

# **Mountains and pathways: meaningful partnership in Scotland at a time of institutional and national turbulence**

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Highlands and Island Students' Association (UHI)

**NVAO SWA on student participation – Friday 10<sup>th</sup> October 2025**



# A quick bit about me

- November 2023: **HISA**, the students' association at UHI.
- August 2007: **sparqs**, Scotland's agency for student engagement.
- Early career roles on both institutional and students' association sides, and a one-year sabbatical as students' association President.



- Masters in Student Engagement in Higher Education (University of Winchester).
- Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.
- Interested in models and concepts of partnership....

# When do we first involve students?

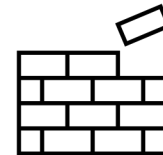
**Lightbulb  
moment**



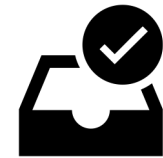
**Informing  
others**



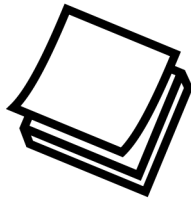
**Early  
building**



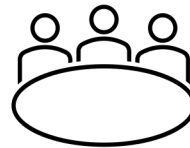
**Full  
rollout**



**Rough  
note**



**Formal  
proposal**



**Trial and  
testing**



**Lightbulb  
moment**



## Ingredients

- Culture of engagement: staff involve them instinctively.
- Courage: senior staff admit they don't know it all.
- Clarity: showing how it can and should be done.
- Capacity: equipping staff (and students).

## Benefits

- Confidence: maybe students will give their own ideas!
- Context: students can tell staff what works for them.
- Competences: students demonstrate their achievements.
- Credibility: if you are involved, you'll have faith in it.

## Two stories from Scotland

A college had a major campus redesign. External consultants ran a survey of students. The first time the college's students' association knew of the survey was when they got the results. They declared they had no faith in the outcome: the survey was confusing and full of jargon. They protested "if only you'd shown us the survey first, we could have helped!" **A**

A students' association helped its college to introduce new suggestion boxes around campus, to gather students' views. One submission included something very offensive about a staff member, who told their trade union. The trade union protested to the college senior management. As a result, the college removed all the suggestion boxes. **B**

