems that might have impacted negatively on the recruitment of reps.

5.22 When estimating the penetration of sparqs' activities, it is difficult to estimate what proportion of all reps at each institution sparqs has reached, since figures estimating the total rep population are not always available or reliable at the institutional level. From sparqs' own estimates, the proportion of reps that sparqs reaches within each institution, varies between 0.3% and 183%¹⁰.

5.23 A range of average estimates of sparqs course rep training penetration lies between 6% and 15% of all student reps based on the following assumptions:

- one institution suggests that there should be a class rep every 30 students – this gives an estimate of around 22,500 course reps and a penetration rate of 6%;
- from sparqs own estimates based on institutional information¹¹, 10 institutions had 1,455 between them, which gives an average of 146 reps per institution or $146 \times 63 = 9,200$ in all Scotland – this gives a higher penetration rate of 15%.

5.24 Both figures are likely to underestimate the penetration of sparqs activities because:

- there are institutions that do not engage in sparqs training since they undertake the training in-house, so the real demand that sparqs can address is less than the total potential demand – for example, three HEIs that do not engage in course rep training actually represent around 55,500 students whom sparqs has no access to;
- course rep training is usually aimed at first-year students, since if institutions engage with sparqs on a yearly basis it is likely that other year reps are already trained – this can actually lead to an estimate by which the total demand that sparqs can access is one third of the total student population (assuming an average course duration of three years to allow for four-year degrees and one-year courses) – this leads to an average penetration rate of between 19% and 46% (depending on whether the total student rep population is estimated at 22,500 or 9,200 – see above);
- sparqs not only undertakes course rep training, so the inclusion of training at higher levels of representation will undoubtedly increase the average penetration rate.

¹⁰ The last figure is due to an underestimate of the number of reps originally.

¹¹ "Engagement of institutions in the activities of sparqs SCM 05-06 34"

- 5.25 Therefore, an estimate of the effective penetration rate is likely to be between 19% and 46%.
- 5.26 Increasing penetration is unlikely to happen in the current scenario. If it is estimated that an average session has 20 students then even if all 63 institutions engaged in sparqs training the total number of reps that sparqs can reach is approximately 1,260. This involves delivering 63 sessions in the first term (10 weeks), an average of 6 sessions per week including preparation and travel time. This is probably as much as two trainers can realistically deliver.
- 5.27 However, even with more trainers on the supply side, the demand side of this relationship would rely on institutions setting up the training. Evidence from case studies and interviews suggests that arranging sparqs training is resource-demanding for institutions and that most of them would struggle to organise more training sessions. Most institutions find it challenging to recruit reps to attend sparqs events, so to increase penetration institutions would need to resolve their own engagement bottlenecks.

Effectiveness of Delivery

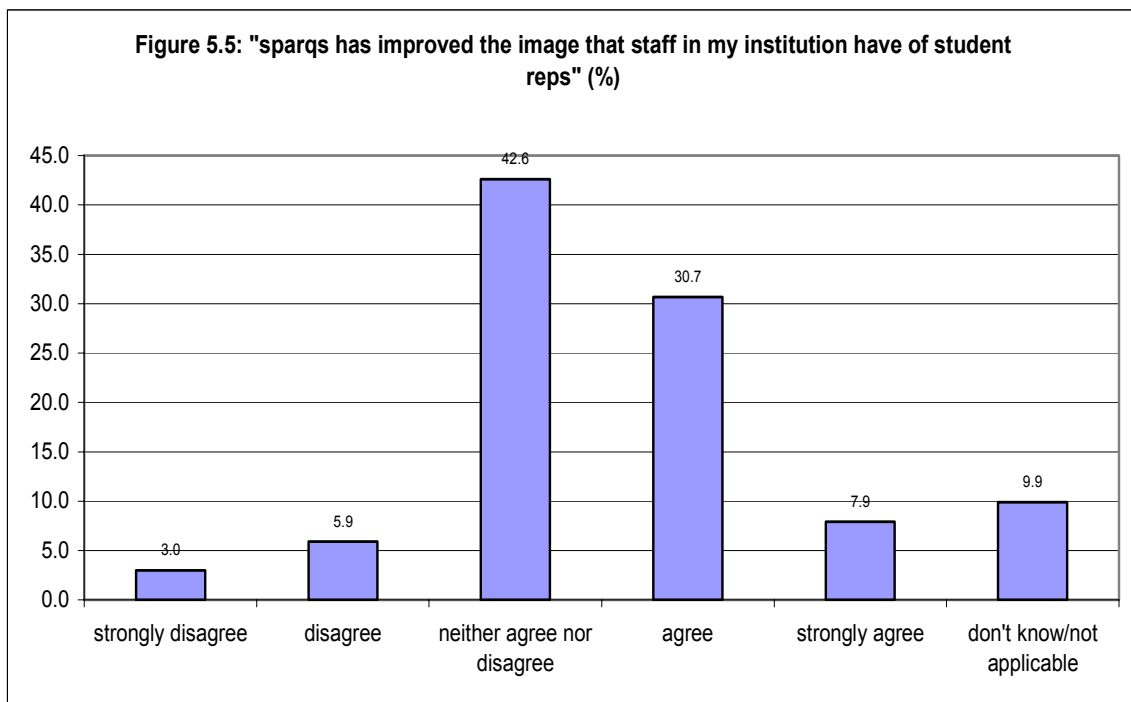
Institutional Level

Contributing to a Change in Culture

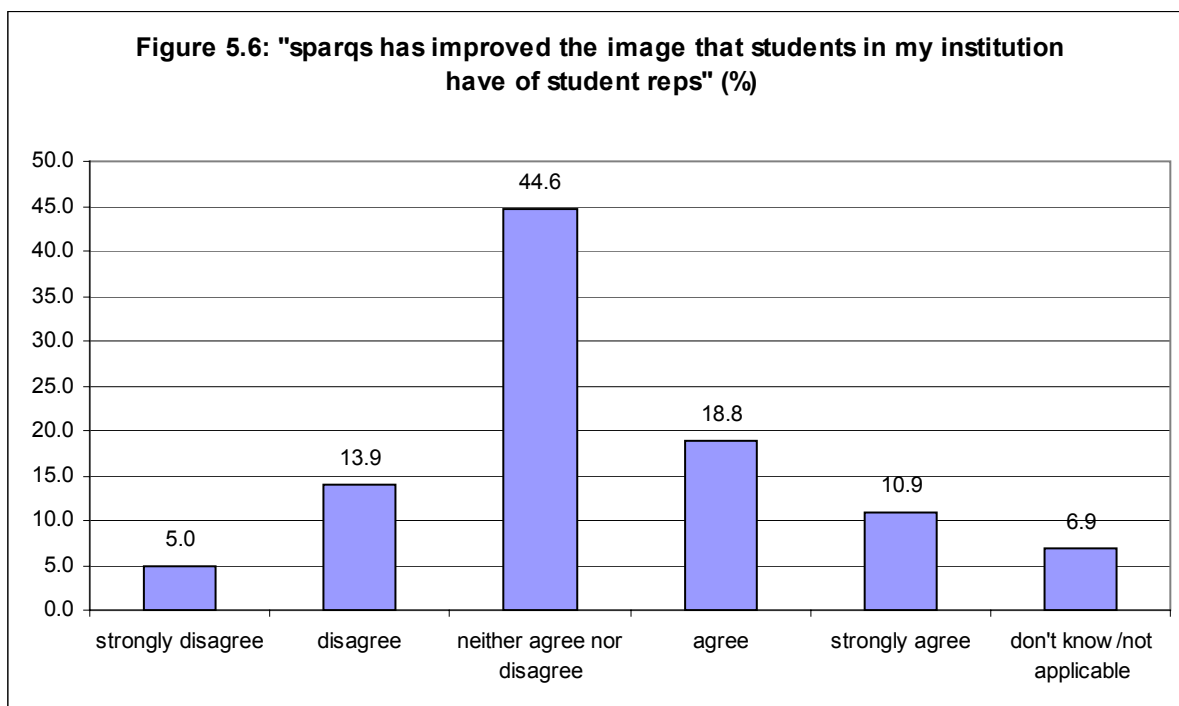
- 5.28 The existence of sparqs has signalled to the sector that the SFC takes student participation in quality seriously. Through its work, sparqs has contributed to enhance the profile of student reps and of student representation within institutions and across the sector. There is now a clearer awareness that students are active participants in quality processes and that they have a role to play in improving learning and teaching in their institutions. Institutions are also aware of the importance of evidencing the student influence, mainly through the requirements of the QAA and HMIE.

5.29 Although some reticence to student participation is still to be found among some stakeholders, there is now a clear understanding that students have a role to play in quality processes. Students are increasingly considered as partners in these processes, and mechanisms are sought to ensure that their voice is heard. sparqs has succeeded in contributing to this increased awareness, although it cannot be wholly attributed to it.

5.30 Some improvement of the perception of staff and students with respect to student reps as a result of sparqs is evidenced in the student web survey and illustrated on **Figure 5.5** below. Around half of the respondents thought that sparqs had had little influence in students' perceptions of reps, with around one fifth of respondents thinking that it had actually had no impact. However, around one third of students agreed that sparqs had had an impact on students' perceptions of reps.



