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sparqs
(Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland)

Report & Financial Statements for the year ended 31 July 2025

Registered Charity No SC046172

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Contents

	Page
Reference and administrative information	3
Trustees' Report	4 - 29
Independent examiner's report	30
Statement of financial activities	31
Balance sheet	32
Notes to the financial statements	33 - 38

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

Reference and Administrative Information

Charity name	sparqs (Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland)
Trustees	Sir Andrew Cubie (Chair) Beate Treml Emilia Todorova Campbell Powrie Dee Bird Sai Shraddha Suresh Wiswanathan (NUS nominated student trustee)
Director	Eve Lewis
Charity number	SC046172
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Independent examiner	Steven Smillie Chiene + Tait LLP (trading as CT) Chartered Accountants and Independent Examiner 61 Dublin Street Edinburgh EH3 6NL
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Trustees Report

For the period ended 31st July 2025

The Trustees are delighted to present their report, together with the financial statements for the period 1 August 2024 to 31 July 2025. The financial statements comply with the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005, the Charities Accounts (Scotland) Regulations 2006 (as amended), the Constitution, and Accounting and Reporting by Charities: Statement of Recommended Practice applicable to charities preparing their accounts in accordance with the Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland (FRS 102) (effective 1 January 2019).

Objectives and Activities

The purposes of the SCIO are:

1. To advance education by promoting an environment where students are able to make a positive and rewarding difference to their own and others' educational experience, helping shape the nature of learning and contributing to the overall success of Scotland's universities, colleges and learning providers.

2. To support activities that ensure students are able to engage as partners at all levels of quality assurance and enhancement activities throughout their learning journey.

3. To promote the benefits of student engagement in meeting the needs of diverse student groups and improving educational opportunities for all students regardless of protected characteristic as covered by equality legislation, mode and level of study and socio-economic background and related aspects of widening access.

4. To support the development of practices and activities that equip students with the skills, knowledge and expertise to engage as partners in shaping their learning and to support learning providers to use that expertise, skills and knowledge effectively.

5. To support student engagement with national sector agencies and policy developments and support the development of a culture of student engagement across Scotland.

6. To promote such similar charitable purposes, objects or institutions in such proportions and manner as the Trustees think fit.

All areas of our work plan are developed with the following strategic priorities in mind:

Diverse Voices
We will focus on supporting all student voices to be heard, and for those voices to have a positive impact on learning, helping ensure all students, whatever their background, can access education, progress and achieve their potential.

Diverse Settings
We will identify settings where capturing the student voice will enhance decision-making, particularly where this voice is not currently heard well and where it will help address challenges such as transitions across the learner journey, widening access, and retention and success.

Learning and Teaching
We will focus on ensuring student engagement mechanisms create opportunities for genuine dialogue and affect decision-making around learning and teaching practice and strategies at a local and national level.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

A Scottish Approach

We will ensure student engagement remains at the heart of Scotland's quality arrangements and decision-making processes. We will continue to develop joint ownership of the quality assurance and enhancement arrangements and the role of students in institutional self-evaluation and enhancement activity.

Throughout this report the commentary will pay particular attention to how the work in any year has helped achieve these strategic priorities, which in turn reflect the priorities of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Government and institutions. The commentary thus provides the opportunity to demonstrate our responsiveness to emerging themes within these priority areas.

A successful year

It has been a busy and successful year for sparqs. We maintained our core programmes of work, including Course Rep Training (CRT), Institutional and sparqs Associate Trainer (IAT & AT) scheme and our That's Quality tertiary event. All of these received excellent feedback gathered from surveys, discussions in our networks and from sparqs Associate Trainer staff. This feedback is used each year to help improve and update our events to make them successful and as well received as they are.
The year saw a transition from developing the key sector reference points (the Student Learning Experience (SLE) model and Student Partnership Ambition) and developing student engagement within the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF), to embedding the models into our work and developing support for the sector and institutions, in order to help realise the potential these new arrangements present for effective student engagement within the delivery mechanisms of the TQEF. That has meant developing approaches, support and guidance for Self-Evaluation Action Plan (SEAP), Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review (TQER) and Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP) and we are pleased with the progress we have made in these areas, providing significant support during this first year of implementation alongside shaping a range of events and resources which will be delivered at the start of the academic year 2025/26.

Significant resource was devoted to a full set of institutional visits between October 2024 and February 2025 where we focused on assessing institutional need for support in relation to the implementation of TQER; use of the SLE and Student Partnership Ambition; and emerging issues for the sector. These provided a rich source of evidence which we have used to shape our work programmes. Not only has this shaped our support for TQEF, but it has also helped identify development needs such as work on reward and recognition for student reps and support for course rep systems. At the same time it also identified some issues such as the effect of the cost of living crisis on the student experience; concern and excitement about the potential of AI; and a growing concern around issues relating to student behaviour. We have already used this intelligence to start to shape projects as well as feeding it into discussions at a national level, including using it to shape one of the STEP projects for the coming year. The enthusiasm with which the sector has adopted the SLE and Student Partnership Ambition reference points has been a particular point of celebration for the team. The examples of institutions using the models at an operational and strategic level are very exciting. We will continue to support their use, as well as gather evidence from outputs such as the SEAP and TQER reports as to the impact they are having. We were thrilled to see that SFC's thematic review of the first round of SEAPs reported that, "*Approximately half of the institutions made specific reference to the SLE model, either describing work already undertaken or referring to planned actions for the future.".* We are happy to be able to share these successes alongside sector colleagues at the European Quality Enhancement Forum in November 2025.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

A successful year (continued)

Our networks met regularly to help inform the direction of sparqs' work and support professional development of staff and student officers. We are grateful and proud of the engagement we have had from the sector in developing our programmes of work and we acknowledge the contribution of our colleagues across the sector in making what we do a success.

Our new project piloting approaches to embedding the SLE model and Student Partnership Ambition into staff development programmes such as Teaching Qualification in Further Education (TQFE) and Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert) programmes has been a great success and we are continuing this work into the new academic year.

The year saw some challenges from a staffing perspective with the Director on compassionate leave for an extended period earlier in the year and a couple of key staff moving on during our busy summer training period. We are grateful for the flexibility and support from SFC during this period. It is a credit to the dedication of the sparqs team and their strong sense of purpose and commitment to our work that we continued to achieve against our objectives in such a meaningful way.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

Achievements and Performance

Work Area 1 - Provides training and support for students and staff

We will continue to provide our established training programmes for course representatives and student officers, looking to enhance provision and support ongoing activity to diversify methods of delivery. We will seek to develop training to meet the needs of particular groups of students where gaps are identified, such as postgraduates and apprentices.

We will seek to develop our growing provision of staff training and work with partners to embed staff training in professional development programmes.

Indicators of success

1) Reach of training
   - Number of students trained through Associate Trainer (AT) and Institutional Associate Trainer (IAT) schemes and 'That's Quality!'.

2) Satisfaction with training
   - % attendees finding Course Rep Training useful or very useful.
   - % attendees who would recommend the Course Rep Training.

3) Impact of training
   - % improvement in understanding of course rep role.
   - % improvement in understanding of engagement mechanisms.

4) Commentary on
   - Extent to which training supports students to identify student priorities, addresses key sector issues and prepares students for further dialogue on institutional and sector challenges
   - Extent to which training prepares students to identify and work on areas of development in partnership with SFC
   - Developments in staff training

Work Area 1 - Provide Training and Support for Students and Staff

We continued to provide our high quality established training programmes which have continued to receive excellent feedback. We provided flexible support to institutions offering a variety of delivery approaches, including online, face-to-face and hybrid or blended methods. We offered Course Rep Training (CRT) online through a self-study module and an online interactive 2-hour Zoom session and also prepared student trainers to deliver face-to-face, although this option was taken up mainly by the institutions delivering their own training. The training of our student training team continues to be a 3-day residential event followed by a 1-day online event focused on equipping trainers to deliver online.
sparqs Associate Trainers delivered training to 523 reps over 49 training sessions (last year we ran 71 sessions to 756 reps). We recognise this is a reduction in numbers trained and have been exploring the reason behind this. Some institutions had internal IT communications issues, leading to 40 sessions being cancelled due to low or no sign ups to training workshops. We have worked closely with institutions to identify issues and help resolve going forward. Whilst completing our institutional visits, institutions highlighted several reasons for rep training numbers being impacted, including challenges of communication with reps; keeping reps engaged throughout the year; and staff turnover. We are reviewing what support is provided to institutions over 2025-26, working closely to offering alternative ways that they can help to train reps. For those opting to deliver their own CRT, we have invited staff members to attend our residential training in August 2025, providing them with our training materials which they can use/adapt to suit needs.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

Our Institutional Associate Trainer scheme had less institutions participating in 24-25. Staff turnover is a factor, with key staff changes at crucial times affecting uptake. One college and university were unable to join the scheme due to lack of budget to pay student trainers. The decrease in uptake may well be a symptom of wider issues related to course rep system and wider reported issues with lower student engagement which we are monitoring and developing further support. It may also be that we are not capturing the whole range of provision with these measures and we will investigate this further. It is a matter of concern for us which we will continue to monitor closely.
We continued our approach to our major events for student officers, That's Quality!, offering an online self-study module, a half day interactive separate Zoom events for colleges and universities and a 2-day participative residential event bringing students from colleges and universities together and getting input from colleagues across the tertiary sector. Being able to move more informative elements of training into the self-study module and sector-specific online events allowed us to maintain our interactive approach to the residential element.