**Vague and  
ill-defined**

**Chore**

**Interview,  
undynamic**

**That thing where I had to sit in front of all the staff**

**Solo,  
isolating**

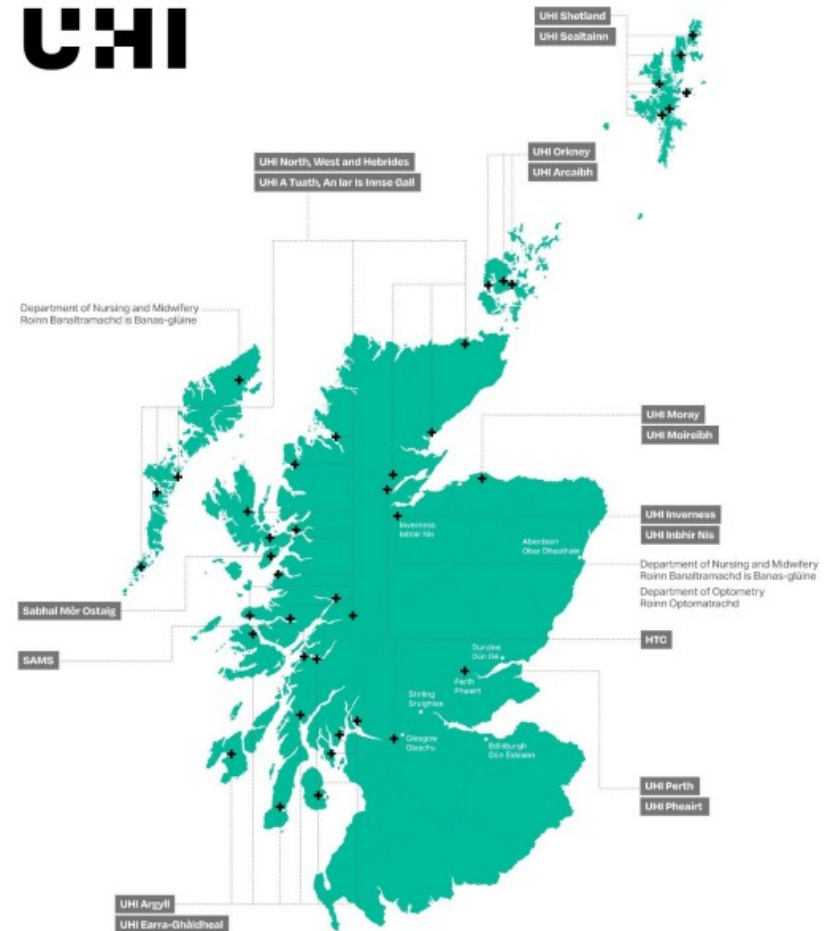
**Passive**

**Overwhelming**

# UHI – a federal university

- **10 Partners** (colleges or research institutes) & central Executive Office.
- ...which means **11** governing bodies!
- Many learning centres & campuses.
- Programmes fit in Partner academic structures **and** UHI's own faculties.
- **Tertiary** and **blended** delivery.
- Process of **Transformation** begun.

**UHI**

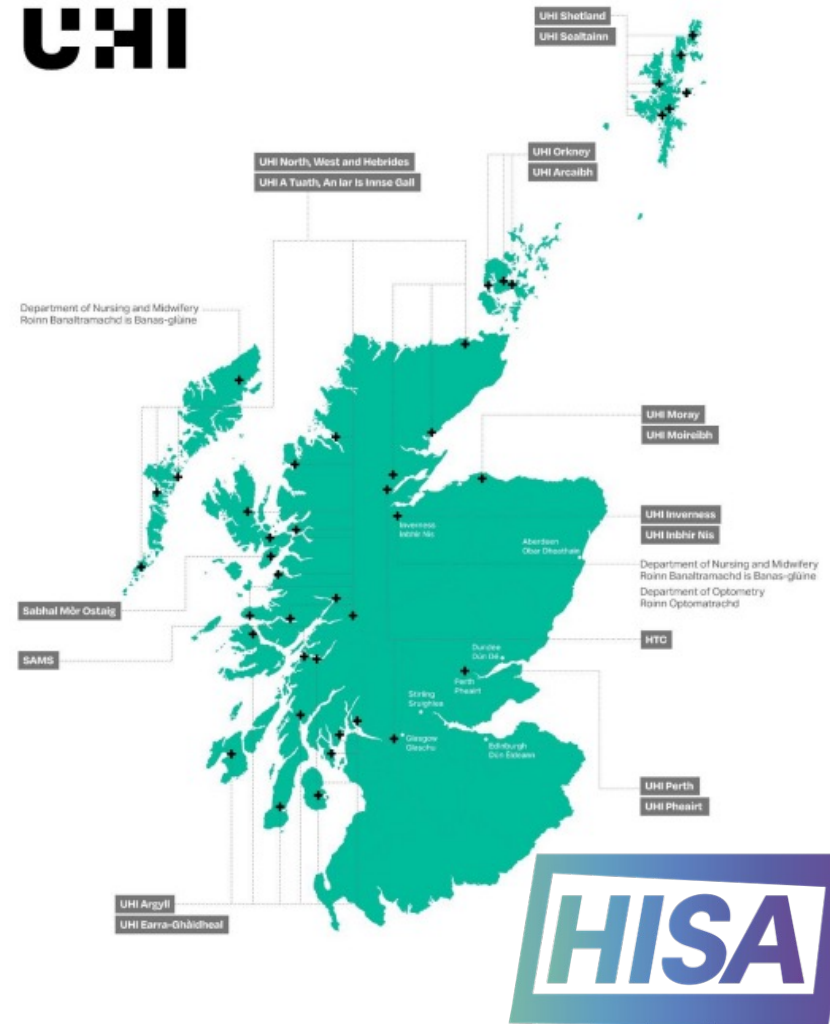




# How HISA responds

- Independently constituted charity and employer (like most British SAs).
- 16 elected student officers (paid full or part-time):
  - 2 full-time cross-campus officers.
  - 14 local officers in the 10 Partners.
- 500+ Student Voice Reps (SVRs).
- Staff support:
  - Led by CEO and senior management.
  - Some central staff; many based within the Partners and campuses (a bit like participation coaches!).
- Challenges of distributed working and many part-time staff and student roles.
- Dynamics of vacancies, capacity constraints, complex topics, and responding to change.