5.31 **Figure 5.6** below illustrates how students thought that staff perceptions of reps had changed as a result of sparqs. The majority of respondents perceived hardly any change, although one third agreed that sparqs had improved staff perceptions of reps.



5.32 In order to promote a culture change to embrace the student participation in quality agenda, there has been a need to promote sparqs as an organisation. It was clear through case study visits and interviews that awareness of **sparqs as a service** is patchy. While some stakeholders are familiar with it, others had not heard about it or had a very partial view about of what it involves.

- 5.33 Awareness across national stakeholders is generally good. Similarly, awareness from institutions' senior management and staff working specifically on quality issues was also high. Most staff and students who had not been directly exposed to sparqs appeared to know very little about it, if anything at all. It is questionable whether this is necessarily negative. Evidence from case study visits and interviews suggests that when students (especially student reps) and staff know about sparqs, they are often curious about it and willing to get better informed about representation issues. This would suggest that it could be positive for sparqs to improve on its general visibility.
- 5.34 However, it is not clear whose role it is to promote sparqs within the institutions. If the senior management is well informed, it could be regarded as their role to impart this information to the rest of the staff. In this way, they could signal its importance not only in principle but also for institutional reviews and assessments. Similarly, if SAs are aware of sparqs, it can be argued that it is their role to decide how they transfer this information to the student population. This is the view that sparqs have sustained, in order not to be seen as an imposition for either staff or students. This could in part explain the patchy awareness of sparqs as a service among these stakeholders.
- 5.35 It is also clear that sparqs has become better known as a service over time, although awareness does not necessarily increase incrementally. This is because every year there are new SAs and new first year students. However, the message is permeating and general awareness is better, although individual awareness has remained patchy.
- 5.36 In summary, in three years, sparqs has achieved recognition and respect across the sector. It has made itself known to a wide audience and has interacted with all the institutions in Scotland. A striking finding from all strands of this evaluation is that there was constant praise and admiration for sparqs, albeit some punctual criticisms.

Student Rep Training

5.37 The effectiveness of student rep training is influenced by a number of factors including:

- actual attendance;
- attendance with respect to expected numbers of trainees;
- practical arrangements.

5.38 The factors above cannot be influenced by sparqs and need to be taken as given. However, the ability of trainers to adjust to an unexpectedly much larger or smaller audience was generally regarded as admirable.

Relevance and Content

5.39 The training is generally viewed as positive. It has in most cases filled in a gap at the institutional level, and has therefore been welcome by students and staff. The general satisfaction with the training is highlighted below under Satisfaction. Engagement with sparqs training has either stayed the same or increased, which is in itself evidence of satisfaction. Statements from the web survey in this respect include 'I think it covered pretty much everything' and 'It was a through training session and appeared to cover all aspects that required discussion' and 'I think the amount of training received was just right'.

5.40 However, there are a number of areas for improvement. The main dissatisfaction with the training from a significant number of consultees was that it is **too generic**. This can be in terms of its content, addressing particular FE or HE issues, specific institutional issues (such as location or internal processes and structures), or tailoring to different audiences (specially more experienced or mature students compared to school leavers or younger students).

- 5.41 The generalised content of the training was discussed at depth in one college during a focus group with students as part of this evaluation. The students expressed the view that if students put themselves forward (or are put forward) to become reps, they are generally more skilled in areas such as communication and confidence. These students would want to see more rep-specific training rather than more general training on communication, negotiation, team building, and other soft skills. Their discussion led them to reflect that half an hour of general skills training would be enough, and that the rest of the training could focus on more specific rep-related issues such as their powers, how to campaign, addressing apathy, and personal development.
- 5.42 However, most consultees agreed that it would not be possible for sparqs to tailor their training for each of 60 institutions and for every audience (particularly since the audience is unknown to them). This was particularly the case when the evaluators mentioned the sparqs staff resources compared to the number of institutions and students they reach. Moreover, the generic transferable skills emphasised at sparqs training are valued since they enhance not only the current skills of the rep but also their future employability and can be added to their personal development plan or CV.
- 5.43 In this respect, there is an important facilitator role for the institutions to play (staff, SA) to discuss needs with sparqs and clarify expectations with students. When tailoring has been sought in advance from sparqs, staff and SAs expressed that they were responsive and able to deliver more specific training. One example was provided at a college visit, where an institutional consultee highlighted sparqs' eagerness and ability to work with students with additional support needs.
- 5.44 It is also important to note that there are some institutions who have felt that sparqs training should be more tailored to the institution. These institutions have slowly developed alternative or complementary training. This is a positive development since it encourages capacity building and lessens the dependency on sparqs.

5.45 The web survey also revealed contrasting opinions in terms of the relevance and content of the training. As discussed elsewhere, training is critical for some students while it seems too basic for others, since all students come with a different baggage in terms of experience. For example, one participant stated that *“I found it very beneficial as without it I would not have understood what was expected of me”*. In contrast, one mature student said *“The students were bored, found it irrelevant, and covered materials they already knew”*. Interestingly, another mature student expressed that *“I was a manager for 5 years and have good life skills. sparqs helped me understand the role of rep and feel this was ample”*. This shows that not all students in the same category (experienced mature students in this case) perceive the training in the same way. This is very likely to be down to personal expectations and an appreciation of the range of students that sparqs deals with.

Training Materials

5.46 As part of this evaluation, sparqs **training materials** were considered (such as leaflets, manuals and presentation slides). Training materials are freely and easily available to students, SAs and institutions. This can encourage more autonomous use of materials (such as institutions delivering the training in-house using sparqs’ materials).

5.47 Training materials are appropriate for their audience and user-friendly, with a good balance between contextual and practical information. They have been improved over time to become more focused.

5.48 Training materials, in particular the course rep handbook, are highly demanded. For example, in 2004/05 sparqs distributed 6,000 copies of the student rep handbook, reaching in that way a much larger number of students than can be reached at training sessions. These materials are actively used by some institutions. In one case an institution had started to develop its own manual, but found this difficult and so reverted back to the sparqs manual.

Frequency of Delivery

- 5.49 The **one-off** nature of sparqs training was one of the key shortcomings highlighted. Face-to-face contact is perceived as not being long enough. Training only takes place during the day time, which excludes some students, especially part-time students who work. One web survey respondent suggested *“a little refresher course of no more than an hour”* and another suggested that *“it may be better to have more than one sparqs training a year, as prior commitments do not always allow people to attend”*.
- 5.50 However, there was limited awareness of other ways to reach reps who are unable to attend, such as the website and CD ROMs where available. Although sparqs can negotiate to deliver more than one training session a year, if each of 63 institutions required for example two training sessions a year, sparqs would certainly struggle to deliver this. This is particularly the case considering that at least half of them would have to take place early in the academic year. This is in addition to other training and development work. Also, sparqs training is intended to be supported by institutions and SA, and there is clearly more scope for them to support sparqs-trained reps and provide a daily point of contact.

External Nature of the Training

- 5.51 During case study visits it was clear that there were contrasting opinions in terms of how sparqs is viewed as an external training body. Some stakeholders saw this external position as a key strength of sparqs because it makes it an independent and neutral body that students, SAs and institutions can work with. Training was therefore seen as less compromised than if it were delivered by the institution or NUS. On the other hand, some stakeholders thought that it was negative that an external body would deliver training at institutions because it was not involved enough and the training would lack specific institutional information.

Addressing the FE and HE sectors

- 5.52 There have also been issues regarding the tailoring of sparqs training to **FE and HE** institutions. Working together with FE and HE not only brings efficiency and higher credibility, but it is also in line with SFC policies. This was reflected from the start in sparqs' constitution, remit and operations.
- 5.53 Generally, work across FE and HE has been positive, and there are no major issues regarding how the service has addressed any specific needs. However, some stakeholders felt that there are substantial differences between both sectors, and also within them, which limits the effectiveness of homogenous sparqs training. In view of the training experiences, sparqs training delivery and materials were split between FE and HE. This responsiveness to the needs of each sector is a key success of sparqs that has improved training and gained supporters across both sectors.
- 5.54 Within each sector, student reps are not an even group in terms of experience, skills and motivations. One of the stronger reasons for differentiated training was to widen participation to engage younger less effective and experienced reps. As one consultee explained, *"Participation in quality is stretching for FE students straight from school"*. Again, the ability to tailor the training to school leavers/mature students or experienced/not experienced reps depends on the information available about the audiences at each training session.