CRT focuses on the Student Learning Experience model, thus ensuring that these representatives are introduced early on to the key aspects which runs through institutional approaches to self-evaluation and enhancement planning and the delivery mechanisms of the TQEF. As the SLE is increasingly embedded into institutional approaches, equipping students in this way remains a focus of the training. The evaluation data confirms that students leave equipped with an understanding of the factors affecting the SLE and equipped to use their knowledge to do something differently.
A significant part of the training for students who deliver this training is around the SLE, giving them the skills to lead advanced conversations around the SLE supporting trainees to consider the range of student experiences. Student trainers receive detailed information about how the training they deliver forms part of the overall approach within the TQEF. We stress throughout the training that their job is to enable students to make change, which one student commented on when asked what the most important thing was they got from the training: 'The importance of the training we are going to deliver. The passion for improving the *tertiary* education system'.

Importantly, we equipped trainers to facilitate conversations with their student trainees around the important issues, including online and blended learning environments, mental health and wellbeing, education for sustainable development and issues related to equality diversity and Inclusion.

That's Quality, the event for elected student officers with an education remit, is designed each year to support student officers to think about what they want to change – their manifesto promises – how they should go about developing that change agenda to ensure it utilises data and evidence from the institution and from the diverse students they represent, and how they can use the mechanisms of the TQEF to support their change agenda. The achievement of the learning objectives detailed above demonstrates the effectiveness of this event in achieving this. The programme also includes key aspects of the policy landscape in which they will be operating including Widening access, National Equality Outcomes and artificial intelligence. Day 2 of the residential event involved a day-long simulation activity which allowed participants to work as student executive team to deal with a range of events, mirroring the sort of activity they might experience during their year in office, including preparing for a quality review visit, engaging with enhancement activity and responding to student and institutional priorities.
That's Quality is a tertiary event, with students from across colleges and universities working together in the simulated student executive teams. Colleagues from across the sector (e.g. QAA Scotland and Education Scotland) and universities and colleges contribute to the event, role-playing fictional senior leaders from tertiary organisations.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

Our National Education Officers' Network (NEON) and Student Engagement Staff Network (SESN) continued to be important for supporting the professional development of staff and student officers. Topics discussed at these networks included sessions on involvement in the first round of SEAPs, engagement with SFC around the outcomes framework and introduction to the STEP activity. Following successful introduction of the new Student Expert Group (SEG), in the 2023/24 session we reviewed the purpose of NEON. During 24/25 NEON has operated solely as an officer development network with content and timing of sessions being led by development needs. The shaping of national policy initiatives has been taken over by SEG see below for more information.

The extent to which training equips students to represent diverse student groups is a key learning objective of our programmes and is measured in the learning outcomes detailed above. A key section of the training covers the role of the trainer in hearing diverse student voices and encouraging them to be heard as well as the important of the trainer in establishing anti-discriminative approaches in their work and similarly, That's Quality introduces this topic during the first on-line sessions and re-enforces it consistently throughout the residential event. The evaluation data provides evidence of this learning outcome being met across our programmes.

For course rep training 62% of people who attended the part 2 workshop had completed the module. Their understanding of representing diverse students was 48% prior to completing the module. This rose to 88% after completing the module and 99% after completing the module and the workshop.
That's Quality consisted of an online self study module, an online event and a 2 day in person event. Understanding of representing diverse students was high for all delegates at the beginning of the event - 72% for universities and 90% for colleges. However, within this data those who **fully understood** diverse representation was 22% for universities and 27% for colleges. 100% of attendees all understood/fully understood after the events, of which 89% **fully understood** from universities and 60% from colleges.

The development of the SLE was carried out with diversity of student experience at the heart. The current SLE is designed to be used by all students including those in school college partnerships and apprentices to postgraduate taught students. We have been developing a separate PGR learning experience model which we hope to complete next academic year. Previously, we have also offered separate training materials for particular groups of students including students in supported education, ESOL, apprentices, PGT and Gaelic medium resources. Some of these resources involved an adapted SLE whilst others have adapted modes of delivery. These materials are all still available for use and the supported education resource has recently been redeveloped. We have begun an early exploration of how to approach materials for the other groups mentioned here. Our developing approach is to use the one standard SLE with all groups (except PGR) but develop advice and guidance on how to adapt training for the different audiences. We are beginning to work on an example for apprentices which we will complete next year.

A standard evaluation question across all our training around the extent to which people feel they have been able to participate. The results of this are reviewed after every event and regardless of percentages any individual comment is reviewed and investigated to see how it can be addressed. Following review of the previous year's training, changes to this year's summer training programme included providing clear information about the format of the event and materials being used, this is to aid delegates to let us know if they require any reasonable adjustments. We have provided BSL interpreters at events, met dietary requirements, used live captioning, greyscale for colour blindness and changed fonts and paper colours for individuals. Having prior information about medical conditions also helped us to assist a delegate who became unwell during an event.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

One of our approaches to ensuring diversity of student voice is to ensure that our student training team is diverse. We take active steps to recruit a diverse team and have successfully recruited a team with diverse background including those from college (often articulating to university), widening access background, a range of disabilities and learning needs and range of ethnicity, religion and nationality. Where we have recruited from these background we have also made adaptions to meet learning needs, buying equipment and making adjustments. Playing to the strengths of our team we look for ways we can harness the expertise they bring and for example we will be able to offer CRT session with BSL for the coming year.

Our training content and delivery methods are reviewed every year. As part of our annual review activity, we reviewed the course rep training programme in February at our SESN network and Joint advisory group. We also worked with our team of Associate Trainers drawing on their experience of developing materials in another role for DARE Academy @ Abertay ensuring the font was accessible and aesthetically pleasing, ensuring UI principles were used to make slides accessible for most people. These adjustments have been implemented in our 25-26 CRT. Improvements suggested were making the training slightly shorter in length as well as not repeating content in the workshop that was covered in the module. We held feedback sessions with our team of Associate Trainers about their views on how training could be improved and worked with them to shorten training and improve content for 25-26. Including accessibility.

This alongside our on-going internal evaluations meant that we continued with national training events, delivering 6 training session with an average turnout of 11 participants at each. The sessions have been well received by institutions and those attending them. This will be ongoing in 2025 – 26.
Additionally, review activity has highlighted continued issues with institution organising training and/ or institutional student training teams and getting expected numbers at their events. Throughout May and June 2024 we contacted all institutions to gain an understanding of their Course Rep plans for 2024-25. Eleven (5 universities, 5 colleges and 1 tertiary) institutions took part. We asked about what worked well and what challenges they faced in 23-24 in terms of rep recruitment, training, retention and engagement. What challenges they faced in 23-24, their plans for CRT in 24-25 and potential challenges that they could face as well as asking about any future changes that may impact their approach to CRT in the future. We asked what support sparqs could provide that it doesn't already. This work will continue in 24-25 and shape our CRT provision for 25-26.