**UHI**



## Mountains...

Major institutional change at UHI: can 11 governing bodies find an agreeable model?

**Scottish Universities Grapple With Funding Crisis as Cuts Deepen**

**Most Scottish colleges not sustainable, says report**

## and pathways

- Strong tradition of sector collaboration in Scotland.
- World renowned education system... well, mostly!
- Sharing between further and higher education:
  - Learning articulation pathways.
  - A new common quality system.
- Students' associations with respect, resource and energy.



## Strengths






- Clarity of message and structures.
- Highly localised: where students are.
- Inclusive, supportive and responsive.
- Responsive to structures and governance.
- Focussed on barriers and solutions.
- Facilitative, empowering, rewarding.
- Well planned and strategised.



## Opportunities

1. Supporting and identifying the roles, impact and professional development of participation coaches.
2. Developing shared commonalities and templates for approaches to student rep training.
3. Developing common resources and support for student council elections.

# Student participation professionals

<b>Values</b> 	<b>Knowledge</b> 	<b>Activities</b> 
<p><b>V1</b> A belief in education as a positive, inquisitive and liberating force for wider societal change.</p> <p><b>V2</b> Placing the student voice at the heart of continuous enhancement and co-creation of the student learning experience.</p> <p><b>V3</b> Recognition of the centrality of equality, diversity, liberation and inclusion to student engagement.</p> <p><b>V4</b> A belief in students' associations as vital collective, democratic contributors to institutional life and students' experiences.</p> <p><b>V5</b> A commitment to transformative partnership as an underpinning aspect of work with staff and students.</p>	<p><b>K1</b> The implications of the diversity and intersectionality of the student population in its demography, pedagogy and geography.</p> <p><b>K2</b> How institutions manage and develop learning and teaching.</p> <p><b>K3</b> The role of evidence and data in effective student engagement in quality enhancement and assurance.</p> <p><b>K4</b> The purpose, role and dynamic structures of students' associations.</p> <p><b>K5</b> How the national and international policy and agency landscape affects, and is shaped by, students.</p> <p><b>K6</b> Policies, theories and strategies relating to student engagement, feedback and partnership in quality.</p>	<p><b>A1</b> Empowering all students to own and shape their learning.</p> <p><b>A2</b> Supporting and enabling academic representative systems.</p> <p><b>A3</b> Facilitating and promoting the recognition of student engagement activities.</p> <p><b>A4</b> Working with, supporting and developing student officers as they engage in strategic decisions about learning and teaching.</p> <p><b>A5</b> Informing and advising decision-makers on students' views and priorities.</p> <p><b>A6</b> Enabling the generation and use of data about the learning experience.</p> <p><b>A7</b> Championing partnership-based collaborations between staff and students.</p> <p><b>A8</b> Acquiring, sharing and applying knowledge about student engagement policy and practice.</p>

# Professional Standards Framework for Student Engagement

## Values



- V1** A belief in education as a positive, inquisitive and liberating force for wider societal change.
- V2** Placing the student voice at the heart of continuous enhancement and co-creation of the student learning experience.
- V3** Recognition of the centrality of equality, diversity, liberation and inclusion to student engagement.
- V4** A belief in students' associations as vital collective, democratic contributors to institutional life and students' experiences.
- V5** A commitment to transformative partnership as an underpinning aspect of work with staff and students.