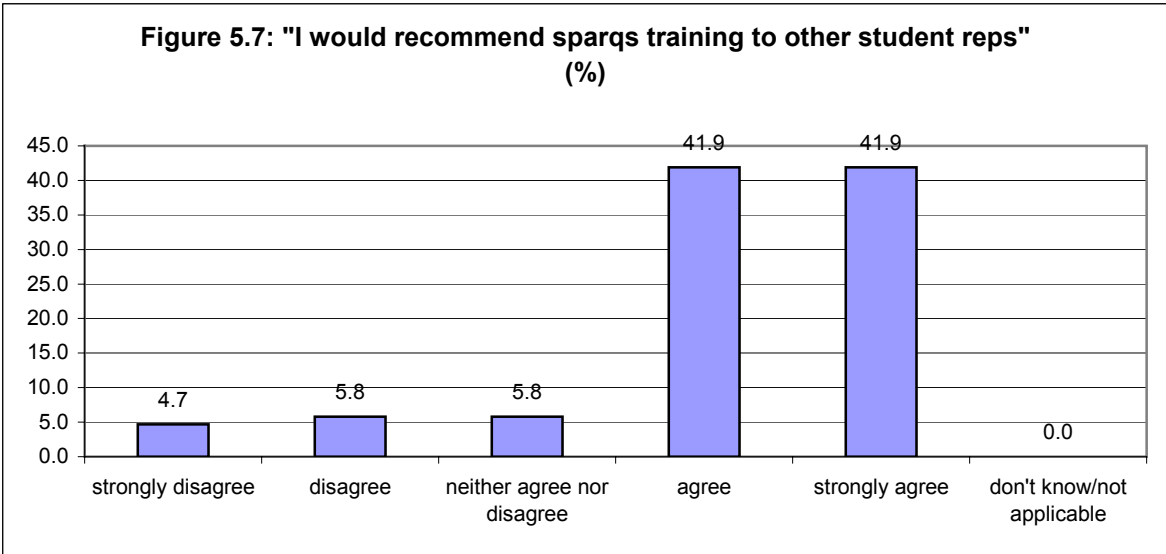
Addressing Diverse Locations

- 5.55 Training can also be tailored differently for **central belt and rural** institutions. Case study visits to remote rural institutions were critical in bringing in the rural perspective to this evaluation. These stakeholders stressed that rural settings do not particularly encourage extra-curricular activities such as student representation, because of the impact on travel, time, and transport costs.

5.56 It was also recognised that rural-based institutions have a high proportion of part-time students who find it hard to engage in student representation. It was clear that sparqs are aware of the uniqueness of rural institutions and try to reach them as much as possible. There could be room for closer work between sparqs and rural institutions to encourage student representation in itself, training attendance, and attendance at meetings. In general, rural institutions were grateful of sparqs' support and appreciated that they were travelling long distances to reach them. The UHI pilot seeks in part to address the issues regarding student representation and training that are specific to institutions in rural settings.

Satisfaction

5.57 Evidence of satisfaction with the training was gathered through the web survey. Out of the 141 respondents to the student web survey, 86 had received sparqs training. As **Figure 5.7** below illustrates, over four fifths of respondents who had attended sparqs training would recommend it, which is a positive finding. This confirms similar feedback received directly by sparqs.



5.58 Despite these positive findings, there are some issues regarding the delivery of the training that signal potential areas of dissatisfaction that can be improved. These issues are mainly the one-off and external nature of the training, its generic approach, and the way in which addresses particular FE and HE issues.

Sector Developments

Conference on Student Involvement

5.59 The **Conference** was one of the most significant developments of the service. As one stakeholder summarised, “*the conference was an unqualified success. It demonstrated real interest*”. The conference managed to attract a wide range of sector stakeholders including some who are seen as leaders in the quality enhancement field. The issues discussed were rich in themselves, but arguably the most important success was using the momentum created in the sector to send a message that student representation is being taken seriously and is being developed further.

Advising/Good Practice

5.60 Advising the SFC is one of the remits of sparqs. There was a recognition that if this had not reached its full potential it was because the SFC had not needed it further and had not encouraged sparqs to be more proactive in this area. The main formal advice to the SFC was through the Mapping Reports. More informal advice and support occurs regularly through meetings and other ad hoc opportunities.

5.61 There could be room for improvement regarding sparqs’ fit with wider quality issues at the SFC, with more participation of sparqs for example at the Quality Working Groups and Quality Enhancement Committees. However, this could also add considerably to staff workload, and should be considered carefully. Also, the role of sparqs in these committees needs to be clear to maximise its input and bring in the student voice while avoiding duplication with NUS Scotland work.

5.62 Sharing of good practice is another remit of sparqs. This has been hugely appreciated by the sector and seen as a key success of the service. In particular this has been achieved through the conference and the website. sparqs is seen as a natural partner for discussion of these issues. It also helps to bring together a cross section of stakeholders (student reps, SAs officers, SAs staff, senior management, quality managers, etc).

Summary

- 5.63 The quality and the range of services offered are continuously improved. One example is the idea of establishing a database of institutional issues, to develop more institution-specific training. Add-on training, advanced training (for already sparqs-trained reps), and focus groups to explore particular issues have also been considered.
- 5.64 Training has been constantly adapted to respond to changing needs. The volume and breadth of students trained is in itself a success, and the feedback received has been overwhelmingly positive. Other provision has mirrored this quality of delivery and has addressed challenging needs of a range of stakeholders.
- 5.65 sparqs has set development goals over and above what was required. Exploring and expanding into new areas of work is not always beneficial to the service's own development. The development plan has been accomplished overall. However, the future of the service depends greatly on its ability to focus on key activities and manage demand.

6 IMPACT

6.1 This Section considers the impact of sparqs. Measuring impact is challenging because it depends on the institutions and individuals concerned every year, especially in FE with a more transient population, and on the selection process that put them in a position to represent their peers.

- **Impact on the Sector;**
- **Impact on Institutions;**
- **Impact on Students' Associations;**
- **Impact on Student Reps;**
- **Impact on Learning and Teaching;**
- **Summary.**

6.2 sparqs is more likely to have a positive impact on students and staff if the Senior Management of each institution buy into the concept. For example, some senior managers actually turn up at some point during the training to show their support, or they are present at ceremonies or events recognising reps' efforts. One senior manager commented "*I made it my business that my institution would be involved [with sparqs]*". This attitude makes it more likely for sparqs to have an impact, since better and more effective structures are likely to be in place as well as accountability. It is also important that the institution is willing to engage with the SAs in student representation issues.

Impact on the Sector

Culture Change

6.3 One of the clearest impacts of sparqs has been the sending of a message, from the sector and the SFC, that student representation matters and is taken seriously. sparqs has highlighted in a neutral way that students are indeed at the heart of FE and HE. This was felt was previously in the domain of the SAs and NUS, in a more politicised way and sometimes in conflict with the institutions. In this regard, sparqs is seen as a catalyst for change and improvement in student representation. An institutional consultee summarised that sparqs "*is a very good advocate of the big buying into quality in Scotland*". sparqs is now seen as the hub of the network of student representation.

- 6.4 Within this context, the impact of sparqs has been to contribute to a change in culture essential for the quality agenda to be achievable at the institutional level. The change in culture is not only from the institutions' perspective, but also from the students' perspective, to see themselves as active participants and not as "empty vessels" acquiring passive knowledge.
- 6.5 Making institutions see student representation as an opportunity and not a threat is an important impact of sparqs. One consultee explained that their institution had always lacked proper policies and guidelines to govern the role of student reps, but now they were developing better policies and sparqs had come in to provide support in this area. In those institutions with existing processes in place, there is evidence that sparqs has helped to take feedback arrangements away from simple satisfaction questionnaires to more interactive approaches, like focus groups.
- 6.6 Involvement with sparqs has also made institutions consider other practices such as rewards and accreditation for student reps. One college commented that it was considering bringing in another layer of course reps who are all sparqs-trained and would serve to consolidate feedback from student reps to the institution. This evidences that interaction between institutions and sparqs can spark up creativity and proactivity from institutions regarding the student participation in quality agenda.
- 6.7 sparqs has also changed the views of key individuals who did not regard sparqs or its agenda highly at the start. These individuals have slowly become more open to the concept and the offer, to the point that some of them finally decided to engage with sparqs and even promote it. Changing perceptions in this way is regarded as a key success of sparqs' work, achieved through hard work, diplomacy, knowledge, as well as through the work of sabbaticals and staff at some key SAs.
- 6.8 sparqs has also helped to raise the profile of student involvement among staff, although awareness of sparqs is still limited across the majority of staff. Awareness is higher among staff who are heavily involve in quality and/or strategic issues.
- 6.9 There was some anecdotal evidence that staff who work with sparqs-trained reps have a more positive attitude towards student participation in quality issues. This is the case because students bring up more relevant issues at meetings, for example, and tackle them in more effective ways.

- 6.10 'Student Representation in Scotland Further Education Colleges: An Aspect Report for SFC by HMIE', summarised that *"sparqs involvement over the past two years had also started to raise awareness among students of the importance of student representation, and the student voice now had a significantly higher profile in HMIE reviews"*.

Networking

- 6.11 sparqs gives student reps the opportunity to come together to share experiences and information on the sector. In this way, it provides a forum that did not exist previously or that was very haphazard. In this respect, SAs also valued the opportunities for networking outside each institution, and the link that sparqs provides with NUS.

- 6.12 Staff who attended sparqs events also highlighted the networking opportunities as a key benefit of engaging with sparqs, whether or not the institution was receiving sparqs course rep training. The importance of the sparqs conference in contributing to networking within the sector was repeatedly mentioned by interviewees.