Specific college events
NUS Scotland Charity delivered a Scotland specific College Lead and Change event. Students and staff from 10 colleges attended and 100% of attendees would recommend attendance at the event in the future. Officers reported increased confidence in their roles, a stronger understanding of equality, diversity and inclusion, and greater awareness of the purpose of students' associations. Networking opportunities and interactive group sessions were frequently highlighted as favourite aspects. Staff participants valued the chance to share strategies, take part in engaging simulations, and connect with peers. Average ratings were high across key measures. Suggestions for improvement included reducing repetition in some sessions and reviewing timing to better align with officer induction periods.
We collaborated with CDN and NUS Charity to deliver a joint on-line training event for College Student Board members. This training focused on empowering those in attendance to understand their role in Board meetings, and how to use building & fostering key relationships would support their work. The presentation was interactive and focused on getting the participants to consider how the advice applied to their institutions also.
Key aspects covered included:

- Initially: who else sits on the Board? Open discussion on how/when students would interact with them and the types of work to be expected.
- Discussion around board composition.
- A breakdown of key important stakeholders for students, such as college staff, the chair & the clerk. Exploration of the strengths they'd bring and some blind spots/biases to consider.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

Staff Development

We continue to issue a welcome pack all new staff working in a student engagement role within students associations and institutions, similar to one provided to all new sabbatical officers. This sits alongside an induction guide which was updated in May to 2024 to incorporate the new quality arrangements etc. We supported 5 pairs through our buddy scheme for student engagement staff and plan to continue to develop this scheme.

This year we began a project on supporting staff development for college and university staff. The overall aim of this project is to raise 'awareness of' and 'engagement with' student partnership across Scottish tertiary institutions, and to contribute to collective action towards achieving Scotland's Ambition for Student Partnership across the sector. The project aims to do this by supporting institutions to embed student partnership into existing staff development activities for all staff, but particularly academic, quality and professional services colleagues. It focuses on the use of the two sparqs reference points within the TQEF – the Student Learning Experience model and Scotland's Ambition of Student Partnership. The project began with a needs analysis exercise working with individual colleges in colleges and universities, existing networks e.g. Scottish Higher Education Developers Network (SHED) College Development Network (CDN) and the providers of the Teaching Qualification for Further Education (TQFE). This led to development of a set of resources that were piloted with providers between May-July 25. 6 colleges, 5 universities and 1 tertiary institution took part in the pilot alongside 1 TQFE provider and 1 Sector agency. The pilot was well received and provided valuable feedback for the continued development of the project. We continued effective working with Advance HE and CDN, contributing to their staff development activities. We also continued to explore our work with Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners (SCAPP).

Outcome 1 metrics	**22-23**	**23-24**	**24-25**
Number of students trained through CRT	575	756	523
Number of students trained through IAT scheme	1484	1479	1178
Total number of students trained via CRT/IAT	2059	2235	1701
Number of students who completed the CRT module	805	765	415
% of attendees finding Course Rep training useful or very useful	96%	95%	95%
% of attendees who would recommend the Course Rep training	97%	99%	98%
% who understood their course rep role after training	99%	99%	98%
% who understood methods of representing classmates, including methods of communication with classmates .	96%	98%	98%
% who understood the factors that affect the learning experience of students.	96%	96%	99%
Number of students trained through "That's Quality" colleges	31	38	38
Number of students trained through "That's Quality" university	30	42	26
% of those who understood/fully understood key learning objectives after TQC	95%	87%	93%
% of those who understood/fully understood key learning objectives after TQU	88%	97%	93%

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

Work Area 2 – Supports institutions and their students' associations to identify priorities for student engagement and develop appropriate action plans

Indicators of success

1) Reach of support
    - Number of colleges and universities receiving at least one developmental interaction.

2) Commentary on
    - Support provided to institutions and how this has influenced projects related to the development of the quality arrangements as well as support for institutions and their students' associations to address challenges within the student experience.

Our Development Consultants increased contact with their institutions and were able to provide support, guidance and advice to 83% (27% 22-23) of colleges and 100% (59% 22-23) of universities. Institutions received support with a number of issues, including the development of new roles, recruitment and induction of new staff, development of rep structures, using the new SLE and Partnership Ambition, and student engagement and partnership in SEAP and TQER.

We provided extensive support for student engagement with the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF). In addition to the support provided during summer training at That's Quality!, we produced written guides to SEAP and TQER. Our SEAP Practical Guide was published in October 2024 and includes an overview of the SEAP process; some suggestions of how students can be involved in the development of the SEAP; and suggested actions for students' associations. Further learning from institutional practice, as well as working with SFC on learning from the first round of SEAP submissions has allowed us to update this guide due to be published in Sept 25.
sparqs worked closely with the two institutions undergoing the first Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review (TQER) visits, with the aim of not only supporting student engagement in the processes but also of learning from this involvement to help develop further resources to support student partnership in future reviews. During the 2024-25 academic year, our staff met with the institutional staff contacts, as well as the Lead Student Representative (LSR) to provide advice and support around engaging students in the TQER. After meeting with the college due to undergo review and receiving a request for additional support, we produced bespoke materials to support the LSR, including providing overall guidance on their role and responsibilities in the review, familiarising them with the kinds of questions that could be asked at review visits, and reviewing possible evidence sources available to the students' association. These resources helped the LSR to understand students' roles in the process, identify next steps, and provided strategies for engaging and involving other students in the review process. We understand that the college achieved substantial student engagement at their review visits, supported by the advice offered. Following the complete review processes for these first two institutions, sparqs asked for feedback from both students' associations about student engagement and partnership and utilised this feedback to liaise with QAA around emerging issues and further suggestions. sparqs has continued to develop additional training and resources for student officers and students' associations involved in a TQER, aided by supporting and learning from the two initial institutions who went through the new review method.

Building on learning from these reviews and following significant liaison with QAA, sparqs developed a TQER guide. The purpose of the guide is to provide information about TQER, and to support meaningful student engagement and partnership throughout the process. It includes an overview of the TQER process and how to engage students at each stage. The TQER guide will be published in September 2025.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

Both guides are particularly relevant to students' association representatives and staff but are also useful resources for all institutional staff involved in the SEAP and TQER processes in order to consider how best to effectively work in partnership with students. Feedback on both guides has been positive, and institutions have reported that they have been using them alongside the guidance from SFC and QAA in order to successfully engage students in quality processes.
We continued contact with each students' association in the next round of TQER in advance of them beginning their TQER process to provide initial support and describe our ongoing package of guidance and training throughout the process whilst designing our training series for TQER Lead Student Reps, which will begin in October 2025. Each event is made up of two sessions. Both (A) and (B) sessions will run concurrently at each event.

- **Session A** will focus on the aspects of the TQER before the review visits, including the Scoping Meeting, the Strategic Impact Analysis (SIA) and the Advance Information Set (AIS).
- **Session B** will focus on the Initial Review Visit (IRV) and Main Review Visit (MRV), including how the meetings will typically run, who should be involved, how to prepare in order to contribute effectively, and the role of students' associations in the review visits.

This training will offer a valuable opportunity to strengthen student representation and ensure meaningful engagement in the TQER process. sparqs looks forward to strong participation from institutions, helping both staff and student officers feel confident and well-prepared to contribute effectively.

sparqs conducted a series of institutional visits with 36 colleges and universities between October 2024 and February 2025. The purpose of these visits was to discuss and provide support on sparqs' two key sector resources, the Student Learning Experience model and Scotland's Ambition for Student Partnership, and to capture the ways in which these resources are being used in the sector; to gather information on the key topics institutions and students' associations are currently working on; and to shape sparqs' ongoing support for institutions and students' associations. Following the visits, sparqs identified key themes related to learning and teaching; the students' association; and uses of the models. An initial draft of the reports related to uses of the models and key learning and teaching themes were brought to two sparqs groups, JAG and SEG. The report was then shared with the wider sector to support institutions and students' associations to identify their own priorities. In addition, sparqs has identified a set of new project areas, which we plan to work with the sector to design and deliver over 2025 and 2026 these included Reward and Recognition for Student Reps, Using Data and Evidence Effectively, Supporting conversations around Student Behaviour, Supporting Conversations around use of AI. We also identified a wider theme of supporting the development of course rep systems. Cost of Living crisis and the increasing effects on the study body was also a key theme and this fed into our contributions to shaping the STEP projects.

Sessions at sparqs' networks and the Advisory Group had a mixture of activities designed to support institutional engagement with key sector topics, including latest developments with the TQEF; staff development; the diversity of course reps; using data and evidence effectively; course rep training logistics; reward and recognition for student reps; assessment and feedback; and SFC's Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model.

