

CASE STUDY

Models for exploring partnership: Introducing sparqs' student partnership staircase as a reflective tool for staff and students

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ABSTRACT

A useful way of exploring partnership between staff and students is through visual representations of partnership, where the concept sits alongside other ideas in scales or diagrams. They enable comparison, benchmarking, and reflection in a way that is facilitative rather than instructional. Many such tools approach partnership in different ways and can be used in various contexts by staff and students. This article explores some of those tools, and introduces Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland's [sparqs] student partnership staircase, a simple tool which places partnership at the top of a four-step scale, prompting conversations about the role that students can and should play in shaping quality and how staff and institutions can enable this. Consideration is given to how the staircase can be used to create mutual learning spaces for staff and students and prompt shared understandings about partnership in quality.

KEYWORDS

student engagement, partnership, visual representation, quality, sparqs

INTRODUCTION: CONCEPTUALISING AND CONTEXTUALISING PARTNERSHIP

Partnership is central to quality. Indeed, given the challenges during and after the lockdown introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, “partnership working with universities is more important than ever” (Alcock & Ball, 2020, What we’re asking for, para. 3). In Scotland, this centrality is anchored by policy. Partnership is “integral to the culture of higher education, however and wherever provision is delivered” (United Kingdom Standing Committee on Quality Assurance [UKSCQA], 2018, p. 4). Scottish Funding Council (2019) guidance for college quality says that institutions “should regard students as partners in supporting improvement” (p. 5). Students as Partners is a feature of Scotland’s Student Engagement Framework (Quality Assurance Agency [QAA] Scotland et al., 2012). Partnership also appears in the full name of Scotland’s student engagement agency, sparqs (Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland), and in its mission and vision (sparqs, 2019, p. 4).

In operation for nearly twenty years, sparqs builds partnership between staff and students in Scotland’s universities, colleges, and national agencies through programmes of training for student representatives and staff, research into key aspects of student engagement, hosting of networking events, and support for institutional development.

One important task for sparqs in driving partnership is to conceptualise and contextualise it within our sector. This article, therefore, aims to introduce a tool for visualising partnership developed and widely used by sparqs. The student partnership staircase is based on a progressive scale of four student roles and aims to enable the placing of partnership alongside other engagement and to reflect on the practices that contribute to it.

Firstly, this article will discuss visualisation in exploring partnership and the value of such tools in general for sparqs and those it works with. Analysis will follow of comparable tools from literature, practice, and policy. Secondly, sparqs’ student partnership staircase and its four steps will be explored, informing conclusions about how the tool can be used by staff and students.

VISUALISING AND EXPLORING PARTNERSHIP

sparqs does not impose student engagement. Indeed, to do so would be unhelpful given the multiplicity of definitions (Trowler & Trowler, 2010), the term’s perceived vagueness (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015), and the numerous critiques of it (Zepke, 2014; Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017). Instead, sparqs helps staff and students to create their own approaches to engagement and partnership. Often this is done through visual representations which explore partnership, compare it to other types of engagement, and encourage reflection on practice. Such tools have strong advantages over simply stating definitions of partnership.

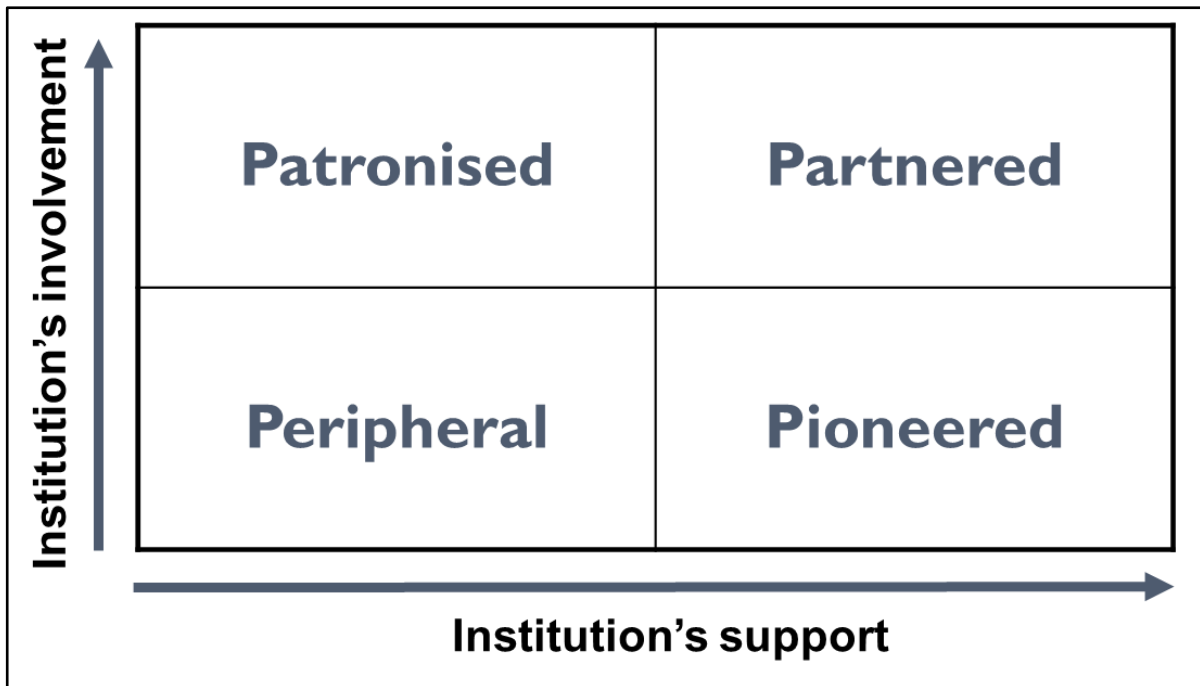
Primary among those advantages is the idea of not forcing fixed ideas. Of course, Scotland’s funding and review bodies produce benchmarks for quality and student engagement (SFC and Education Scotland, 2019; QAA Scotland, 2017). Yet given that Scotland’s colleges and universities contain a huge diversity of institution type, size, student profile, and curriculum, a more pressing task than merely complying with any definition of partnership is enabling stakeholders to find their own paths to it. After all, partnership has been described as “a dialogic and values-based approach to learning and teaching that has the potential to be transformative, developmental and fun” (Gravett, Kinchin, & Winstone, 2019, p. 13). This underpins both sparqs’ approach with institutions and Scotland’s wider quality enhancement model.