- 6.13 sparqs trainers are also often regarded as role models and ambassadors, which impacts positively on the message they convey. Some interviewees commented that students can more easily identify with sparqs than with the institution themselves (seen as more biased) or with the SA (which is generally regarded as focusing in more political welfare issues).

Awareness Raising

- 6.14 The sector as a whole is benefiting from the improved awareness of student participation in quality and the enhanced skills of student reps who in turn influence the quality of learning and teaching at FE and HE institutions across Scotland.

- 6.15 As a sector agency, sparqs has played a major role collating and disseminating best practice in student representation, through networks, multi-lateral relationships, and the Conference.

- 6.16 There is evidence that sparqs has had an impact on key sector players. For example, HMIE had recognised that the way it evaluated student representation to the quality enhancement and learning and development process was flawed because it had no standards to work to. sparqs provided guidance and ideas on those standards and developed an effective evaluation framework for HMIE, which it now uses. Through applying those standards to the inspection process, HMIE will now tangibly act to improve issues in FE providers.
- 6.17 Similarly to HMIE, QAA on the HE side emphasised the “enormous synergy” in working with sparqs, because they had tried to engage students in quality without considerable success, and now they work together with sparqs in this area (Institutional Reviews, Enhancement Themes, committee work).
- 6.18 Even the institutions consulted who did not engage with sparqs training because they perceived that they already have strong support for student reps, recognised that sparqs had an impact on those institutions that do not have such strong structures and also acknowledged its wider impact on the national scene.

Impact on Institutions

- 6.19 The impact of sparqs at the institutional level depends on the structures that are already in place and on how institutions utilise the resource that well-trained reps represent.

Improving the Dialogue

- 6.20 Evidence from the interviews and case study visits highlights the impact of sparqs in improving the dialogue between the institutions and the SAs. This is seen as one of the most commendable successes of sparqs. Some of the SAs have now a more important role to play in student participation, and some institutions are starting to recognise this. sparqs has extended the message that student representation matters, and that has strengthened the position of SAs, bringing them closer to the institutions. There is evidence that SA Presidents are for example working more closely to Quality Managers after receiving sparqs support. Some SA Vice-Presidents (often of Learning and Teaching) attended sparqs events with institutional representatives (often Quality Managers or Academic Registrars).

Capacity Building

6.21 Some SAs (sometimes in collaboration with the institutions) have decided after receiving sparqs training for two or three years to start doing it in-house. Therefore, in these cases sparqs has helped to embed training at the institutional level and has increased the capacity of SAs. Clearly, not all SAs are at this level, but there is evidence from the interviews and case studies that a number of SAs are considering reaching this stage in the near future.

Impact on Students' Associations

6.22 The most easily measurable outcome of sparqs is the number of students trained. Consultation evidence and the Mapping Reports evidence that these student reps would not have received training otherwise and would not have been able to influence quality issues in the same way. Training is now large in volume but also regular and consistent over time, and available at all institutions.

6.23 For those SAs that were delivering training themselves before, sparqs has helped to reduce the burden placed on them and to free up resources. Training has become less political, more accepted by the institution, focused on quality rather than welfare issues, and more consistent over time. For those SAs that were not running rep training before, sparqs has clearly added to their capacity. sparqs training materials were particularly valued by SAs.

6.24 It was felt that with sparqs on the scene, SAs could offer more proactive support to student reps rather than helping them reactively only when problems arose. In this way, SAs are more able to support reps throughout the year and become a port of call for any queries from reps. However, it was clear that some SAs interviewed lagged behind this level of proactive engagement and passively expected sparqs to come forward with solutions, specially when engaging with sparqs becomes demanding (contacting reps, organising rooms, ensuring attendance, etc).

6.25 The turnover of sabbaticals and officers at SAs can disrupt training activities, so the support of sparqs has been valued, as well as its continuity and consistency across institutions. This impact is appreciated even though engaging with sparqs is laborious for the SAs, especially for those with no permanent staff and no full-time sabbatical officers.

Impact on Student Reps

6.26 The following box provides a summary of quotes from the web survey which help to introduce the different areas in which sparqs has had an influence on students:

On reflection of my training with sparqs, I think the main areas where sparqs helped me are:

- *“Allowing me to network with other class reps at the training”*
- *“Being more confident”*
- *Clarifying responsibilities of a rep”*
- *“Communicating with fellow students well”*
- *“Development and presentation of an idea”*
- *“Helped improve my negotiation skills”*
- *“The team building aspects”*
- *“I found the class rep training particularly useful and I think that, if I had not undertook such training, I would not really have understood my role as a class rep”*

6.27 Similarly, students have provided examples of sparqs impact on themselves and their institutions during the interviews and case study visits:

- Students are better informed and take appropriate issues up at the right meetings
- There is a noticeable difference in course related only complaints that are going to course meetings
- *“sparqs re-clarifies the role to staff each year”*
- Students are more aware of the quality enhancement process and schools themselves are really focusing on student feedback
- Class reps that have attended sparqs training stated that they felt it provided clarity about their roles and responsibilities, and their tutors’ perspectives

- Some students thought that attending sparqs training can help students feel part of something

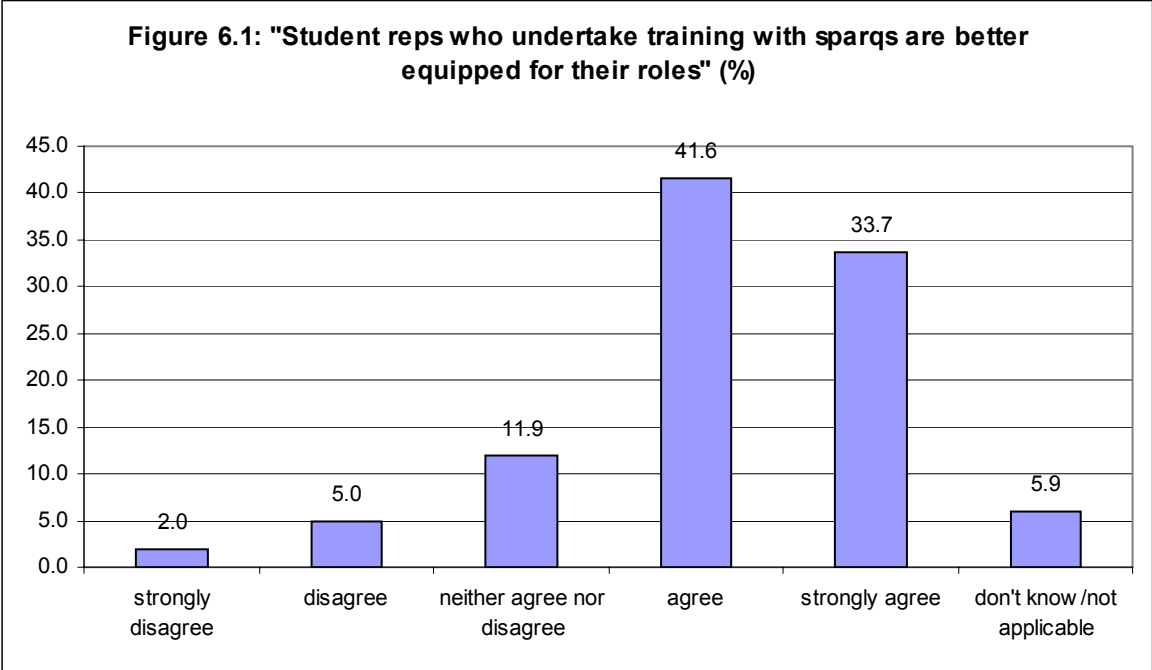
6.28 Interviews with staff also evidence the impact that training has had on students:

- *“Reps are more aware of what they're meant to be doing”*
- *“Now students are requesting the use of computers instead of moaning and groaning that they have to use computers. There's a different reaction tendency now, when students see a problem, before it was moaning, now it's communication”*
- *“It's added some perspective to the student role and has enabled them to be more effective”*
- *“The fact that they're trained means that they're more focused on learning and teaching and curricular issues and quality”*
- *“It makes their input more valuable and recognised that the student rep is the central person with reference to quality*
- *“It makes them aware of what they're doing and what they're part of, how important it is “*
- *“”It's a pleasure to see them become more articulate”*
- *“The reps are more active and more confident now”*

