Purpose and Background

The report provides a summary of activities, undertaken in partnership with RGU:Union, in relation to:

- student engagement in formal quality processes; and
- the Student Partnership Agreement (SPA).

Further Information

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1 Overview

Feedback from the recent Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) highlighted a number of areas of positive practice. One of these areas was student representation and partnership working, and it was indicated that:

“the University has an effective and proactive partnership with RGU:Union. A number of student roles have been established to enhance representation and engagement including student faculty officers and students acting as interns on enhancement projects. Students are recognised and rewarded for their engagement with enhancement activities through Student Contribution and Involvement Awards and the University’s credit-bearing Extracurricular Award.”

Recognising that the established representative structures are considered to operate effectively, the following provides a brief overview of ongoing core activity, and focuses on key enhancement activity over the period.

2 Coordination of Student Representative activities

Appointments

384 student representatives were appointed during Session 2015/16, and Table 1 below shows the distribution across Schools and Departments. The appointment of formal student representatives continues to be encouraged for all stages of all courses. However it’s also accepted that there are legitimate reasons for alternative mechanisms to be used, and that these can also be effective.

Table 1: Student Representative Appointments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dept of Accounting and...</th>
<th>Dept of Communication...</th>
<th>Dept of Management</th>
<th>Gray’s School of Art</th>
<th>Law School</th>
<th>School of Applied Social...</th>
<th>School of Computing...</th>
<th>School of Engineering</th>
<th>School of Health Sciences</th>
<th>School of Nursing and...</th>
<th>School of Pharmacy &amp;...</th>
<th>Scott Sutherland School...</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>26</td>
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In support of timely appointments, a specific enhancement for Semester 1 was the creation of an animated video-clip ‘Representation at RGU’. Circulated directly to Course Leaders it has been viewed over 400 times, as well as being looped on plasma screens. Following the success of this communication, and recognising the value in providing additional context, two further videos were created throughout the session: ‘Partnership at RGU’ and ‘Achieved in Partnership’ [Also refer to section 3 below].
The roles of **Student Faculty Officers (SFO)** continue to be embedded, with a full compliment appointed for 2015/16. Each Faculty agreed project objectives with outcomes reported via Faculty Quality Enhancement Sub-committees (FQESCs). Furthermore, it’s extremely pleasing to note that appointments for 2016/17 have recently been made, which will allow their training to be embedded within that of the Sabbatical Team.

Please also refer Item 3.1 below - Although there is broad representation across the university, those appointed as representatives equate to only approximately 3% of the student body. Recent discussions at the SPA Working Group highlighted a desire to build on the existing representative structures – which currently place the onus on individuals – and to ultimately aim to support all students to be active partners in their learning experience.

**Training**

232 student representatives attended sparqs training, with a further 73 students indicating that they’d previously attended training and/or were continuing representatives. To supplement this RGU:Union held a ‘Your University forum’ mid-way through Semester 1, providing an opportunity to:

- Hear more from the Dean of Students, Sabbaticals and DELTA staff regarding RGU structures and the activities of the SPA;
- Meet senior representatives (e.g. Vice-Presidents, SFO’s); and
- Seek feedback on the learning experience; notably IT colleagues attended to respond to any specific issues.

**Evidence-based discussions**

There continues to be a wide range of opportunities available for student representatives to engage in discussions about their learning experience, including though full membership on the majority of School, Faculty and university committees and regular opportunities to meet with senior staff. A summary of the latest discussion opportunity for Student Representatives with the Principal and Deputy Principal is contained in the Annex.

In addition, over and above these formal structures, there are a number of examples of new and effective ‘partnership working’. The ELIR case study provided three separate illustrations of these:

- Community - the development of university street
- Learning – students partners within Gray’s School of Art
- Services – the Project Support Intern Scheme within DELTA

**Recognition**

ELIR feedback cited the **Student Contribution and Involvement Awards** as an example of good practice. This year, nine students were conferred Awards, and examples of the types of activities undertaken in partnership included:

- Engagement in effective staff/student liaison mechanisms and quality assurance/enhancement processes.
- Contributions to the development of student-facing facilities and services.

Notwithstanding the above ELIR commendation, it was agreed by the Panel that the current scheme be reviewed to ensure that it fully reflects the developing emphasis on partnership working between staff and students [Also refer Item 5 below].
3 Student Partnership Agreement (SPA)

The SPA remains a focus for discussions between staff and students and a framework around which areas of focus can be identified. This session consideration was given to further embedding key messages and encouraging related activity within faculties and schools/departments, as well as at institutional level.