Another benefit of visualising partnership is that it can challenge assumptions. As Dickinson puts it, “there’s barely a university that isn’t theoretically proud of working in partnership,” (2020, para. 12) and yet “all partnership is student engagement, but not all student engagement is partnership” (Healey et al., 2014, p. 7). Therefore, when decision-makers are encouraged to match their practice against a visual tool, especially at times when a partnership might be strained by disagreements with student bodies or rapid transformations such as 2020’s COVID-19 lockdown, that pride can be scrutinised. In short, “would you call your practice partnership?” is a less useful question than “where would you place examples of your practice on this scale?”

Various authors have created tools for visualising partnership. To set sparqs’ student partnership staircase in context, it is worth exploring some examples. The seven tools that follow reflect a diversity of approaches to engagement, and sparqs has used many, for instance, in its Student Engagement Analysis Workshop (sparqs, n.d.-b). This workshop includes prompts for reflection on partnership between individual students and their provider using Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of citizen participation, and between students’ associations and institutions using one of Cadogan’s (1998) matrices of students’ union partnerships (p. 14; sparqs, n.d.-c) (see Figure 1). These two tools are light and accessible, yet deep enough to generate discussion about specific engagement activities, especially through sparqs’ representation of Arnstein’s ladder to explain each stage (see Figure 2).

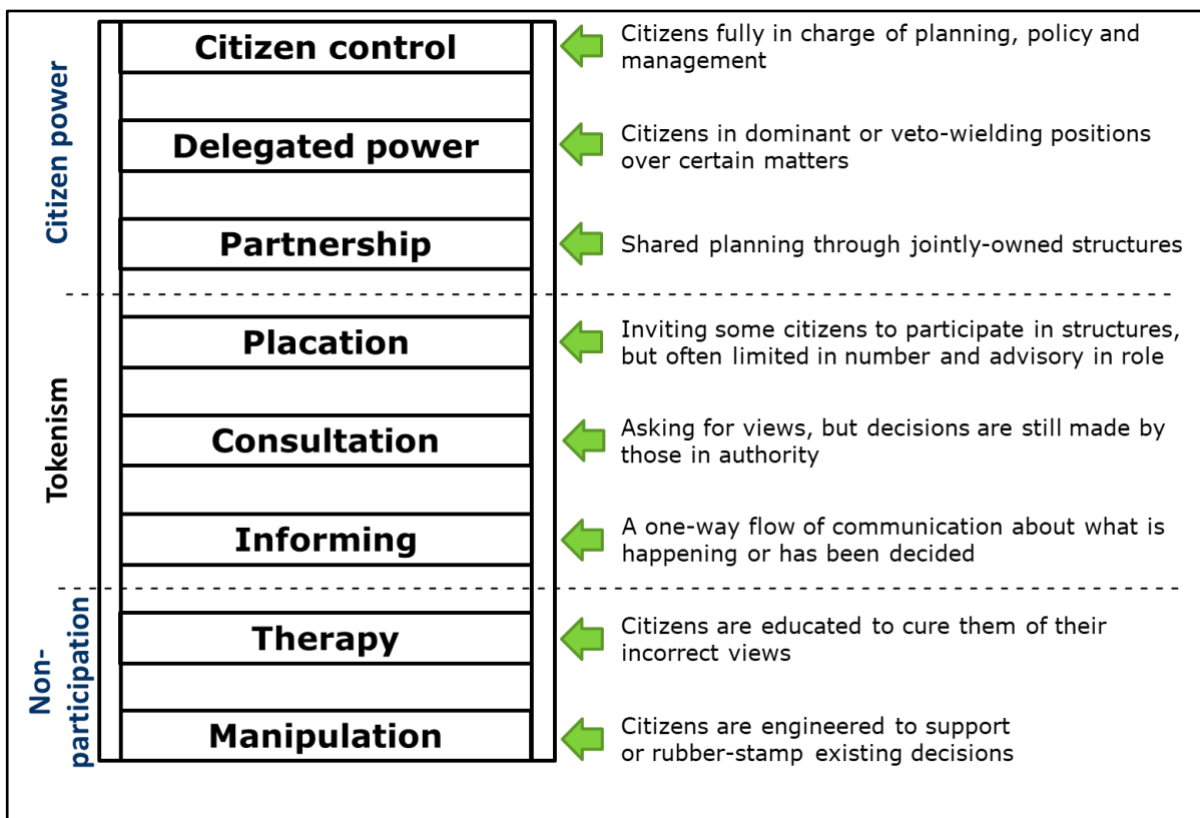
Arnstein’s ladder originated in public planning in the USA and has been widely critiqued (Collins & Ison, 2006; Theyyan, 2018; Castaneda, 2019; Connor, 1988), albeit criticism will reflect the paper’s vintage and context as much as its flaws. Indeed, it has since been adapted for multiple sectors, including schools (Fletcher, 2005), healthcare (Tritter & McCallum, 2006; NHS England, n.d.), and housing (Cullen, 2005; Romanin, 2013). Bovill and Bulley (2011, p. 5) have modified it to explore student engagement specifically in curriculum design (see Figure 3), while Bovill (2017) has further outlined a five-level contextualisation of partnership drawn from international development (Dearden et al., 2003) (see Figure 4). This illustrates the capacity for student engagement to learn from and share with other spheres, and the transferability of concepts and models.