In 24/25, sparqs' Joint Advisory Group had 3 meetings, two in person and one online. The in-person meeting was jointly run as a planning day alongside the staff network (SESN) and student officer network (NEON). This meeting focused in the morning on reviewing institutional experience of student engagement in all the key delivery mechanisms of TQER to date providing a wealth of information to inform not only our own developing support package but also our input into support and delivery from other delivery partners. The afternoon focused on getting institutional input into our developing projects resulting from institutional visits.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

In May 2025, we delivered two sessions at the TQER Reviewer Training. One was a session for all reviewers on the SLE model and the Partnership Ambition. The second was a session co-created with QAA Scotland and aimed specifically at student reviewers. This included a set of scenarios designed to support the students to be effective reviewers and increase their confidence in the role.

We have delivered range of support to individual institutions, including supporting recruitment activities; advice on training approaches; support for student officers; discussions around approaches to SEAP and other self-evaluative activity; and designing and running workshops. For example, we designed and delivered a half day workshop for Glasgow School of Art to support them to review and develop their Student Partnership Strategy using the new Student Partnership Ambition and we delivered a series of staff development workshops at New College Lanarkshire on the SLE and Partnership. We went to Newbattle Abbey College to deliver a session to their Student Representative Council (SRC) on using the SLE model, recognising that their elected officer is not elected by the time of That's Quality and ensuring that their student body does not miss out on key content.

NUS worked with 15 colleges to provide development support. This covered a wide range of topics including support with constitutions, helping write business cases for funding and development of staff structures, officer skills development, support around payments for part time officers and impacts of the Education Act 1994, facilitation of events including strategic planning and organisational development, facilitation of networking and sharing of practice between associations and advice and guidance on technical matters such as PVGs, finance HR.
Support during election period is a vital piece of support offered by NUS Charity. 4 colleges were given specific advice ranging from detailed information around processes for nominating/selecting candidates and interaction with HR policies to wider support around planning elections and developing effective election communication strategies. Scottish college SA staff were also able to access support from a series of UK wide webinars aimed at supporting SAs through the election period with staff attending sessions aimed at new deputy returning officers, running elections in small and specialised institutions, advanced triaging for experienced returning officers and rights and eligibility of internal student candidates.

A staff network that looks solely at organisational development has not existed for some years – but based on feedback and wanting to share practice outside of academic quality, a Teams channel and online meetings were set up and this commenced in early 2025. The College SA staff community of practice has met 5 times in this reporting period with an average attendance of 8.4. Staff from 13 colleges attended at least one of the meetings. At all events, NUS Charity and NUS Scotland give an update with new resources, support or campaigns college SA staff and officers can utilise or get involved in. Some of the topics for discussion across the meetings were:

- Different ways to split activity or responsibilities across officer roles
- How different SAs support and engage their volunteer Officers – retention challenges
- Different models for Student Officers/Student Committees
- Elections
- Campaigning around college counsellors/mental health issues
- Building a stronger staff network
- General information sharing
- Officer training: what worked well and successful sessions
- Sharing activities planned for welcome week

The NUS Development Consultant was off sick for an extended period during this reporting period. NUS was able to meet the outcomes we had agreed through drawing on other members of their team. We have been pleased with the continuity of support provided and the range of issues NUS have been able to cover.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

Outcome 2 Metrics	22-23	23-24	24-25
Number of colleges receiving at least one developmental visit	27%	89%	83%
Number of universities receiving at least one developmental visit	59%	95%	100%

Work Area 3 - Provides a range of projects, resources and events to support and facilitate discussion around key student engagement priorities

We will continue to provide events and networks, including a biennial conference, to support the sharing of practice, facilitate discussion and address key challenges.

We will run national project groups to bring together students and staff sharing key developmental areas and produce national resources and guidance.

Indicators of success

1) Reach of support
   - Number of colleges and universities attending at least one developmental event.
   - Number of individuals attending sparqs' developmental events.

2) Satisfaction with support
   - % attendees finding event useful or very useful.
   - % attendees who would recommend training or event.

3) Reported impact of support
   - % improvement in understanding of attendees following an event.
   - % attendees reporting able to apply learning in a work context.

4) Commentary on
   - Range of projects, events and networks, including number of people and institutions engaging.
   - Topics covered in this work area and how these have helped achieve sparqs' strategic priorities and institutional and national challenges.
   - How sparqs has provided advice, resources or support to help institutions to practically address an area of development or enhance work.

91% of institutions participated in at least one of our networks or events and there were 463 participations overall. 96% of attendees when asked would recommend these activities to others, the highest recorded figure over the past 5 years.

Across That's Quality, CRT, AT Residential, NEON and SESN 93% of attendees combines said that they would recommend sparqs training & events to others. 92% of attendees also said that they felt included and able to take part in our training/events, reasons for those not able to participate were mainly due to technical difficulties in online events. There was really positive feedback about the way the training was delivered and the knowledge and approachability of facilitators. In addition 76% of attendees said they would take positive action and change the way that they work as a result, making a positive impact in the sector. Topics covered in SESN and NEON often won't impact on the different ways in which people work as it can often be about the work/direction of sparqs or communicating changes in the sector.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

Below are some positive evaluation comments from our training and events.

AT Residential
"I've done so many training sessions as an attendee and a trainer and this is the best I've been to by far + It is very hard to have an event like this which doesn't feel overly exhausting and repetitive, where people aren't counting down until the sessions end, particularly when there is so much information being passed on. But I never felt like that and honestly I was incredibly impressed about the way it was run and definitely the best training course I have ever been part of."
"The EDI bit was helpful and I come across it every day and it's good to get more training on that."

"All questions that people asked were listened to - there were no stupid questions and I felt really comfortable making mistakes - I felt really supported by the staff It was great that at every step, we were told why that step was important or relevant - helped me digest the info better and wasn't just rote learning."

That's Quality!
"I will deal with issues before they become a bigger problem."
"Communicate with different members of my team with different experiences."
"Great trainers motivated and enthusiasm."
"I will implement the SLE model into Rep meetings and other Academic meetings"
"Push for proper SU involvement in SEAP."
"Look more into where data comes from, asking more questions about who has fed into it."

Course Rep Training
"The training was well-structured and covered key topics clearly. The facilitators were engaging and provided practical examples."
"I really liked getting to talk with other student reps using the chat feature, and completing the online activities has helped refresh my memory on the online modules."
"I liked how clearly it was explained - especially with the acronyms and how to better develop those skills. Another great aspect was showing all the resources and making them available for continued use."
"Was very informative and was now have more information regarding my role as class rep."
"Before the training event I wasn't very sure of my role as class rep. Now I feel more well informed about my responsibilities."

sparqs' Tertiary Quality Student Expert Group (TQSEG) was established in September 2023, while the sector worked towards developing a single tertiary approach to quality for colleges and universities. The rationale was to provide a joined-up approach to the student voice within the move to Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF), enabling students to discuss and influence the approach as it was developed. Bringing together a group of students interested in the tertiary quality developments, the group met monthly throughout 2024/25 to discuss key topics related to quality and the TQEF. In addition, volunteers from TQEG were then matched to the various sector committees requiring student representation. Key discussion topics throughout 24/25 included the Outcomes Framework and Assurance model; Scotland's Ambition for Student Partnership; Artificial Intelligence (AI) in tertiary education; students' association handover processes, and shaping the information gathered from sparqs' series of institutional visits.

Our established sector networks, SESN for students' association and institution staff with a remit in student engagement, and NEON for education officers, met regularly throughout 2024-25, with 4 online meetings of. SESN and 3 online meetings of NEON during the year. In addition, we ran a joint in-person event in May 2024 for NEON, SESN and JAG, focused on planning for the year ahead. The sessions delivered at SESN and NEON included the Tertiary Enhancement Topic; employability and careers; and support for SEAP. updates. At several of the meetings, we facilitated discussions with guests speakers including Universities Scotland, Colleges Scotland and SFC, as well as opportunities for SESN members from institutions and students' associations to share practice from their own organisations.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

At our largest training offer for student offers, That's Quality, 100% of attendees reported that, following attendance of the event, they understood quality assurance and enhancement in Scotland, and had an understanding of the role of student engagement and partnership in quality. This has built a significant foundation of knowledge across student leaders in Scotland's colleges and universities and allows them to more confidently and successfully fulfil their roles as partners in TQEF.
We will gain further evidence of how sparqs' support has had an impact on student officers and staff through analysis of data in future reporting, including data included within the SEAPs.