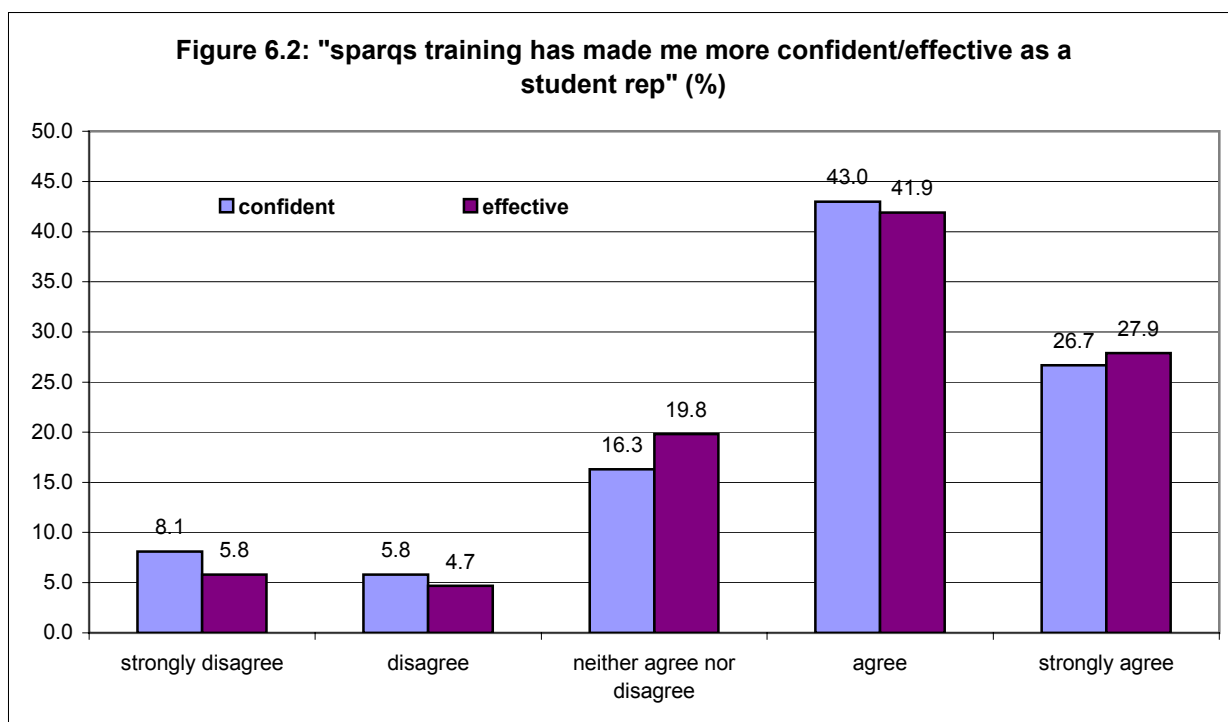
6.29 From interviews with staff and students, and from the student web survey, it is clear that the main skill areas improved are team building, communication, and negotiation. Confidence, awareness, focus and effectiveness are also personal development areas that improve with sparqs training.

6.30 It was added that sparqs-trained reps are less afraid of identifying problems and suggesting solutions, are more demanding and more active, and take responsibility for their own learning. One of the trainers stated that *“sometimes you can see a change in the two hours [of training]”*, although it is difficult to observe how this change is sustained and translated into day to day representation.

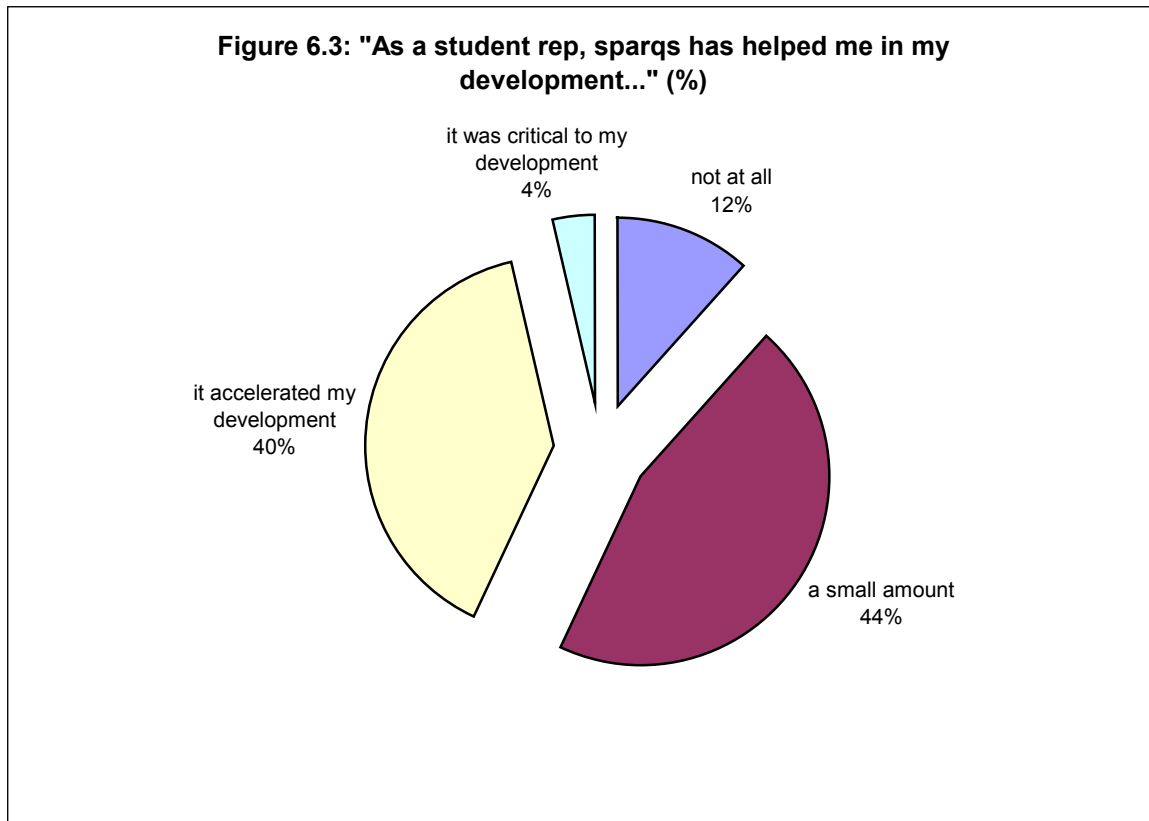
6.31 The development of skills through sparqs training was tested using the web survey. Respondents were asked to express their views about the statement “Students who undertake training with sparqs are better equipped for their roles”. As **Figure 6.1** illustrates, over three quarters of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. This shows that sparqs prepares student reps for their roles, which is their core task.



6.32 **Figure 6.2** below illustrates the impact of sparqs on the confidence and the effectiveness of reps. It is clear from both figures that around 70% of students thought that sparqs made them more confident and more effective as reps.



6.33 Asking students to rate how much sparqs had helped them in their development was used as a proxy for testing the additionality of sparqs training. As **Figure 6.3** below indicates, around 40% of respondents felt that it had accelerated their development. A similar proportion felt that it had helped their development a little. Around 12% thought that it had not helped their development at all while for 3.5% of respondents sparqs was critical for their development.



6.34 Therefore, around 88% of respondents felt that sparqs added something to their development, which is a significant finding in itself and evidences the additionality of course rep training. The low proportion of students for whom sparqs was not critical in their development was expected since sparqs is not the only thing that affects the development of a course rep. Other factors such as personal skills and experience, the support from the SA and the institution, their own peer group, and other informal support, also contribute to their development as reps.

Impact on Learning and Teaching

6.35 The ultimate aim of sparqs is to influence learning and teaching at HE and FE institutions in order to enhance quality. Although sparqs has been operating only for a short time and despite the fact that impact is difficult to measure and attribute, consultation evidence points out some ways in which sparqs' influenced has filtered through to learning and teaching issues.

6.36 Some of the specific learning and teaching issues that students have had an impact on after sparqs training include:

- requesting a reduction in the number of handouts given for a certain course and requesting a reduction in core reading (more supplementary reading);
- communicating to staff the concerns that fellow students had with respect to module choices and then explaining to students why those choices were given (this is an interesting example of how a student rep as a resource can be used to pass on information on both directions);
- using the format and pointers given at sparqs training at a staff/student meeting to voice concerns over the level of absences of a particular member of staff, which was having an impact on learning. As a result, the college was responsive and recognised they had to have a “plan B” so they put a better structure in place that the students found acceptable;
- researching into issues more thoroughly by reading previous minutes and asking staff so as to be better prepared to argue certain cases.

6.37 The evidence gathered also indicates that better trained reps are more confident and motivated to make an impact on quality while they are studying, rather than leaving it until the end of the course, when it is more difficult to make improvements. At the same time, sparqs-trained reps are also more aware that it is important to seek solutions for future generations of students, even if their own cohort will not benefit from those improvements.

6.38 One consultee interestingly pointed out that students were having an impact before sparqs and before the QEF, but that now that impact is more systematic and auditable. Another institutional consultee commented that *“the training is valued especially by SA sabbaticals, they are far more engaged in learning and teaching and they are more able to comment and take a lead of learning and teaching than before”*.

6.39 The student web survey also sheds some light on the impact of sparqs: over half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that sparqs has had a clear impact on improving the quality of learning and teaching in their institution, while 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. This shows that over half the students surveyed could evidence the impact of sparqs precisely on learning and teaching issues, over and above what it can achieve in student representation in general.