Figure 1. Cadogan’s Matrix: sparqs (n.d.-c)



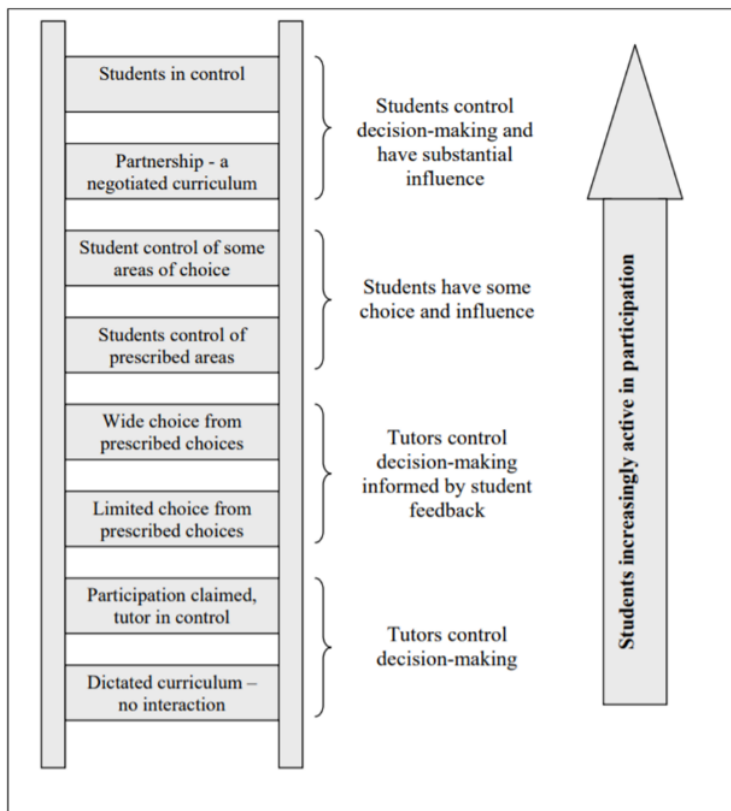
sparqs (n.d.-c).

Figure 2. Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation



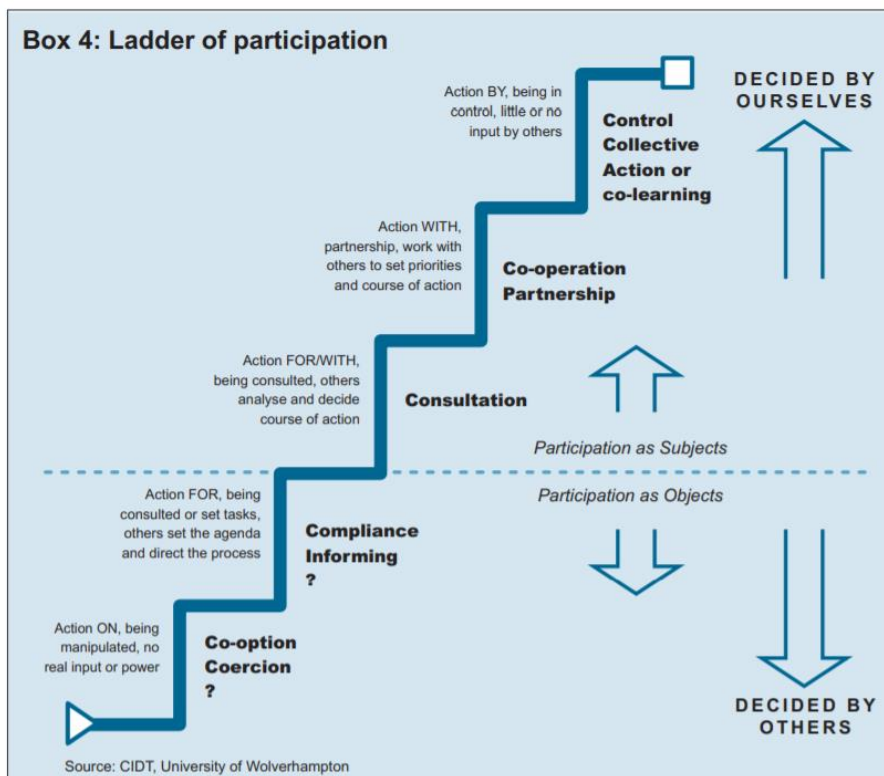
sparqs (n.d.-d).