The range of resources and support provided this year and commented on throughout the report have been led by ongoing evaluation of institutional need. Currently, much of this focus has been on implementing the TQEF. There has been a significant set of developments across our work to enable stakeholders to use the tools we have develop, as well as several new developments as STEP, TQER and SEAP continue to develop. For example, we provided immediate support to the institutions undergoing the first TQER whilst learning from that to develop the TQER guide and the LSR training programme. Similarly, the initial SEAP guide has been updated following reflection with sector partners and institutions on how the first submissions went. Learning from this also fed into the content of That's Quality programme, our induction guides and development of sessions for institutional request for workshops to be delivered next year.

Through our advisory groups and input into sector meetings and forums we receive regular feedback that these resources are used and valued.

The sector has adopted use of the SLE and Partnership Ambition with an enthusiasm of which we are proud. While sparqs published the SLE in Oct 2023 its place in the new TQEF arrangements was first referenced in the SFC guidance published in July 2024. The SFCs thematic review of SEAPs (which had been submitted just 5 months later in December 2024) found:
"Approximately half of the institutions made specific reference to the SLE model, either describing work already undertaken or referring to planned actions for the future. Examples of how the SLE model has been implemented included using the questions in new surveys, strengthening student feedback systems by embedding the SLE model into student representative systems, including training and meetings, and using the model to update student resources for institution-led quality review processes."

The speed with which it has been adopted across the sector is testament to the collaborative approach to its development, its strong evidence base and the usefulness of the tool. In sparqs' institutional visits between Oct 2024 and Feb 2025, we also gathered evidence of the SLE being widely used. Ways in which institutions reported using the SLE Model included in:

- Course Rep Training, or equivalent.
- Rep meetings, in particular within Student-Staff Liaison Committees (SSLCs), or equivalent.
- Staff training and development activities.
- Several parts of the quality arrangements, including Institution-Led Reviews; within development of the SEAP; and in Programme Reviews.
- Creating surveys and using the model to categorise and organise comments received through feedback surveys.

Forth Valley College have used the SLE model to form the basis of its institution wide Student Learning Experience Strategy.
Whilst the Student Partnership Ambition was not published until October 2024 and so was not as widely referenced in the first SEAP analysis over 2024/25, we have begun to see institutions and students' associations use it in their practice. For example, Edinburgh Napier University has reported using the Partnership Ambition to map to their institutional practice in order to evaluate their current approaches, and Glasgow School of Art asked sparqs to develop and run a workshop to use the Ambition and its features to review and develop its Student Partnership Strategy.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

Both models are fully embedded in sparqs training and development activities, including course rep training, That's Quality and our staff development project aimed at embedding the models into professional development activities such as TQFE and PGCerts. The Models will form the basis of our website redevelopment and help identify sparqs priorities for new support resources.
sparqs has worked with the other TQEF delivery partners to embed the SLE model and the Partnership Ambition in SEAP, TQER and STEP. Both models are included as sector benchmarks in SFC's SEAP Guidance and QAA's TQER Guidance. We ran a session with the STEP Network to support them to develop student engagement and partnership strategies as part of their STEP project proposals and provided training to new review team members on the models and there use in TQER.

Work on the SLE model's 3 lenses, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; Mental Health and Wellbeing; and Sustainable Development has continued. The Sustainable Development lens, in particular, is in the later stages of development. We have worked closely with Students Organising for Sustainability (SoS), Learning for Sustainability Scotland and Environmental Association of Colleges and Universities (EAUC) who ran sessions with students to shape Sustainable Development descriptions of the SLE blocks and reflective questions, mirroring the way the model was developed. These will serve as a template approach to help develop the other lenses. We aim to launch the sustainability materials in the new year (2026).

22 institutions participated in collecting rep diversity data, made up of 10 colleges and 11 universities. 2233 students completed the survey which is a significant drop from previous years. Many institutions have streamlined their course rep structures, reducing the amount of reps that they have and this is the likely cause for the reduction. We now have 4 years of data from 2020-21 to 2024-25 and plan to interrogate this data during 2025-26 and produce a report of our findings.
As mentioned in previous metrics, we also provide diverse methods of delivery for course rep training. This includes specific CRT for supported education, PGT, ESOL and Gaelic students. This training is created by sparqs and delivered in house by institutions. sparqs Associate Trainers have been trained to deliver supported Ed CRT in the event that institutions would like sparqs to deliver the training. One institution requested this training to be delivered by sparqs in 2024-25, which 8 students attended.

Outcome 3 Metrics	**22-23**	**23-24**	**24-25**
Number of colleges and universities attending at least one development event	91%	91%	91%
Number of people attending developmental events	400	451	463
% attendees who would recommend training or event*	97%	92%	99%
Change in understanding of attendees following an event (% increase)	33%	75%	43%
% attendees reporting able to apply learning in a work context	70%	77%	70%

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

Work Area 4 - Engages with a wide range of sector meetings and policy discussion forums

We will continue to work closely with our partners and contribute to appropriate decision-making forums around student engagement issues.

We will maintain an overview of quality developments across the UK and internationally, contributing to discussions to help strengthen the role of students, especially where developments could affect practice in Scotland.

We will work closely with National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland to monitor policy developments and provide support for students to influence these.

Indicators of success

1) Reach of support
    a) Number of sector committees sparqs has contributed to.
    b) Number of sector meetings where students or staff have been supported to attend by sparqs.

2) Impact of support
    c) % agreeing that sparqs has

3) Commentary on
    d) Impact of support – how sparqs has supported students/student officers to contribute to national discussions around key policy developments.
    e) Consultations/reviews that sparqs has contributed to and/or supported students to contribute to.
    f) The extent to which sparqs has supported student engagement issues and student views on learning and teaching to be considered and implemented in decision-making forums.
    g) Extent to which this work has had an impact on sparqs' strategic priorities.

sparqs attended 75 sector level meetings (down from 112 in 22/23) across 31 different committees during this period and supported students and staff to attend a further 48 meetings across 17 committees. The reduction in meetings is due in part to an intentional and continued streamlining of our committee attendance following a suggested action from our sparqs strategic review report by SFC. In addition, there has been a reduction in the number of committee meetings in existence across the sector over the past year, including SHEEC, the Tertiary Enhancement Steering Group, the Tertiary Activity Advisory Group, and the Scottish Government's Fair Work in Scotland Hospitality Industry Inquiry.

sparqs' attendance at sector committees across 24/25 has had particular benefit in supporting the sector to engage with the SLE Model and the Partnership Ambition. After publication of the Partnership Ambition in October 2024, we attended several sector level committees to disseminate information about the model and how institutions and sector agencies could use it in their organisations. This received positive reactions from the sector and led to an increased familiarity with the Partnership Ambition from the start.

sparqs' attendance at all 3 levels of STEP Governance, as well as in weekly operations meetings with CDN and QAA, has meant that we have been a key partner in shaping STEP as it has been in its Discovery Phase. As a result, sparqs was able to identify early challenges with student engagement in STEP and, in collaboration with the other Delivery Partners, to lead on the development of further mid-year guidance for institutions in selecting STEP student leads and supporting them to take part. Our attendance at all parts of STEP allowed us to respond to any challenges and opportunities related to student engagement and partnership in an agile manner, without having to wait until the next year to make changes.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

sparqs is a key member of the TQEF coordination and alignment group which bring together SFC delivery partners and this has been an invaluable addition helping clarify and coordinate the contribution of different partners.
sparqs inputted into the discussion around rationalising committees involved in quality discussions for universities (i.e. SHEEC/QASHE), ensuring new structures continued to enable effective student partnership.

sparqs identified students and staff from across the sector to take part in 43 meetings across 17 committees. Students who attended external committees were selected from sparqs' Student Expert Group (or in some cases identified outwith SEG and added to this group after gaining their external committee position). The result of this was that sparqs was able to gain a fuller picture of sector activity, including on committees we ourselves do not sit on, as well as to give students on external committees a ready-made cohort with which to engage. This has had a subsequent positive impact on sparqs' performance in terms of our ability to successfully support students on committees and provide a joined up approach to the student voice across Scotland.

A significant amount of policy and influencing work in this reporting period has been related to the work on the tertiary quality arrangements. Discussion of the arrangements formed a significant part of our network and advisory group meetings and sparqs contributed extensively to formal and informal discussion around their development. This has included cross-agency meetings with SFC, contributions to the Tertiary Quality Steering Group, and the final meeting of QAA's Review Method Advisory Group. Additionally, we continued to meet regularly with SFC colleagues regarding the overall development of the TQEF and sparqs' specific contribution to the developments, as well as regular meetings with senior colleagues from QAA Scotland.