## Knowledge



- K1** The implications of the diversity and intersectionality of the student population in its demography, pedagogy and geography.
- K2** How institutions manage and develop learning and teaching.
- K3** The role of evidence and data in effective student engagement in quality enhancement and assurance.
- K4** The purpose, role and dynamic structures of students' associations.
- K5** How the national and international policy and agency landscape affects, and is shaped by, students.
- K6** Policies, theories and strategies relating to student engagement, feedback and partnership in quality.

## Activities



- A1** Empowering all students to own and shape their learning.
- A2** Supporting and enabling academic representative systems.
- A3** Facilitating and promoting the recognition of student engagement activities.
- A4** Working with, supporting and developing student officers as they engage in strategic decisions about learning and teaching.
- A5** Informing and advising decision-makers on students' views and priorities.
- A6** Enabling the generation and use of data about the learning experience.
- A7** Championing partnership-based collaborations between staff and students.
- A8** Acquiring, sharing and applying knowledge about student engagement policy and practice.

# Student participation professionals

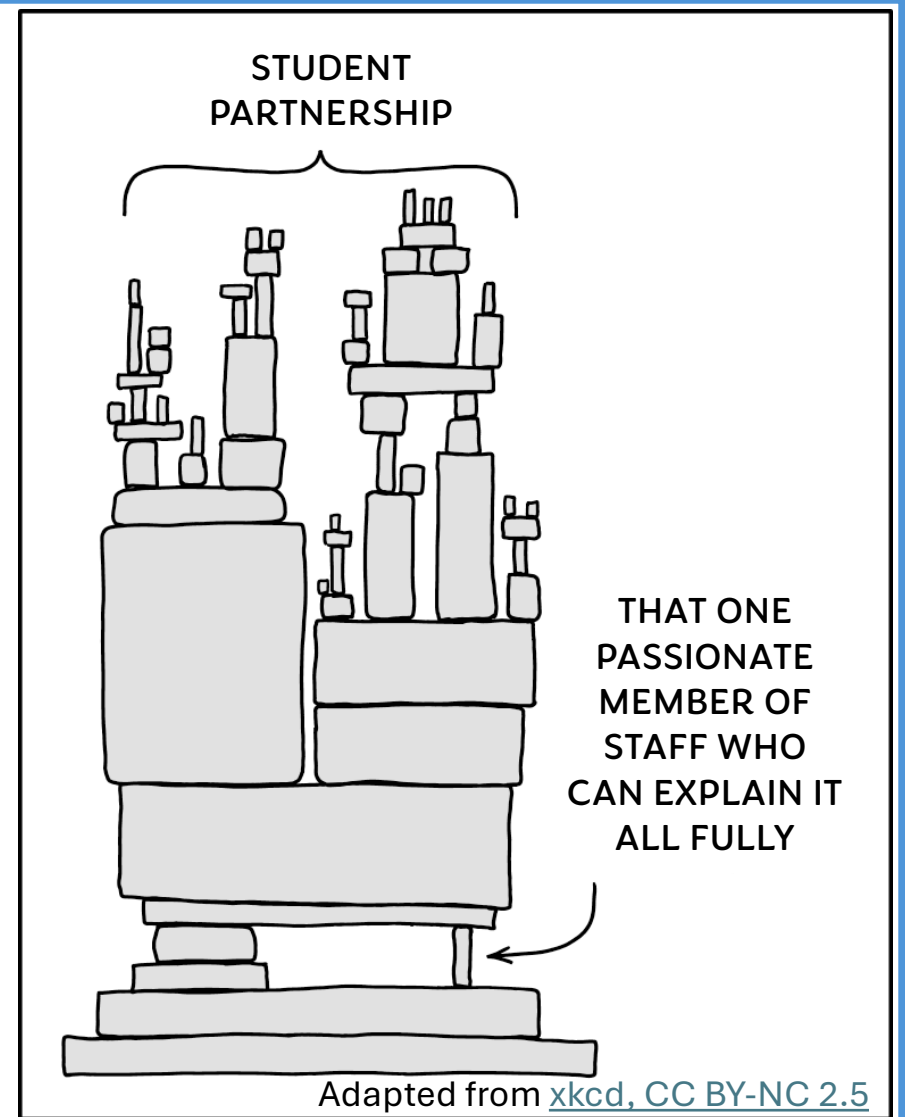
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- Student Engagement Staff Network: learn, share, develop.
- Buddy Scheme, bringing staff together informally.