Figure 3. Bovill and Bulley’s ladder of student involvement in curriculum design



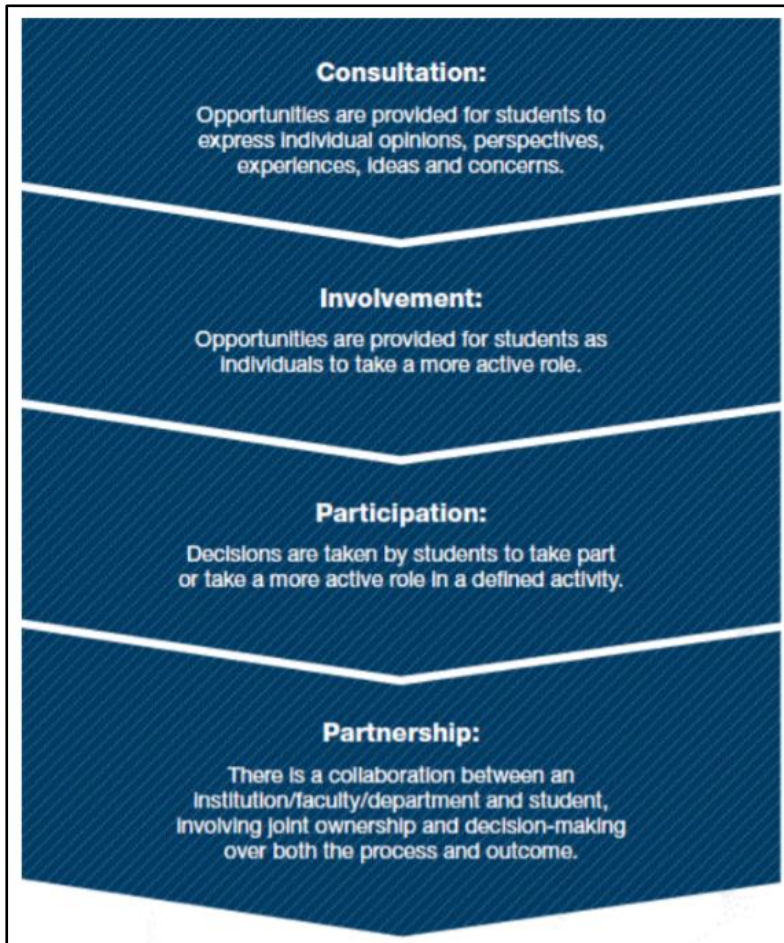
Bovill & Bulley, 2011, p. 5.

Figure 4. Ladder of participation



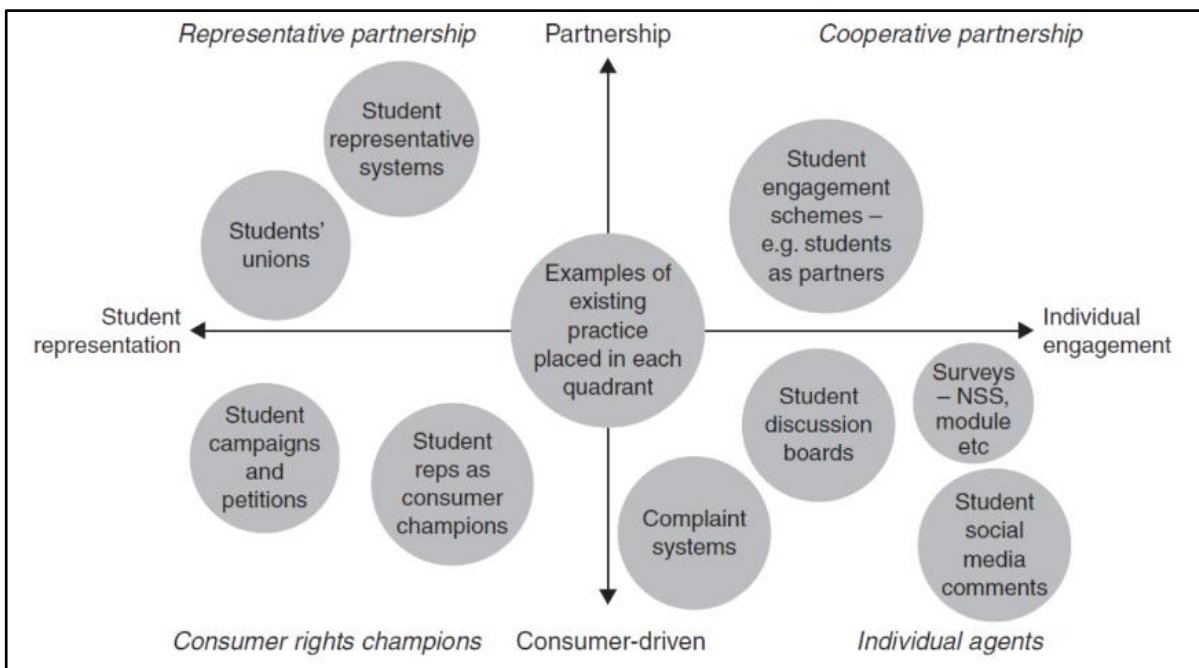
Dearden et al., 2003, p. 7.5.