Activity to embed and enhance communication included:

- Inclusion of specific information within the Student Representative ‘appointment information’ for staff.
- Increased prominence within the range of representative engagements (e.g. training, Deans meetings, RGU:Union forums, Moodle areas).
- Consideration by FQESCs; within FDT the substantive discussion item for each meeting was ‘student partnership working’ with joint updates invited from staff/students.
- Progress updates at various university committees, including to the Board of Governors.
- The establishment of new RGU:Union Partnership webpage, to augment the existing Campus Moodle Areas.
- Hosting of a DELTA Focus On event: ‘Students as Partners’ to facilitate sharing of experiences between colleagues.
- Development of a suite of materials and content to promote representation and partnership.
- Most recently this has culminated in new innovative ‘achieved in partnership’ branding. Developed by DELTA e-learning colleagues, this builds on the previous You Said, We Did campaigns which it was agreed were no longer fully capturing the spirit of partnership working across the university. This was then further developed by students for use in wider contexts - refer diagram below.

Actions in relation to Part 2 included:

**Community**

- Social space – Repurposing of existing spaces, furniture and fittings into more appealing social areas. Plans for the further redevelopment of university street include a new union shop and meeting room for student groups.
- Catering – Enhancements from feedback such as introducing vending machines, and extension of microwave provision. Collation of opinions and input to future design of service provision.
- Study space – Promotion of currently available space, as well as efforts to identify additional spaces across campus. An ‘Easy guide to study space’ has recently been launched which provides clear and succinct information on the variety of resources available, as well as catering and travel options.

**Identity**

- School-level identity – workshop activity was led by SFO’s in ABS and FHSC with inputs to FQESC meetings.
- Equality in experiences – Actions to explore the diverse population of RGU and specifically distance-learning students (e.g. video versions of induction presentations, live streaming of events and ODL specific newsletter ‘Connected’).
- External partnerships – Partnership activities to promote RGU students as stakeholders in the city and region (eg working with other institutions on the Student Community Partnership Strategy, launch of the Safe Taxi Scheme, RGU:TV safety video project with Police Scotland).
The poster diagram below helpfully summarises a number of aspects promoted under the auspices of the SPA:

- **Ethos and environment:** Feedback indicated that the ethos of partnership was more valuable to students than the SPA document itself. Having an identifiable ‘vision’ aims to help promote the SPA to both students and staff.

- **Effective representation:** A new visual depiction of opportunities for representation has been created to demonstrate how students inform decision making at various levels. It should be noted that following further discussion on the nature and alignment of student partnership opportunities the diagram will be reviewed.

- **Recognition of enhancements:** As well as highlighting the tangible campus developments undertaken in response to student feedback, the new ‘achieved in partnership’ branding emphasises the approach taken, and involvement of students in solutions.

**Further developing ‘partnership’**

In reviewing Session 2015/16 the SPA Working Group recognised the considerable progress made to date, and in particular welcomed the effective project approach in certain Schools, and the reciprocal cultural and pedagogical benefits.
There was a desire from members to challenge the current representational structures, and initiate step-change in the understanding of ‘partnership’, this might include for example:

- Encouraging all students to be “active partners” in their learning experience; and
- Encouraging individual areas to consider new “Student Staff Partnership Mechanisms”, replacing and/or building on current Staff Student Liaison practices.

Given the nature of proposals it was agreed further dialogue be undertaken to fully consider implications, and that any short-term recommendations be considered executively by the Conveners of the SPA Working Group and QAEC.

4 Wider Initiatives

Notable wider and/or external activities include:

- **ELIR Case Study**
  The university chose ‘Student Partnership’ as the theme for the case study provided to the ELIR team. The case study was developed as an online tool outlining how, in different ways, and in different parts of the university, a partnership approach has enhanced the student learning experience.

- **sparqs Engaging Students in Institution-Led Review**
  RGU has had significant involvement in the development of new sparqs sector guidance; ‘Engaging Students in Institution-Led Review: A practice guide for universities and students’ associations’. The guidance was informed by the student engagement of Gray’s School of Art Institution Led Subject Review (ILSR) and the Student-Facing Support Services Review of IT Resources. Positively sparqs indicated that RGU staff had been extremely keen to empower students to become fully involved in the processes, and to equip them to be able to devolve responsibility. In turn students themselves had been passionate about their learning and creative in the methods in which they had sought feedback from fellow peers.

5 Planned activities for Session 2016/17

It should be noted that, moving forward, the recently established DELTA Analytics and Student Partnership Team will facilitate the range of student representation and partnership activity; enabling closer alignment with analysis of student feedback and performance indicators to support enhancements to the learning experience and sharing of effective practice.

During the next academic year further consideration will be given to:

- The desire of the SPA Working Group to initiate step-change in the understanding of ‘partnership’.
- Existing forms of recognition (eg Student Contribution and Involvement Awards) to ensure they fully reflect the developing emphasis on partnership working between staff and students.
- The potential use of pre-defined key performance indicators as outlined within the compliance mapping for the QAA Quality Code Chapter B5: Student Engagement.
Discussion opportunity for Student Representatives - April 2016

Annually all Student Representatives are invited to meet with senior staff to the university, including the Principal and Deputy Principal. This provides an informal opportunity to discuss mutual areas of interest, as well as opportunities for enhancement.