In 2024-25, we have contributed to all 3 levels of STEP governance - the Steering Group, the Topic Leadership Group (TLG) and the Network. Within the Steering Group and TLG, we have supported the ongoing development of student engagement within STEP and also supported student members of these groups. Through the Network, we have provided support and guidance to institutions as they begin to develop their projects, including presenting at a STEP Navigation Session on how to effectively include student engagement and partnership in project proposals with the use of the Partnership Ambition. We also lead one of the STEP projects – "Strategies to support student engagement and partnership within an increasingly time-poor and cash-poor student population".
We have also continued to work closely with CDN supporting their events, including co-facilitating annual College Student Board Member training. Once again, we sat on a judging panel for the annual CDN College Awards and attended the event to present an Award. In 2022/23, we presented at 7 Board Member Induction sessions across the academic year alongside NUS Scotland. This has now moved to an online self-study format and so we no longer deliver these sessions.
Sparqs was a member of the UK Quality Code Advice and Guidance writing group for the Principle 2: Engaging Students as Partners. We attended meetings throughout 2024/25, with a particular focus on embedding partnership at the strategic level. The development of the advice and guidance took place from September 2024 to May 2025 and the resource has now been published on QAA UK's website.
We continue to support the learner engagement team at SQA in engaging with the views of college students. We appointed and prepared student members to contribute to the National Qualifications (NQs) Strategic Group.

We continue to work with the Joint Articulation Group, continued our links with SCAPP, Education Scotland's (EdS) Schools Team Rights and Participation Network, and participated in the SCQF Forum. These groups have streams of work that we could support further student engagement with in the future.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

We continue to develop our partnership and mutual support with Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) organisations, including EAUC (Alliance for sustainability leadership in education), SOS-UK (Students Organising for Sustainability), and Learning for Sustainability Scotland (LfSS).
Colleges Scotland and SDS attended a meeting of NEON in March 2024 in order to give student officers the opportunity to influence some of the future elements and features of the Careers Information, Advice and Guidance offer across the sector, following publication of the Career Review Final Report by SDS.
Universities and Colleges Scotland attended SEG in May 2025 to discuss a revised definition of Articulation with students. From this meeting, we have identified the need for further student engagement work required in this area, in order to shape student-facing resources related to articulation.

Outcome 4 Metrics	**22-23**	**23-24**	**24-25**
Number of sector meetings sparqs has contributed to	112	80	75
Number of sector meetings where students or staff have been supported to attend by sparqs.	85	73	48

Work Area 5 – Fosters effective links and communication channels with our members, practitioners and stakeholders

We will establish annual engagements with each of our members to agree work plans supporting their key activities, where appropriate.

We will continue to develop our governance structures to ensure our members, practitioners and stakeholders are able to inform and influence our work.

We will continue to utilise a wide range of communication methods, including news articles, website and social media.

Indicators of Success

1) Reach of support
   a) Number of sector partners receiving at least one developmental visit.
   b) Number of people engaging with sparqs' advisory groups, working groups and consultative events.

2) Commentary on
   a) Impact of support - advice, resources or support to sector partners to help them to practically address an area of development or enhance work within their organisation.
   b) Programmes of work with partners and how they have impacted on sparqs' strategic priorities and national development areas.
   c) Topics discussed with and shaped by stakeholders, etc.
   d) Use of sparqs' website.
   e) Circulation and impact of sparqs' news articles.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

Throughout 2024-25 we continued to collaborate closely with sector partners to deliver co-ordinated support to the sector across many of our strategic priority areas. We work closely with NUS Scotland in many work areas, but a key collaborative programme of joint work is our work supporting the college sector, which we fund via SFC.
Sector partners are also represented appropriately on our advisory groups and Members' Steering Committee and, likewise, we sit on many of their sector committees and working groups, also outlined elsewhere in this report. 180 people engaged in sparqs advisory groups, working groups and consultative events.

The sparqs Director meets regularly with leaders in QAA, CDN and SFC and other colleagues work closely on the delivery of joint pieces of work. For example we worked closely with QAA developing the support for the role of Lead Student Rep in TQER and worked together to continue to support and agree adaptations to STEP support to ensure the role of students is effective. We collaborated with CDN on the development of the self-evaluation toolkit and used our professional working relationships with US and CS to respond to emerging issues. There is evidence throughout this report of our work responding to and influencing national priorities.

We have continued to ensure our website maintains its usage and our communications strategies reach a wide audience. Our news articles were published regularly throughout the year, highlighting key issues in the sector.

Due to recent updates in Google analytics we have been unable to retrieve website traffic/download data as our website is not compatible with Google analytics anymore. We continue to maintain the website with current information and have received positive feedback about the resources within from members of our advisory groups. We have started the process of mapping our current website and collating development ideas for a new website. We will consult with sparqs staff, members and advisory groups as part of the development process.

We published 52 news articles in 2024-25, which had a read rate of 39% and distributed to approximately 1800 people (includes 750 course reps). News articles were presented at each Joint Advisory Group where we received positive feedback. We also took a new approach to our "Talking Student Engagement" series which was a regular feature in our news articles. These have been renamed as 'Talking Student Partnership' and is a series of occasional video interviews featuring students, institutional staff, students' association staff, and other student partnership experts from Scotland's tertiary education sector and beyond. The interviews aim to capture perspectives on student partnership and reflections on good practice on key topics within learning, teaching, and the student experience. These are highlighted on our website, in news articles and on social media.

Outcome 5 Metrics	**22-23**	**23-24**	**24-25**
Number of people engaging with sparqs' advisory groups, working groups and consultative events.	101	153	180

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

Work Area 6 - Contributes to student engagement developments across the UK and internationally

We will attend and contribute to events and activities across the UK and internationally.

We will seek opportunities to work with international partners on funded projects and investigate ways of offering our activities to an international audience, where appropriate.

Indicators of success

1) Reach
   a) No of conferences/events attended/contributed to.

2) Commentary on
   a) International activity and how it is contributing to sparqs' strategic priorities and reputation of sparqs and Scotland.
   b) External sources of income.

sparqs continues to be recognised as a world-leading organisation, as demonstrated by our work both nationally and internationally and the feedback and data outlined below. We continue to be invited to contribute to a range of conferences across Scotland, the rest of the UK and internationally and are regularly invited to contribute to projects as experts in student engagement. In addition, we endeavour to keep informed about relevant events, and regularly make submissions to calls for proposals for contributions to external events and conferences, often inviting institutions to collaborate with us.

In June 2025, we submitted a paper proposal and a workshop proposal for the European Quality Assurance Conference (EQAF) 2025. The theme of the conference is 'QA in times of crises – Ensuring stability, autonomy and international cooperation in higher education'. We were thrilled to hear that both of our proposals were accepted. We will present our paper on student engagement and partnership in TQEF alongside QAA Scotland, the University of St Andrews, Forth Valley College and the STEP University Student Lead in November 2025. sparqs will also deliver a workshop on the Partnership Ambition at the same event.

We participated in 26 events and conferences during 2024-25, including presenting at QAA UK's Student Engagement Festival, Advance HE's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Conference; SCAPP Conference 2025, and EUAC, SOS-UK & sparqs' joint event on Embedding Sustainability in the SLE model. In 2024-25, we were also a regular contributor to institution's conferences and events, including Learning and Teaching Conferences at City of Glasgow College and The University of Edinburgh; UWS's Partnership Conference and Stirling Student Union's Academic Rep Symposium.

Our international work continues to be important in strengthening Scotland's reputation as a centre of excellence for student engagement, as well as potentially providing valuable income. We are currently in ongoing conversations with institutions in the Netherlands and Oman about the possibility of working with them on future projects.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

We will continue to explore new relationships with a view to learning from others, promoting Scotland's approaches and generating income. Whilst we have had no significant sources of non-SFC funding this year, we are in discussion with Robertson Trust about a piece of work that would come to fruition in 2025-26, which will give us capacity and flexibility in our work plans.