- 6.40 One specialist college had actual evidence of the impact of student involvement in the annual review rounds. These were felt to have vastly improved in the last two years, when around 5 students undertook the sparqs review training.
- 6.41 In “Student Representation in Scotland Further Education Colleges: An Aspect Report for SFC by HMIE” (December 2005), it was stated that *“sparqs training and other support was starting to have an impact on the effectiveness of learner participation and it was valued by colleges and by the students and staff who had participated”*.
- 6.42 There is a general perception that impact does not increase as the level of representation increases. Course reps, because of their large numbers and the fact that they are at the forefront of learning and teaching, can have considerable impact. One consultee summarised this concept saying that course reps help at the student-level, while higher level reps help at the institutional level, but one is not better or more influential than the other.
- 6.43 It was also mentioned by a stakeholder that sparqs has a role to play and some impact on aiding the progression from FE to HE. In this respect, one comment from the student web survey stated that *“I feel the training was clear and well delivered. The explanation that the training was same for all institutions and so was transferable when moving on to university”*.

Summary

- 6.44 It was clear throughout the course of this evaluation that sparqs is widely perceived as being a positive contribution to the sector. In general, there was much praise about the initiative and the positive atmosphere in terms of student representation it has contributed to create.
- 6.45 Mechanisms for assessing the impact of student participation in quality issues were rarely in place at institutions. In this respect, sparqs is looking to improve the way in which it monitors trainee progress, which will help to assess its impact. One way considered is to ask trainees to keep logs of activities. An alternative way is to undertake follow-up training sessions, which are likely to work better at higher levels of representation where there is already more commitment from students.

6.46 In future, course inspections and self-assessment surveys will provide further evidence of performance and impact. The evidence gathered throughout this evaluation on sparqs' impact is summarised under the eight thematic areas below, followed by a summary table illustrating the impact on sparqs by stakeholder groups.

6.47 **Table 6.1** below summarises the impact of sparqs by stakeholder group, mirroring the way in which the remit of sparqs has been set out.

Table 6.1: Impact				
	Students	SAs	Institutions	SFC and the Sector
Training Provision	X	X		
Skills Development	X		X	
Networking	X	X	X	X
Improvements on Learning and Teaching	X		X	X
Awareness Raising	X	X	X	X
Improved Dialogue		X	X	
Capacity Building		X	X	X

7 CONCLUSIONS

7.1 This Section presents the conclusions of this evaluation and is structured around its original aims:

- evaluating the success of sparqs in achieving the objectives of the service:
 - supporting students;
 - supporting SAs;
 - supporting institutions;
 - identifying good practice;
 - advising the sectors and the Funding Councils;
- measuring the impact of the service;
- providing advice on the future activities of sparqs and the promotion of student participation in quality.

Achieving the Objectives

Supporting Students

7.2 sparqs has succeeded in providing standardised free-training to a large number of student reps across Scotland. As highlighted in the Mapping Studies, most of these reps would not have access to other training otherwise. Satisfaction with the training is very positive, and there is evidence of its impact on individual students. Some areas for improvement remain, such as tailoring the training and improving the frequency of deliver. However, improvements on the training would add to the capacity constraints that the service experiences, and might not encourage institutions from developing their own internal capacity.

Supporting SAs

7.3 sparqs has helped SAs to raise the profile of student involvement within institutions, by providing a knowledgeable and less political voice. It has also enhanced the capacity of SAs, who would otherwise struggle to deliver training themselves. Continuity has also been a positive addition to SAs, as well as an improved relationship with institutional staff and management.

- 7.4 However, capacity building at SAs remains an issue as there is a risk that SAs might become too dependent on sparqs support.

Supporting Institutions

- 7.5 sparqs has succeeded in engaging with all institutions in Scotland, which is an achievement in itself. It has acted as a key point of reference and guidance for a large number of institutions in all matters related to student involvement, as well as acting as a key training provider.
- 7.6 In this way, sparqs has increased the institutions' capacity to organise and deliver training. This has resulted in institutions benefited from reps who are better placed to enhance the quality of the learning and teaching.
- 7.7 As explained above, sparqs has also acted as a catalyst for improvement of the dialogue between institutions and the SAs, who now often find themselves working together in student representation issues.
- 7.8 Similarly to what happens at the SA level, the main area for improvement with regards to supporting institutions is to embed the support and build capacity, to reduce dependency on sparqs' already scarce resources.

Identifying Good Practice

- 7.9 The Mapping Studies and the Conference on Student Involvement proved key to identifying and sharing good practice across the sector. Stakeholders have valued sparqs training events as opportunities for networking. However, there is scope for improving sharing best practice at this stage, when some institutions have developed innovative ways of addressing student involvement after the support from sparqs.

Advising the Sector and the SFC

- 7.10 It is clear that the set up and performance of sparqs in the last three years has been a big step in the sector. It has voiced the message that student participation is an important part of the QEF. It has gained the support of the sector and has found a niche position within it.

7.11 Partnership working as well as the relationship with the SFC and NUS have been positive. The Mapping Studies have added value to the sector and the SFC, while the service remains open to providing support to the sector through events like the Conference and consultancy services.

Measuring Impact

7.12 There is clear evidence already that sparqs is having an impact at different levels.

7.13 At the national level, it was contributed to a culture change in favour of student participation. It has raised the awareness of the whole agenda and has opened a forum for discussion.

7.14 At the institutional level, it has sent a message that student representation matters, while at the same time supporting institutions in making it happen. It has trained reps for them to be more effective and confident at influencing the quality of their learning and teaching. It has provided development activities and other training to address the need of the institutions.

7.15 At the student rep level, sparqs has provided free training to a large number of reps and training materials to an even larger number. The better trained reps are already having an impact on learning and teaching, with the help of their enhanced skills and awareness of their roles.

Suggestions for the Future

7.16 There is evidence that performance in terms of achieving the objectives set out by the SFC has been positive. sparqs has succeeded in supporting students, SAs, and institutions in improving the effectiveness of student engagement in quality processes. It has also to some extent advised the SFC and has been the epicentre of best practice in student participation in FE and HE in Scotland. Impact is already measurable.

- 7.17 sparqs is now at a turning point in its development. It is essential that future options are reviewed carefully to provide a more thought-out development so that it continues to support the sector while building capacity and transferring ownership to institutions.
- 7.18 There is no evidence that institutions could at this stage provide the support that sparqs brings to the sector, and there are no other organisations viewed by the sector as capable to achieve the same level of recognition and performance.
- 7.19 Withdrawing support for sparqs in terms of funding would send a message that its agenda is no longer important and would lose the momentum that it has generated. There is no evidence that institutions could at this stage provide the support that sparqs brings to the sector, and there are no other organisations viewed by the sector as capable to achieve the same level of recognition and performance.
- 7.20 The recommendations emerging from this evaluation are discussed in the next Section.

8 FUTURE OPTIONS

8.1 Following the conclusions in the previous Section, we now proceed to propose four options for the future development of the service. Each option originates as a result of the consultants' analysis following the extensive evaluation described above.

Options

8.2 This is a clear time for sparqs to do a stock-take of activities and work out the best way ahead to continue to maximise the impact on sector.

8.3 There are four main options for future work:

- **Option 1: Status Quo;**
- **Option 2: Focusing on Training;**
- **Option 3: Focusing on Development;**
- **Option 4: Withdraw Funding.**

Option 1: Status Quo

8.4 This option involves sparqs continuing to develop as it has done so far. Progress so far has been positive. Organic development has proved responsive to the needs of the sector. However, this is not a desired route since it could stretch resources too thinly and not manage demand efficiently, as demand for standard course rep training can squeeze out more developmental work. It would not benefit capacity building and long-term sustainability.

8.5 In this respect, delivering training for reps and students, providing opportunities for networking at specific events, advising the sector and the SFC, undertaking ad hoc activities, doing development activities, plus now managing seven projects can prove too much for the service's already strained human and financial resources.

Option 2: Focusing on Training

- 8.6 Course rep training has been at the core of sparqs' activities. One option is to revert to this core and be seen as a training agency for student reps, improving the reach and tailoring of the delivery.
- 8.7 This option has two main drawbacks. Firstly, it would reduce the capacity of the service to focus on more added value developmental activities which have an impact on the sector as a whole. Secondly, it does not encourage institutions and SAs to build their own training capacity, and creates dependency on the service. In this way, it lessens the ownership institutions have of the whole quality agenda.

Option 3: Focusing on Development

- 8.8 Most institutions and SAs now know that they are expected to listen to the student voice following the last three years of sparqs work and the accompanying policy moves. Furthermore, institutions have developed a greater understanding of the role they are expected to have in the current structure. A significant number of institutions would benefit from support in the training they are delivering or starting to develop. Another large group of institutions would benefit from advice on how to 'take off' and deliver their own training, taking ownership of the processes and seeing it for the institution's own benefit. A third group of institutions are likely to be in the stage where actual training delivered by sparqs is still needed.
- 8.9 This does not mean that the service should not undertake any course rep training. Delivering training puts the service in contact with the student population and aids its development. The question is how much actual course rep training to undertake and, more importantly, how to distribute it across institutions.
- 8.10 Training allocation has to be based on need. This option proposes that sparqs works out a service plan with each institution, which evolves over three stages:
- transition period of approximately three years – this stage would involve training delivery to which capacity building is slowly embedded. This can be followed by support to the institution to develop its own capacity;

- development period of approximately three years following the transition period above – this stage would see sparqs acting as a sounding board for institutions to seek advice on particular issues. At this stage, sparqs would be acting as a true development agency that would also provide a forum for student participation in quality in Scotland. There may be some residual course rep training at this stage;
- supporting stage in around six year's time – this long-term form of sparqs would see it established as a sector agency supporting all institutions which have now all embraced student participation in quality in practical and theoretical terms.