Figure 5. HEA and NUS’s ladder of participation

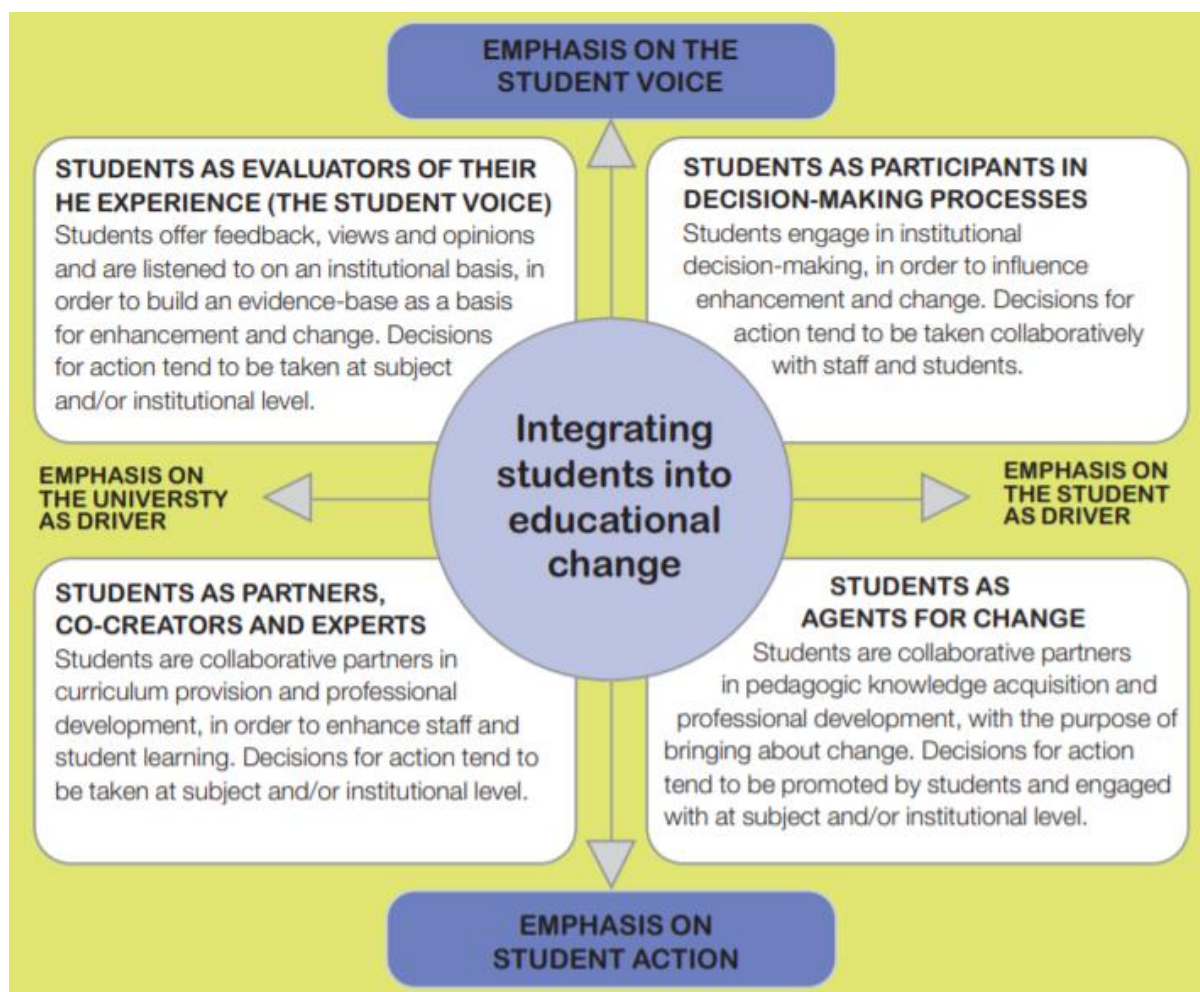


Healey et al., 2014, p. 16.