Outcome 6 Metrics	**22-23**	**23-24**	**24-25**
Number of conferences/events attended/contributed to	45	44	26

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

Acronyms List

ARC	Academic Representation Co-ordinators
ASV	Annual Support Visit
AT	Associate Trainer
CAG	College Advisory Group
CDN	College Development Network
CRT	Course Rep Training
EdS	Education Scotland
EQAF	European Quality Assurance Forum
EREP	Evaluative Report and Enhancement Plan
ESOL	English as a Second or Other Language
ESU	European Students' Union
EUA	European University Association
GAP	Gender Action Plan
HGIOC	How good is our college?
HISA	Highlands and Islands Students' Association
IAT	Institutional Associate Trainer
iGAP	Institutional Gender Action Plan
ILR	Institutional-led Review
JAG	Joint Advisory Group
NEON	National Education Officers' Network
NSS	National Student Survey
NStEP	National Student Engagement Programme (Ireland)
NUS	National Union of Students
ODL	Online Distance Learning
PSFSE	Professional Standards Framework for Student Engagement
PGR	Postgraduate Research
PGT	Postgraduate Taught
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
QASHE	Quality Arrangements for Scottish Higher Education
QEF	Quality Enhancement Framework
QMU	Queen Margaret University
SEAP	Self Evaluation and Action Plan
SESN	Student Engagement Staff Network
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
SHEEC	Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee
SLP	Student-led Project
SPA	Student Partnership Agreement
SSES	Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey
TNE	Transnational Education
TQEF	Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework
UAG	University Advisory Group
UHI	University of the Highlands and Islands

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Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

Financial review

Review of Financial Position

During the year, the charity received income of £495,274 (2024: £480,920). SFC funding is made up of 12 months funding at £468,880 (2024: £465,939).

Expenditure during the year amounted to £476,072 (2024: £435,583) of which the major component is salaries amounting to £339,807 (2024: £329,504).

Reserves

Reserves held at 31 July 2025 amounted to £163,146 (2024: £143,944), all of which relate to unrestricted funding. Reserves of £40,000 should be maintained as the board agreed this level would cover one month's operating costs.

Plans for Future Periods

Income from SFC will increase to £566,720 for 2025-26. No additional project income is anticipated for the year. Spending has been budgeted at £566,882, maintaining our reserves.

Structure, Governance and Management

Constitution

The charity is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO). It was registered in its current legal form on 3 December 2015 and officially commenced activities on 4 June 2016. It has a two-tier structure consisting of Members and The Board of Trustees.

Appointment of Trustees

Trustees are appointed in accordance with the constitution.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

Risk Management

The Board has assessed the major risks to which the charity is exposed, in particular those related to the operations and finances of the charity and are satisfied that systems are in place to mitigate our exposure to the major risks.

Key risks identified by the Board, and steps being taken to mitigate them are set out below:

Key risk	Mitigation action
Reliance on SFC funding	Scoping review has been completed and positive talks with SFC around future of sparqs. Funding bid for 2025-26 was submitted in January 2025 and positive talks with SFC indicate funding will remain at same level.
Cessation of SFC Funding	Following review and positive discussions with SFC, it is understood that sparqs is a valued independent agency. There is more likelihood that funding would be reduced rather than stopped completely. sparqs would need to evaluate the level of funding and staffing compliment, organisational structure as a whole.
Long-term illness	Promote a healthy work life balance. Flexible workloads allow people to pick up work if a member of staff is absent. Progress on areas of work is shared at 121's, planning days and team meetings ensuring everyone is aware of current priorities. A re-focus of these priorities would take place should there be any long-term absence.
Fall in demand for services	Ensure sparqs adapt to sector needs and respond effectively. Stay informed of new priorities through sector meetings, members, Annual Support Visits, College and University Advisory Groups
Building closure	IT is set up to allow staff to work from home. Staff take kit home at the end of each day now that we have moved into new premises. Moving to SharePoint and with Office 365 staff can securely access all files and accounts on any device.
Significant policy change	Ensure that sparqs are on top of changes and are part of key sector discussions.
Change in direction or type of service we offer, or major incident in terms of customer care which impacts on the way the sector views sparqs and engages with our work.	Monitor interactions through client management systems, dealing with any issues as soon as they arise. Pay due attention to complaints. Safeguarding, financial controls and other issues which could affect reputation. Work with our advisory board to monitor any changes.
Loss of data	Access to personal data is restricted and only allowed as required for a role. Documents are also password protected. Secure file sharing with externals is now in place. All accounts and devices have passwords to access and authenticators in place.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

Key risk	Mitigation action
Nonpayment of invoices	Maintain tight financial controls and procedures. Plan to operate within guaranteed income streams wherever possible. Finance software has inbuilt invoice reminders to chase payment. Also flags long outstanding invoices which are followed up with a phone call.
Inability to respond to new challenges/innovate	Use of additional funding to explore new work areas through pilot projects with minimal risk. Seek out new funding streams available which support this work. Reassurance from SFC that funding will remain at same level.
Cyber attack	When accessing accounts from a different device, verification is required through an authenticator app - only the account holder has access to this. Other online accounts such as Zoom, PayPal, Xero also have 2 factor authentication in place. As part of our IT support package with Focus IT Services, they include a tool that runs continuously on all machines which is a cyber assessment and vulnerability tool. Keeping our work safe. This is being provided free of charge. We have added cyber security training to our IT support package. Each member of the team took an analysis questionnaire and is sent targeted training based on their areas of weakness. It also monitors if when access a site your login credentials have been compromised. It simulates phishing scams and sends by email to the team, ensuring people are constantly alert. Staff will receive monthly cyber security training modules on different topics. Our SharePoint files/folders are also backed up hourly (part of our IT support package).

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Statement of Trustees' Responsibilities

The Trustees are responsible for preparing the Trustees' Report and the financial statements in accordance with applicable law and United Kingdom Accounting Standards (United Kingdom Generally Accepted Accounting Practice).

Company law requires the Trustees to prepare financial statements for each financial year which give a true and fair view of the state of affairs of the charitable company and the incoming resources and application of resources, including the income and expenditure, of the charitable company for the year. In preparing the financial statements the Trustees are required to:

- Select suitable accounting policies and apply them consistently.
- Observe the methods and principles in the Charities SORP (FRS 102).
- Make judgements and estimates that are reasonable and prudent.
- State whether applicable UK accounting standards have been followed, subject to any material departures disclosed and explained in the financial statements.
- Prepare the financial statements on the going concern basis unless it is inappropriate to presume that the charitable company will continue in operation.

The Trustees are responsible for keeping adequate accounting records that disclose with reasonable accuracy at any time the financial position of the charitable company and enable them to ensure that the financial statements comply with the Companies Act 2006, the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005 and the Charities Accounts (Scotland) Regulations 2006 (as amended). They are also responsible for safeguarding the assets of the charitable company and hence for taking reasonable steps for the prevention and detection of fraud and other irregularities.

Approved by the Board of Trustees and signed on its behalf by:

Andrew Cubie

Sir Andrew Cubie
Trustee

Date: 29 April 2026

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

INDEPENDENT EXAMINER'S REPORT TO THE TRUSTEES OF sparqs

I report to the charity Trustees on my examination of the financial statements of sparqs for the year ended 31 July 2025 which are set out on pages 31-38.

This report is made to the Trustees of sparqs, as a body, in accordance with the terms of my engagement. My work has been undertaken to enable me to prepare the financial statements on behalf of the Trustees and to report my opinion as set out below and for no other purpose. To the fullest extent permitted by law, I do not accept or assume responsibility to anyone other than Trustees and members of sparqs, as a body, for my work or for this report.

Respective responsibilities of the Trustees and independent examiner

The charity's Trustees are responsible for the preparation of the financial statements in accordance with the terms of the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005 (the Act) and the Charities Accounts (Scotland) Regulations 2006 (as amended) (the Regulations). The charity Trustees consider that the audit requirement of Regulation 10(1)(a) to (c) of the Regulations does not apply. It is my responsibility to examine the financial statements as required under section 44(1)(c) of the Act and to state whether particular matters have come to my attention.

Basis of independent examiner's statement

My examination is carried out in accordance with Regulation 11 of the Regulations. An examination includes a review of the accounting records kept by the charity and a comparison of the financial statements presented with those records. It also includes consideration of any unusual items or disclosures in the financial statements, and seeks explanations from the Trustees concerning any such matters. The procedures undertaken do not provide all the evidence that would be required in an audit, and consequently I do not express an audit opinion on the view given by the financial statements.

Independent examiner's statement

In the course of my examination, no matter has come to my attention:

1. which gives me reasonable cause to believe that in any material respect the requirements:
   - to keep accounting records in accordance with Section 44(1)(a) of the Act and Regulation 4 of the Regulations, and
   - to prepare financial statements which accord with the accounting records and comply with Regulation 8 of the Regulations

   have not been met; or

2. to which, in my opinion, attention should be drawn, other than as detailed below, in order to enable a proper understanding of the financial statements to be reached.