8.11 Option Three brings long term sustainability to the project by embedding principles and activities at the institutional level.

8.12 This model would also see sparqs undertaking considerably less course rep training while focusing on other training such as Board of management or internal review training. It would also have a role to provide a central point of information and training materials.

8.13 In Section Five a spectrum of engagement was discussed. It is clear that institutions and SAs are placed at different stages in this spectrum. This means that a needs assessment from sparqs, probably with the back up of the SFC, is required to establish the state of play and the future engagement. The rationale for this assessment is that the SFC would seek evidence from all institutions that they are committed to the QEF and therefore student participation in quality. The idea behind this model is to see institutions moving along a line that takes them from a high level of dependency on sparqs, to a capacity building stage, to being fully competent in involving students in quality issues. This would almost inevitably require close work between the SAs and the institutions, and this is likely to be one of the areas for closest monitoring and for intensive support from sparqs.

8.14 Related to this is the need for the SFC to enter a dialogue with institutions and SAs to explore their role in this new context. Institutions and SAs would have an open choice regarding how to engage with sparqs. This can kick start the interaction between the SAs and the institutions if it is not in place already. sparqs would offer a minimum level of support to all institutions including regular contact, a training toolkit, and quality assurance support.

8.15 The SFC is generally regarded as the natural funder for sparqs. This is because of its focus on the QEF and because it is a national body that can guarantee that all institutions have access to the service. The general view from sector stakeholders was that institutions would not be prepared or able to fund the initiative directly, although some would increase capacity to provide similar services. There was a concern that funding should be sustainable and not short-termed.

8.16 The idea behind Option Three is summarised by a senior manager at an institution: *"I see a deepening role for sparqs rather than one of widening"*.

Option 4: Withdraw Funding

8.17 Clearly, another option for the SFC is to withdraw funding and stop running sparqs altogether in summer 2007. This is not seen as a desired option because firstly sparqs is at a developmental stage and therefore questions of sustainability could draw resources away from current work. Secondly, this would send a signal to the sector that student participation in quality is not a priority which is not only not the reality but would also conflict with the second stage of the QEF launched in September 2006.

8.18 Withdrawing funding at this stage would signify a loss in the momentum and positive environment in terms of student participation that sparqs has contributed to create.

8.19 Case study visits and interviews that gauged the views of the sector evidence that stakeholders do not expect sparqs to stop receiving funding. Should that happen, most institutions would revert to what was happening before sparqs (evidenced in the Mapping Reports), which basically means delivering hardly any training and support for student reps. The sector would lose the only agency whose remit is to support student participation in quality. Even institutions who do not engage in sparqs course rep training expressed that its role in aiding networking and sharing of best practice would be missed.

8.20 One option was for NUS to deliver the training instead. This is not a desirable option since it is likely to lose the neutrality that stakeholders appreciate in sparqs. It would also mean that NUS would need to secure extra funding.

8.21 For those institutions that are advancing in terms of the student participation in quality agenda, the end of sparqs would more than often find them still unprepared to cope with the training and other support by themselves. For those institutions that are less advanced, there is still a case for awareness raising and for basic training. For example, even at this stage one SA representative said that *“if sparqs could do an awareness raising session about what student representation is about, we would need it”*, which shows that some institutions still need to come a long way in terms of embracing this agenda.

8.22 A focus group with HE student reps and SA officers resulted in the following list of what would happen if sparqs suddenly stopped being funded. It is clear from these reflections that students would miss sparqs’ on the ground impact and activities:

- No proper training for class reps
- Less ability for the SA to influence the institution
- Permanent SA staff would miss out on the training opportunities
- Less opportunities for staff and students to work together at events
- Missing out on access to same consistent information
- Missing out on opportunities for training benefits to spread between peers
- Student representation would lose profile and would become less of an issue

9 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 This Section summarises the recommendations from this study, taking into account the evidence from all strands of the evaluation. It then presents the consultants' recommendations to the SFC regarding the future of sparqs.

Recommendations

- 9.2 The recommendations, grouped under the headings of core and additional areas, are directed to the Funding Council with reference to the sparqs service.

Core Recommendations

- 9.3 Ensuring that student participation continues to be a priority within Quality Enhancement is essential. For this to happen, the dialogue between the SFC and the institutions will have to ensure that student participation remains high in the agenda. The SFC has to enter a new dialogue and process of engagement to reaffirm the core values of student participation in quality.
- 9.4 It is the view of the evaluators that, to maximise existing and already stretched resources, sparqs should decrease its focus on course rep training provision and increase its developmental and support role. This is in line with **Option Three** in Section 8. Now that the message about student representation is out and is being reinforced by the QAA and the HMIE, the challenge is to transfer ownership to institutions to build capacity and decrease dependency on sparqs.
- 9.5 We recommend that sparqs undertake a needs assessment of each institution during the next academic year and draw up service agreements with each institution to clarify with the institutions and SAs what level of support they can expect from sparqs. It must be taken into account that representation often works differently across different schools/departments/colleges within an institution. Therefore, if engagement is secured at the institutional level it has to be understood to be inclusive of the structures underneath.

- 9.6 This needs assessment should be backed up by the SFC to ensure that all institutions are working towards provision for enhancing student participation in quality in Scotland. This will ensure that less engaged institutions are taken into account.
- 9.7 Although the relationship with sparqs with each institution is unique, some standardised service offer is necessary to control demand and ensure support. This will require institutions and SAs to come together to discuss needs with sparqs, which is a key benefit in itself.
- 9.8 We anticipate that most institutions will understand that limited resources need to be allocated wisely. Therefore, we do not anticipate reticence on behalf of institutions to discuss needs with sparqs. The SFC and sparqs should discuss the extent to which these discussions around needs assessments will be disclosed. The sharing of information will help institutions to face forthcoming external and internal reviews.
- 9.9 **Building capacity** within institutions can be achieved through a combination of Option Three above and what is learnt through the UHI pilot. In this respect, sparqs should consider how to deliver training and help build capacity at the same time. There are different ways in which this can be achieved:
- supporting SAs and quality managers;
 - disseminating good practice (there are already fine examples of how this can be achieved but they are not always known across the sector);
 - involve students already trained by sparqs supporting training delivered by sparqs (for example, they could work as facilitators in group discussions within a training session), this is already in place at one institution consulted.
- 9.10 The latter option can help to refresh the knowledge of already trained reps and boost their confidence and motivations, while their role can also bring in a more real and familiar face to the students trained. This can encourage sharing of best practice within an institution and is a first step to networks being established. These student reps could also be given the task to help the SAs and/or the institutions to organise the training. This can involve ensuring promotion, checking attendance, sorting out practicalities such as rooms and refreshments, and even evaluating the training informally.

- 9.11 The high demand for **staff training** needs to be addressed. The buy in of staff is key to students getting to know about student participation. The web survey indicated that at least one quarter of reps knew about sparqs through a staff member. This figure is likely to be higher in FE colleges where the relationship with staff is closer and the SAs are in general less well resourced. Staff can encourage students to participate and to engage with sparqs. However, as one student said at a focus group, *“the lecturers don’t actually know what they are asking you to do”*. Staff training needs to address this information gaps and we feel this is a priority for sparqs in the near future.
- 9.12 In this respect, it is interesting to learn from best practice at Napier University. In this institution, programme leaders are accountable to recruit reps. sparqs can work with institutions to ensure that there is accountability somewhere in their systems for recruiting and training reps (or liaising with sparqs).
- 9.13 The current development **projects** need to be developed and delivered with caution. Although they will address key issues emerging from the Mapping Reports, there should be a consensus over priorities so that the projects do not have a significant negative impact on already challenged resources. The focus should be on getting institutions and SAs to work together rather than on instructing them or doing the work for them. Solutions should come from within the sector and sparqs are better placed to work as facilitators.
- 9.14 Achieving more added value from the **Steering Group** and making it more proactive is an important recommendation to maximise the input from experienced sector stakeholders. An open and constructive debate regarding the options above and these recommendations is paramount at this stage.
- 9.15 The governance, structure, form and location of sparqs are satisfactory and fulfil the organisation’s purpose. The niche position within the sector and the relationship with NUS Scotland and the SFC are to be valued.