# Developing other staff

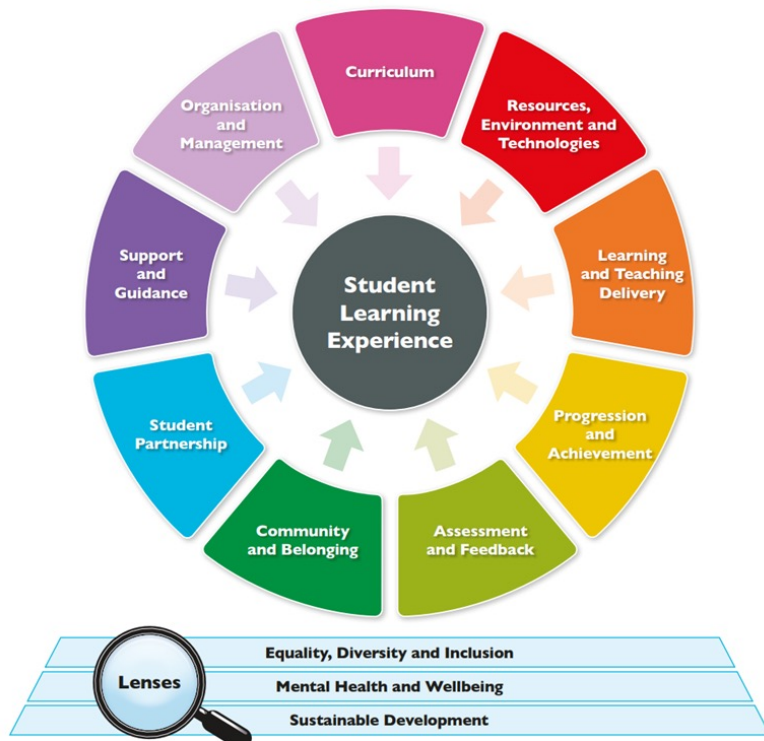
- Engaging in staff conferences and development programmes.
- Partnership as collaboration.
- “What can reps do for you?”
- Demystifying and co-creating the student rep system/training.
- Student voice as key to retention, satisfaction and achievement.
- Identifying and celebrating successful practice.





# Student rep training

## Student Learning Experience (SLE) model



Brown & Varwell, 2024

- sparqs' student training team.
- Annual training event for student rep trainers from institutions/SAs.
- Model exported to Ireland:

National Student Engagement Programme  
Clár Rannpháirtíochta Náisiúnta na Mac Léinn