Students present indicated that the following had informed their choice to study at RGU, and had also subsequently exceeded expectations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informed decision-making process</th>
<th>Exceeded expectations on arrival</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Location within the Scotland/North-East</td>
<td>▪ Satisfaction with the campus facilities</td>
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<td>▪ Campus environment</td>
<td>▪ Ethos of university life</td>
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<td>▪ Modern facilities</td>
<td>▪ Range of representation opportunities/activities supported by RGU:Union and the university</td>
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<td>▪ Range of support services</td>
<td>▪ Drop-in/out of hours sessions made available by services</td>
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<td>▪ Pre-enrolment support</td>
<td>▪ Specific offers from Careers and Study Support</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Knowledge of course content</td>
<td>▪ Course specific resources/facilities</td>
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<td>▪ Structure and modes of delivery</td>
<td>▪ Effective use of tutorials</td>
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<td>▪ Accreditation of courses</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Reputation for employability</td>
<td>▪ Emphasis on employability skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Links with industry</td>
<td>▪ Focus on entrepreneurship</td>
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<td>▪ Placement opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Friendliness of staff</td>
<td>▪ Accessibility of staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Knowledge, expertise and support</td>
<td>▪ Support available</td>
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It should be noted that course-specific issues raised have been conveyed to relevant colleagues. Broad school and/or university-wide areas for further development included the following:

**Discussion:** Students indicated that they appreciated the library and GSS Learning Centre spaces, but that at peak times they often reached capacity, and would welcome more designated study space.

**Update:** Further discussion highlighted that there are a wide variety of types of study space available, for example; silent study, IT facilities, group work or specialist course specific areas. However, when the most prominent areas were busy students weren’t aware of alternative options across the breadth of the campus. Recognising this RGU:Union has worked with a number of departments to better promote currently available space, as well as identify additional spaces across campus. An ‘Easy guide to study space’ was launched which provides succinct information as well as catering and travel options: [http://www.rguunion.co.uk/studyspace/](http://www.rguunion.co.uk/studyspace/).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion:</th>
<th>Update:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Campus environment</strong></td>
<td>Estates and Property Services will arrange regular meetings with RGU:Union to discuss any issues and/or opportunities. It is recognised that timely communication could be improved; both of issues which require attention to Estates and of those that are fixed and/or reasons why an immediate solution can’t be provided. Mechanisms to engage the wider student body will also be considered, for example a partnership workshop.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students often raised estates-related issues, which they perceived to be ‘quick-fix’, but which took longer then expected to be resolved. Examples included: - SIW Level 5 water fountains - Signposting for water fountains generally - Air-conditioning in MBA room</td>
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<td>Although catering options and choice had generally improved, there was still an opportunity to better support students with specific dietary requirements. eg vegan options.</td>
<td>RGU:Union representatives continue to be full members of the Catering Management Group and to discuss improvements to food offers and service provided directly with the provider. In addition during Semester 2 a series of student focus groups were held to inform the future direction of the service.</td>
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<td><strong>Reasonable adjustments</strong></td>
<td>The Disability and Dyslexia Centre indicated that the new procedure was intended to be more inclusive, however acknowledge that practice in schools differs and can be complex. The Centre Manager has scheduled to meet with the representative to gain further insights.</td>
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<td>Processes for reasonable adjustments for assessment requirements had been revised, rather than being identified by a 'sticker' students now had the opportunity to submit their work to a proof reader before handing it in.</td>
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<td><strong>Experiences of distance-learners</strong></td>
<td>Staff welcome and recognise attributes of the variety of learners. In particular the national Transition Enhancement Theme, supports a number of project activities aimed at better understanding the range of student experiences. This year there has been a focus on distance-learners, those commuting and those who start in January.</td>
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<td>The ABS Student Faculty Officer (SFO), a locally based distance-learning student, highlighted the importance of recognising the experiences of different types of students within RGU, for example distance-learners. Although many students chose to study off-campus for specific reasons, it was important that where possible there were equivalent opportunities for integration and involvement.</td>
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<td><strong>School/Department specific topics:</strong></td>
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<td><strong>ABS forums for discussion</strong></td>
<td>Staff at a recent FQESC meeting had also reflected that there were a number of opportunities to feedback about facilities, but fewer opportunities to talk about their subject discipline and course content and how these were delivered. It was agreed that it would be valuable to review the existing avenues operating, including the committees that students could engage with for this type of discussion. ABS will aim to build on the success of the ‘identity’ meeting held by Student Faculty Officers and focus future partnership work on clearly defined enhancement activity.</td>
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<td>A number of representatives from Aberdeen Business School indicated that whilst they felt comfortable contacting staff directly with any issues, that they would welcome more opportunities to discuss academic matters, particularly across different courses.</td>
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<td><strong>Gray’s - sense of belonging</strong></td>
<td>The Principal indicated that Gray’s School of Art was integral to, and a hugely important component of, RGU’s provision. A meeting has been arranged to discuss the perceptions of students in more detail.</td>
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<td>A Gray’s representative indicated that art school students often perceived themselves as a separate entity from the wider university.</td>
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