Additional Recommendations

9.16 In addition to the core recommendations, there are a number of additional areas that should be considered:

- there is strong evidence that institutions, especially in FE, would like sparqs to have more influence in recruiting reps and improving the image of student participation. We would not recommend that sparqs undertakes this role since it would stretch its remit and resources. Our recommendation is that sparqs advises institutions and SAs on how to go about tackling these issues, working in tandem with NUS;
- information on student reps, mainly in terms of numbers, performance, skills and experience, should be enhanced on the institutional side. A possible alternative is that sparqs require as condition of their service that institutions provide the best possible information on the student rep population. This can be an area of work between sparqs and institutions. This information will make training more targeted and relevant, improving the contact and engagement with student reps across all institutions;
- sparqs should complete the feedback loop by working more with student reps to be able to take forward outcomes with the institution after the reviews. Students who are sparqs trained can influence internal and external reviews by providing evidence of learning and teaching issues. We recommend that they are also trained to understand the results of reviews and take forward their recommendations at their institutions;
- management information needs to be transformed more effectively into intelligence that can aid analysis of current needs and future options, informing the funders and the Steering Group better. For example, making an assessment of organisations falling into the categories of the engagement spectrum. The transparency and frequency of financial information, though improving, is another area for future development.
- the conference was seen as a major success and a focus for student representation in quality issues across the sector. Repeating the conference on an annual basis will help continue this momentum and provide a valuable opportunity for sharing good practice.

APPENDIX A: WEB SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

ALL STUDENTS.

1. Name
2. Email address
3. Gender
 - a. *male*
 - b. *female*
4. Institution
5. Please indicate your opinion about the following statements regarding student representation generally:
 - a) I understand what the role of a student rep is.
 - a. *Strongly disagree*
 - b. *Disagree*
 - c. *Neither agree not disagree*
 - d. *Agree*
 - e. *Strongly agree*
 - f. *Don't know / not applicable*
 - b) Student reps are generally representative of the whole body of students.
 - a. *Strongly disagree*
 - b. *Disagree*
 - c. *Neither agree not disagree*
 - d. *Agree*
 - e. *Strongly agree*
 - f. *Don't know / not applicable*
 - c) I think there are strong incentives for students to get involved in representation in my institution.
 - a. *Strongly disagree*
 - b. *Disagree*
 - c. *Neither agree not disagree*
 - d. *Agree*
 - e. *Strongly agree*
 - f. *Don't know / not applicable*
 - d) Student reps have had a clear impact on improving the quality of learning and teaching in my institution.
 - a. *Strongly disagree*
 - b. *Disagree*
 - c. *Neither agree nor disagree*
 - d. *Agree*
 - e. *Strongly agree*
 - f. *Don't know / not applicable*

6. Please mark the boxes that best describe you:
- a) *I am a student rep* **GO TO Q7**
 - b) *I am not currently a rep but used to be one* **GO TO Q7**
 - c) *I have never been a student rep* **GO TO Q11**

THOSE WHO ARE/HAVE BEEN STUDENT REPS.

7. In which setting are/were you a student rep?
- a. *Class*
 - b. *Course*
 - c. *Faculty*
 - d. *Department*
 - e. *Student association/union*
 - f. *Institution-wide*
 - g. *Other*
8. What motivated you to become a student rep?
9. Would you recommend to other students to become a student rep?
- a) *Yes*
 - b) *No*
 - c) *Don't know*
10. Have you received training to be a student rep?
- a) *Yes*
 - b) *No*
11. Have you heard of sparqs?
- a) *Yes*
 - b) *No* **GO TO Q18**
 - c) *Don't know* **GO TO Q18**

THOSE WHO HAVE HEARD OF SPARQS.

12. When did you first hear about sparqs?
- This academic year 2005/06*
 - Previous academic year 2004/05*
 - In the academic year 2003/04*
 - Before October 2003*
 - Don't know/can't remember*
13. How did you first hear about sparqs?
- From another student*
 - From the students' union*
 - sparqs leaflet/other material*
 - sparqs website*
 - From a staff member*
 - Other (if "other", please indicate how)*
 - Don't know/can't remember*
14. Please indicate your opinion about the following statements:
- Student reps who undertake training with sparqs are better equipped for their roles.
 - Strongly disagree*
 - Disagree*
 - Neither agree nor disagree*
 - Agree*
 - Strongly agree*
 - Don't know / not applicable*
 - sparqs complements well the support that is offered in my institution by other bodies (the university itself, NUS, Students' Union, etc).
 - Strongly disagree*
 - Disagree*
 - Neither agree nor disagree*
 - Agree*
 - Strongly agree*
 - Don't know / not applicable*
 - sparqs has improved the image that students in my institution have of student reps.
 - Strongly disagree*
 - Disagree*
 - Neither agree nor disagree*
 - Agree*
 - Strongly disagree*
 - Don't know / not applicable*

- d) sparqs has improved the image that staff in my institution have of student reps.
- a. *Strongly disagree*
 - b. *Disagree*
 - c. *Neither agree nor disagree*
 - d. *Agree*
 - e. *Strongly agree*
 - f. *Don't know / not applicable*

15. Have you received sparqs training?

- a) Yes
- b) No **GO TO Q19**
- c) Don't know **GO TO Q19**

THOSE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED SPARQS TRAINING.

16. What training have you received from sparqs?

17. Please indicate your opinion about the following statements:

- a) I would recommend sparqs training to other student reps.
 - a. *Strongly disagree*
 - b. *Disagree*
 - c. *Neither agree nor disagree*
 - d. *Agree*
 - e. *Strongly agree*
 - f. *Don't know / not applicable*

- b) sparqs was an incentive for me to choose to be a student rep.
 - a. *Strongly disagree*
 - b. *Disagree*
 - c. *Neither agree not disagree*
 - d. *Agree*
 - e. *Strongly agree*
 - f. *Don't know / not applicable*

- c) As a student rep, sparqs has helped in my development ...
 - a. *Not at all*
 - b. *A small amount*
 - c. *It accelerated my development*
 - d. *It was critical to my development*

- d) sparqs training has made me more confident as a rep.
 - a. *Strongly disagree*
 - b. *Disagree*
 - c. *Neither agree nor disagree*
 - d. *Agree*
 - e. *Strongly agree*
 - f. *Don't know / not applicable*

- e) sparqs training has made more effective as a rep.
 - a. *Strongly disagree*
 - b. *Disagree*
 - c. *Neither agree nor disagree*
 - d. *Agree*
 - e. *Strongly agree*
 - f. *Don't know / not applicable*

- f) On reflection of my training with sparqs, I think the main areas where sparqs has helped me are ...

- g) On reflection, the areas I would have benefited from more training on are ...

ALL STUDENTS.

- 18. Nationality
 - a. *Scottish*
 - b. *Other UK*
 - c. *Other EU*
 - d. *Non-EU*

- 19. Age

- 20. Name of course

- 21. Level

- 22. Mode of study
 - a. *Full-time*
 - b. *Part-time*
 - c. *Other*

- 23. What year of your course are you in just now?
 - a. *1st year*
 - b. *2nd year*
 - c. *3rd year*
 - d. *4th year*
 - e. *5th year*
 - f. *After 5th year*
 - g. *Other*

24. Length of course (approx).
- a. *Less than 1 year*
 - b. *1 year*
 - c. *2 years*
 - d. *3 years*
 - e. *4 years*
 - f. *5 years*
 - g. *More than 5 years*
25. Do you consider yourself to have any disability that affects your ability to learn and work?
- a. *Yes*
 - b. *No*
 - c. *Don't know*
26. Ethnic origin
- a. *White Scottish*
 - b. *White English*
 - c. *White Welsh*
 - d. *White Irish*
 - e. *White other*
 - f. *Mixed background*
 - g. *Indian*
 - h. *Bangladeshi*
 - i. *Pakistani*
 - j. *Chinese*
 - k. *Other Asian background*
 - l. *Black Caribbean*
 - m. *Black African*
 - n. *Other Black background*
 - o. *Any other ethnic background*
27. Would you like to be entered onto the £500 prize draw?
- a. *Yes*
 - b. *No*
28. Is there anything else you would like to add or any comments you would like to make?

List of Acronyms

sparqs	Student Participation in Quality (Scotland)
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
SFEFC	Scottish Further Education Funding Council
SHEFC	Scottish Higher Education Funding Council
NUS	National Union of Students
HMIE	Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education
ASC	Association of Scottish Colleges
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
HEA	Higher Education Academy
SFEU	Scottish Further Education Unit
UHI	University of the Highlands and Islands Millennium Institute
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
YCL	York Consulting Limited
HE	Higher Education
FE	Further Education
ELIR	Enhancement-Led Institutional Review
CRT	Course Representative Training
QEF	Quality Enhancement Framework
HEI	Higher Education Institution
SA	Students' Association

Key References

sparqs

HE Mapping Report (“Report of the Further Education Mapping Exercise of Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Improvement Processes”)

FE Mapping Report (“Report of the Higher Education Mapping Exercise of Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement Processes”)

HE Briefing Note 7

2003/04 Annual Report

2004/05 Annual Report

Development Plan 2005/06

Work Plan 2005/07

Contracting documentation

Self-Evaluation Documents

“Getting Started as a Class Representative at the University of Dundee” CD-Rom (sparqs/University of Dundee Students’ Association)

Other

Second Annual Report of the Evaluation of the SHEFC Quality Enhancement Framework

Student Representation in Scottish Further Education Colleges: An Aspect Report for SFC by HMIE (<http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/hmiesrfec-03.html>)