About ▾ Student Portal ▾ Student QA Reviewers Institutions

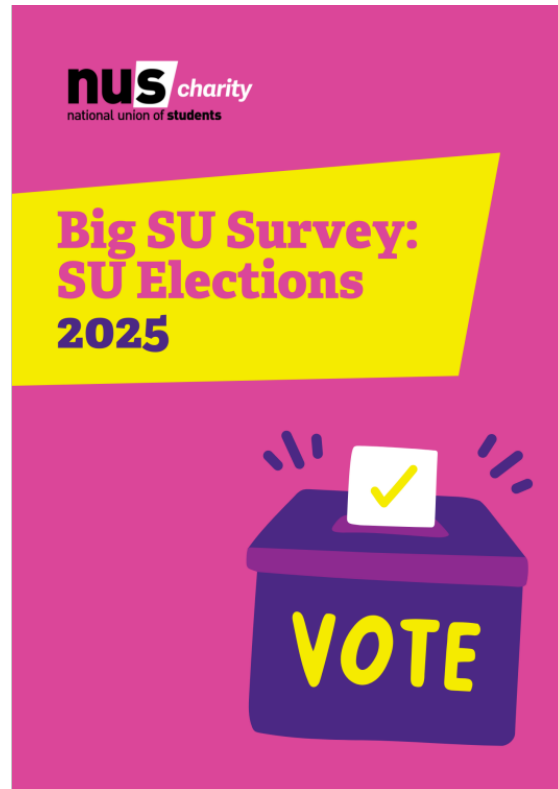
## Student Portal

Everything you need, all in one place

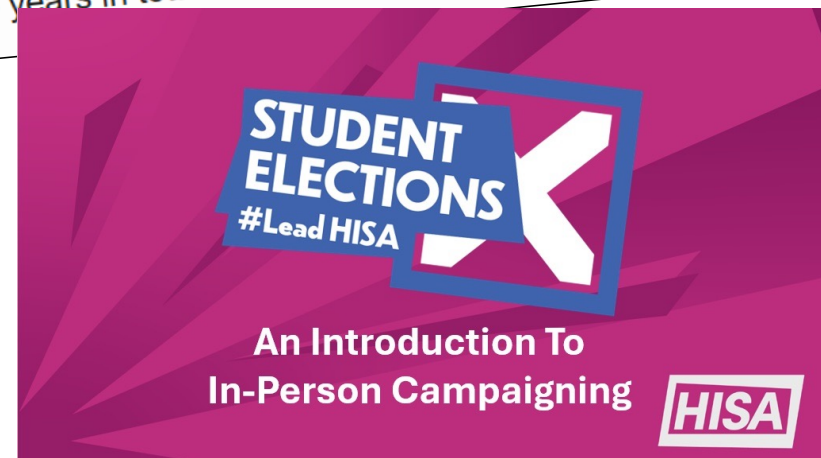
**BOOK TRAINING**

**ACHIEVE AN AWARD**

# Approaches to student elections



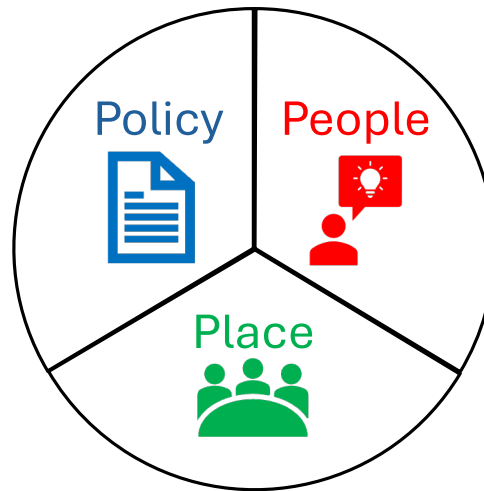
- (d) appointment to major union offices should be by election in a secret ballot in which all members are entitled to vote;
- (e) the governing body should satisfy themselves that the elections are fairly and properly conducted;
- (f) a person should not hold sabbatical union office, or paid elected union office, for more than two years in total at the establishment;



# Where next on the mountains and pathways?

- Sustainability beyond the Systems-Wide Analysis.
- For institutions and as the Flemish sector, consider **three Ps**:

Student participation strategies.  
Sections of strategic plans.  
Quality enhancement approaches.  
Democratic structures.



Participation coaches.  
Student officers.  
Senior management remits.  
...and, in some ways, everyone?

Working group, department  
or committee

# Resources and contact details

- Brown, M., & Varwell, S. (2024). Scotland's Student Learning Experience model: Building partnership in quality in a tertiary context. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, 12(2). <https://doi.org/10.56433/jpaap.v12i2.605>
- Varwell, S. (2024, October 10). *That thing where I had to sit in front of all the staff*. Wonkhe. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/that-thing-where-i-had-to-sit-in-front-of-all-the-staff/>
- sparqs' [Professional Standards Framework for Student Engagement](#).
- Scotland's [Student Learning Experience model](#).
- NStEP's [Student Training Programme](#) (Ireland).
- NUS UK's [elections support](#) (much more behind login).

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Bluesky: [hisasimon.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/hisasimon.bsky.social)

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/simonvarwell/>

**Let this be the start, and not de staart.  
Bedankt!**