Figure 6. Paradigm of example student engagement practices



Lowe & Bols, 2020, p. 272.

Figure 7. A theoretical framework for engaging students as change agents

Dunne & Zandstra, 2011, p. 17.

Sharing the simplicity of sparqs' student partnership staircase is the Higher Education Academy and National Union of Students' four-step diagram (Healey et al., 2014, p. 16) (see Figure 5) that, like sparqs' staircase and Cadogan's matrix, places partnership as the pinnacle. This contrasts with Arnstein's and Bovill and Bulley's ladders which include levels of participation beyond partnership, where one might place student-led projects, students' associations, or models where students perceived as consumers might dictate or control the learning experience to the exclusion of staff expertise.

That said, consumerism is a feature of Lowe and Bols' (2020, p. 2727) student engagement paradigm (see Figure 6). It is distinct from previous examples because it does not set partnership on a sliding scale of increasing engagement, distinguishing instead between representative and cooperative models of partnership. This illustrates that partnership itself is a wide concept containing multiple distinct practices. Dunne and Zandstra (2011, p. 17) (see Figure 7) similarly use two axes, portraying partnership within a multifaceted, non-binary spectrum. Curiously, their model puts Students as Partners, co-creators, and experts in the same quadrant. The terms are not synonymous: sparqs' staircase sets experts as below partners, while Dollinger and Mercer-Mapstone (2019) highlight the subtle differences between partners, co-creators, and other terms of empowerment. Finally, Dunne and Zandstra place partners in a quadrant described as

“university-driven,” echoed by Matthews et al.’s (2018) warning of the risk of Students as Partners being misused to pursue management objectives. Nonetheless, Dunne and Zandstra’s model is rich and descriptive, covering wide ground in each quadrant rather than (like Cadogan’s grid) presenting four simple, distinct concepts.

Collectively, these seven models create diverse ways to visually represent and contextualise partnership. As described, some are binary and some are double-axis, and while most explore students as individuals, others also cover collective engagement. Some tools were developed within education and others originate elsewhere. Some are simple visualisations that users could approach independently, while others are richer and require more facilitative support to engage with. The tools also vary in scope: Bovill and Bulley’s and Cadogan’s are limited (to student engagement in curriculum design and students’ association relationships, respectively), while others are more general.

Crucially, though, all tools highlight the power dynamics that frame engagement. In many (such as Arnstein or Cadogan) the student role depends on the authority enabling it; while Dunne and Zandstra’s and Lowe and Bols’ diagrams create space for student-driven engagement. Arguably this is a strength of sparqs’ staircase, in that—as will be explained next—its focus on four student roles generates reflection on the actions of staff and institutions. This is a key element of a successful visual tool: true partnership should recognise the rights and responsibilities of both staff and students.

SPARQS’ STUDENT PARTNERSHIP STAIRCASE

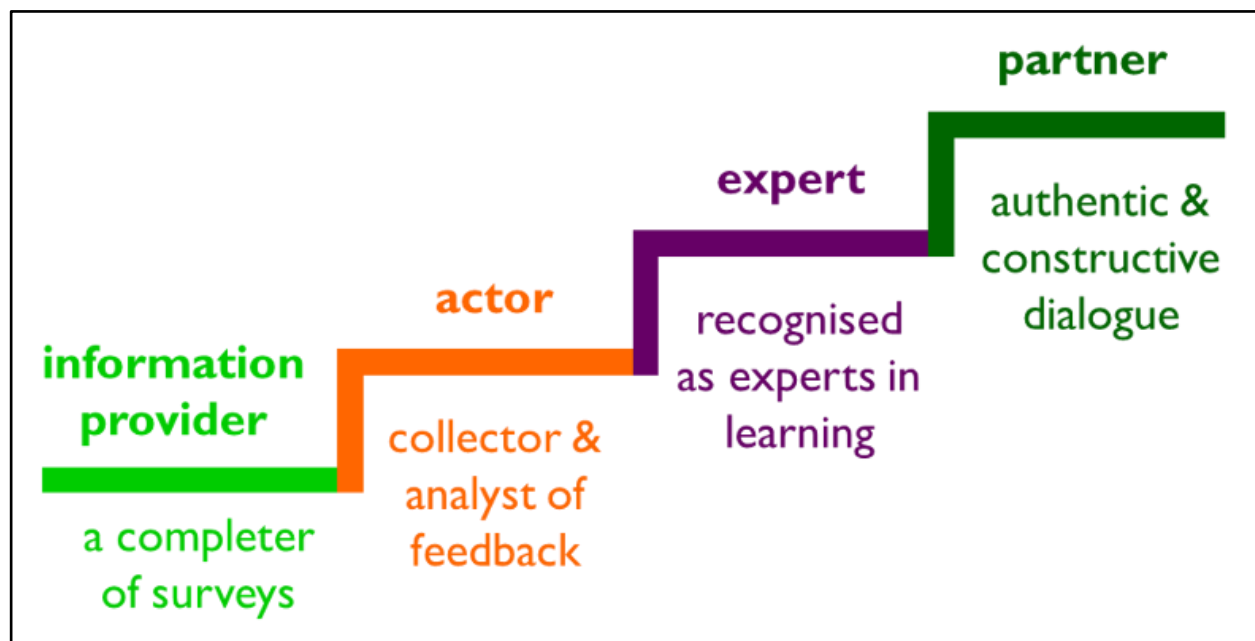


Figure 8: sparqs' student partnership staircase (sparqs, n.d.-a).