Steven Smillie

Steven Smillie
CHIENE + TAIT LLP (trading as CT)
Chartered Accountants and Independent Examiner
61 Dublin Street
Edinburgh
EH3 6NL

Date: 29 April 2026

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STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL ACTIVITIES (including Income and Expenditure Account)

For the year ended 31 July 2025

	Notes	31 Jul 2025	31 Jul 2024
		£	£
Income and endowments from:			
Donations and legacies	2	468,880	465,939
Charitable activities	3	26,394	14,981
Total income		495,274	480,920
Expenditure on:			
Charitable activities	4	476,072	435,583
Total expenditure		476,072	435,583
Net (expenditure)/income and net movement in funds		19,202	45,337
Reconciliation of funds:			
Total funds brought forward		143,944	98,607
Total funds carried forward		163,146	143,944

The statement of financial activities includes all gains and losses in the year.

All incoming resources and resources expended derive from continuing activities.

All income and expenditure in the current and prior year relates to unrestricted funds.

The notes on pages 33-38 form part of these financial statements

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

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BALANCE SHEET

As at 31 July 2025

	Notes	31 Jul 2025 £	31 Jul 2024 £
Current assets			
Debtors	8	24,258	13,943
Bank and cash		161,606	146,154
		185,864	160,097
Creditors: amounts falling due within one year			
Creditors and accruals	9	22,718	16,153
Net current assets		163,146	143,944
Net assets		163,146	143,944
Represented by			
Unrestricted funds			
General funds		163,146	143,944
		163,146	143,944

Approved by the Board of Trustees and signed on its behalf by:

Andrew Cubie

.....

Sir Andrew Cubie -Trustee

Date: 29 April 2026

The notes on pages 33-38 form part of these financial statements

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NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

For the year ended 31 July 2025

1. Accounting policies

Basis of preparation

The financial statements have been prepared under the historical cost convention with items recognised at cost or transaction value unless otherwise stated in the relevant notes to these financial statements. The financial statements have been prepared in accordance with the Statement of Recommended Practice: Accounting and Reporting by Charities preparing their financial statements in accordance with the Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland (FRS 102) (effective 1 January 2019) – (Charities SORP FRS 102), the Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland (FRS 102), the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005, the Charities Accounts (Scotland) Regulations 2006 (as amended) and UK Generally Accepted Accounting Practice.

The charity constitutes a public benefit entity as defined by FRS 102.

The financial statements are presented in sterling which is the functional currency of the charity.

Going concern

The financial statements have been prepared on a going concern basis. The Trustees have assessed the charity's ability to continue as a going and have reasonable expectation that the charity has adequate resources to continue in operational existence for the foreseeable future. Thus, they continue to adopt the going concern basis of accounting in preparing the financial statements.

Funds Structure

Unrestricted funds are expendable at the discretion of the Trustees in the furtherance of the objects of the charity.

Restricted funds are funds that can only be used for particular restricted purposes within the charity's objects. Restrictions arise when specified by the donor or when funds are raised for particular restricted purposes.

Income recognition

All income is recognised once the charity has entitlement to the income, there is sufficient certainty or receipt and so it is probable that the income will be received, and the amount of income receivable can be measured reliably.

Donations and legacies are recognised when they have been communicated in writing with notification of both the amount and settlement date. In the event that a donation, grant or project income is subject to conditions that require a level of performance before the charity is entitled to the funds, the income is deferred and not recognised until either those conditions are fully met, or the fulfilment of those conditions is wholly within the control of the charity and it is probable that those conditions will be fulfilled in the reporting period.

Income from charitable activities includes income earned in running conferences and delivering projects for third parties.

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS (Contd.)

For the year ended 31 July 2025

1. Accounting policies (continued)

Expenditure recognition
Liabilities are recognised as resources expended as soon as there is a legal or constructive obligation committing the charity to that expenditure. All expenditure is accounted for on an accruals basis and all expenses are allocated to the applicable expenditure headings. Irrecoverable VAT is charged to the Statement of Financial Activities as incurred.

Support costs have been differentiated between governance costs and other support costs. Governance costs comprise all costs involving the public accountability of the charity and its compliance with regulation and good practice. These costs include costs related to independent examination, accountancy and legal fees together with an apportionment of overhead and support costs.

Charitable activities
Charitable activities costs are those costs expended on meeting the Charity's objectives and the governance costs.

Pensions
The charity operates a defined contribution pension scheme. Contributions payable are charged to the Statement of Financial Activities in the period that they are payable. There were no outstanding contributions at the year end.

Taxation
The charity is a registered charity and accordingly is exempt from taxation on its income and gains when they are applied for charitable purposes.

Irrecoverable VAT
Irrecoverable VAT is charged against the expenditure heading for which it was incurred.

Financial instruments
The charity only has financial assets and financial liabilities of a kind that qualify as basic financial instruments. Basic financial instruments are initially recognised at transaction value and subsequently measured at their settlement value.

2. Income from donations & grants	**2025**	**2024**
	£	£
Scottish Funding Council – core grant	468,880	465,939
	468,880	465,939

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

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NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS (Contd.)

For the year ended 31 July 2025

3. Income from Charitable Activities	**2025**	**2024**
	£	£
Event, project and interest income	26,394	14,981
	26,394	14,981

4. Expenditure on Charitable Activities	**2025**	**2024**
	£	£
Direct charitable activity costs:		
Associate Trainer including salary costs	28,392	29,665
Support and governance costs (note 5)	447,680	405,918
	476,072	435,583

5. Support and governance costs	**2025**	**2024**
	£	£
Salaries and associated costs	325,054	315,200
Travel and subsistence	5,406	5,180
Staff training	1,482	437
Staff recruitment	480	-
Events and meetings	19,760	22,364
Premises	37,523	16,000
Website and online tools	4,733	4,368
Printing, stationery and postage	1,315	245
Insurance	2,693	2,606
IT software and consumables	2,916	5,747
Legal and professional fees	41,375	28,091
General expenses	579	354
Bank interest and charges	533	170
Subscriptions	7	135
Advertising and marketing	890	1,586
Entertainment	714	1,337
Governance costs		
Independent examination	2,220	2,098
	447,680	405,918

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

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NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS (Contd.)

For the year ended 31 July 2025

6. Analysis of staff costs	**2025**	**2024**
	£	£
Salaries	265,922	257,263
Social security costs	18,229	19,477
Pension defined contribution	55,156	52,259
Health benefit	500	505
	339,807	329,504

No employee received emoluments of more than £60,000.

The average number of employees during the year was 16 (2024: 14)

The key management personnel are the Trustees, the Director and the managers. Total remuneration paid to key management personnel in the year was £113,603 (2024: £125,381), inclusive of employers' pension contributions and employers' NI.

7. Related party transactions and Trustees' remuneration

The Trustees did not receive remuneration, reimbursement of expenses or other benefits for their services in the current or prior years.

There were no other reportable related party transactions during the year.

8. Debtors	**2025**	**2024**
	£	£
Trade debtors	1,945	2,035
Prepayments	22,313	11,908
	24,258	13,943

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

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NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS (Contd.)

For the year ended 31 July 2025

9. Creditors: amounts falling due within one year	**2025** £	**2024** £
Trade creditors	9,087	1,230
Social security and other taxes	-	(1,008)
Accruals and deferred income	13,631	15,931
	22,718	16,153

10. Deferred income

Deferred income comprises of income in relation to attendance at events which take place in August at the QMU.

	2025 £	**2024** £
Balance as at 1 August	3,190	2,973
Amounts released to income	(3,190)	(2,973)
Amount deferred in year	2,952	3,190
	2,952	3,190

11. Pension scheme

The charity contributes to a defined contribution pension scheme. The assets of the scheme are held separately from those of the charity in an independently administered fund. The pension cost charge represents contributions payable by the charity to the fund and amounted to £55,156 (2024: £52,259). Contributions outstanding at the balance sheet date amounted to £4,991 (2024: £126).

Docusign Envelope ID: BEE05FF7-31B7-8834-813F-7098DC5BA7B2

12. Operating lease commitments

Lessee

At the reporting end date the company had outstanding commitments for future minimum lease payments under non-cancellable operating leases as follows:

	2025 £	2024 £
Amount falling due within 1 year	25,800	16,003
Amount falling due between 1 and 5 years	5,160	-
Amount falling due after more than 5 years	-	-
	30,960	16,003