sparqs developed this staircase (see Figure 8) a decade ago as a tool to reflect on how students might shape their learning experience. It outlines four roles, illustrated by example activities. Although it has not been amended since then, the staircase has been used in a continually developing range of ways within and outwith Scotland in conversations with staff and students about engagement and partnership, as evidenced by a Twitter search using the terms “student partnership staircase.” These include workshops with staff and students to explore student engagement, presentations in staff development sessions,

and national and international conferences. sparqs has also developed a related card sort exercise for mapping engagement tools against the four steps of information provider, actor, expert, and partner (see Figure 9).

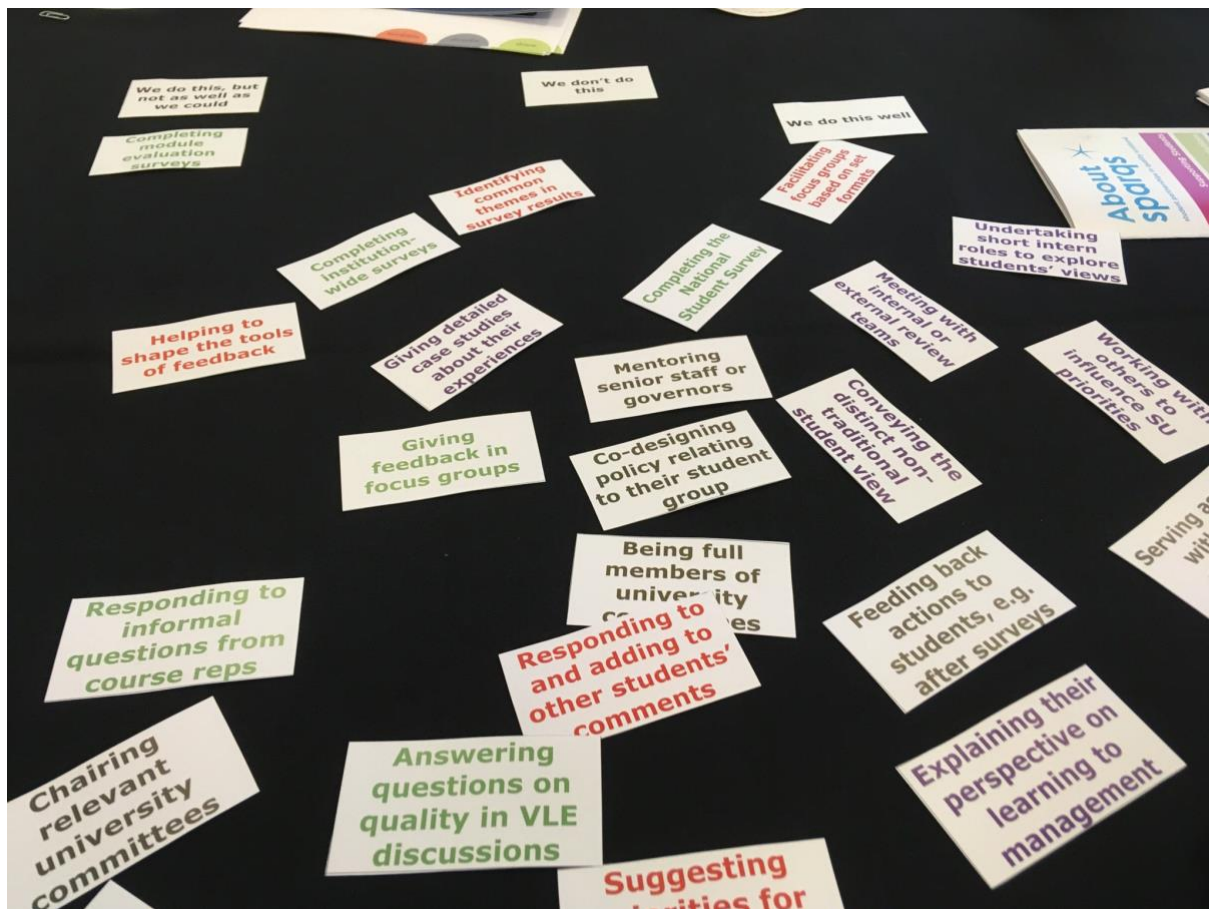


Figure 9: The staircase's card sort exercise in action.

Information provider

Ideally, all students will give information about their learning experience. The example activity under information provider in Figure 8 is completing surveys, whether at the module, institution, or national level. Information can be provided in many other ways, such as class discussions, emails, focus groups, and meetings.

Not all students will fill out surveys, a point addressed in literature (Nair et al., 2008; Higher Education Academy, 2016). There is also evidence to suggest that students' course feedback can feature subjectivities and biases (Heffernan, 2021; Wiley, 2019; Stewart, 2015; Gibbs, 2010), while sectoral equivalents such as the UK's National Student Survey (NSS) have received widespread criticism (Huxham et al., 2017; Cheng & Marsh, 2010; Cathcart et al., 2014), with the use of NSS findings described by Yorke (2014) as "naïve" (p. xvi).

This helps place the information provider at the lowest level of this scale and can generate discussion about the limitations of merely giving views. There is also scope to discuss a potential consumerism inherent in providing information (Copeland, 2014; Bunce et al., 2017; Jones-Devitt & Samiei, 2011), whether and how all students are enabled to do so, and the value of the role in the context of higher steps on the staircase.

Actor

There is a deeper opportunity for students beyond merely providing views, for instance by collecting or analysing contributions. Course reps may be well placed to do this, given their purpose is to “articulate the collective experience of their cohorts” (Carey, 2013, p. 73). Course reps should undertake research into the learning experience and draw conclusions from that data. Indeed, course may have strengths in such research, enjoying a certain independence from the institution and possessing distinct perspectives from staff about what data might reveal.

As with the information provider, these processes can be criticised for their failure to fully represent the student cohort (Bols, 2017) and for their weak impact on quality due to a “tick box” approach (Carey, 2013, p. 73). As sparqs often finds when facilitating discussion on this step, the absence of a widely known course rep role description creates an obvious action point.

Expert

Progressing beyond the somewhat contained roles of information provider and actor is the acceptance that students have expertise: an ability to speak authoritatively about the learning experience in a way that “does however not diminish the importance of the teacher’s expertise in their subject area, but holds the learner expertise of the student as equally important” (Kettis, 2019, p. 9). By reflecting on this expertise, staff can explore how it can benefit their own role and the learning experience.

Students’ expertise can be especially valuable if their perspectives are not effectively heard through standard channels, from groups often but incorrectly called hard to reach (Marie et al., 2017). Indeed, the reasons why a student might never have been an information provider or actor may be the basis of their expertise.

Recognition of diversity is central to this, and there are abundant explanations of the importance of engaging such voices (Shaw et al., 2017). These include, among others, commuter students (Thomas & Jones, 2017), students from ethnic or religious minorities (Islam et al., 2019; Stevenson & Whelan, 2013; Stevenson, 2014; Jones-Devitt et al., 2017), postgraduate students (Kinash et al., 2017; Fung & Wood, 2008), work-based learners (Costley et al., 2011), and transnational students (Maxwell-Stuart, 2015; Maxwell-Stuart & Huisman, 2018). This expert role is also prominent in policy. In addition to long-standing equalities legislation, there are requirements in Scotland for institutions to develop strategies for engaging groups, including care-experienced students, users of British Sign Language, students from deprived areas, and students from under-represented genders (Scottish Funding Council, n.d.; sparqs, n.d.-e).

The expert shares similarities with the information provider in conveying individual experiences and with the actor in taking a more analytical role. But the expert sits higher on the staircase due to a richer task of contextualising those perspectives not just within learning environments or engagement tools but also within wider structures, policies, and cultures. Being recognised in that role is important, because while the information provider and actor should challenge staff perceptions of the learning experience, the expert can challenge staff perceptions of the wider institution.

Partner

The example activity of the diagram’s top step is “authentic and constructive dialogue.” This implies a conversation that is not brief, superficial, or reactive (a tempting

avenue at times of turbulence), but rather a richer engagement based on “respect, reciprocity, and responsibility” (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p. 2).

Authenticity suggests a role with purpose and validity. This is not a conversation enabled by a slight accommodation from decision-makers (as with “placation” on Arnstein’s ladder). Nor is it a one-way flow of information, however articulate. The authenticity comes because both sides give a full and honest perspective, engaging in “mutual empowerment among co-learners” (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019, p. 79).

Meanwhile, the idea of a constructive dialogue suggests building something new (whether simply a shared understanding, or an element of a learning experience or quality system). “Constructive” can be found within sparqs’ course representative training, as part of the “ABCD of Effective Feedback” alongside “accurate,” “balanced,” and “diplomatic” (sparqs, n.d.-f). This suggests that students’ views should not merely be instructional for staff but help to form a shared action plan, where students “shoulder a collective responsibility with respect to the outcomes of such processes” (Tanaka, 2019, p. 4).

Exploration of this level of the staircase allows both parties to consider each other’s roles in creating this authenticity and constructiveness and enables reflection on whether partnership is achievable for all students in all contexts (Bovill & Bulley, 2011). It can also raise the prospect that many students can be capable of acting as partners. Indeed, a well-engaged student not in a representative role could be a valuable partner, while an under-equipped student officer on a university committee could be merely an information provider.

Staff and students discussing this level should note that while the three lower stages of the staircase involve students contributing to pre-existing structures, this top step challenges those structures because partnership “can create liminal spaces within which power and exclusion can be deconstructed, critiqued, and potentially redressed” (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019, p. 79). Partners inherently have expertise, but an expert alone, even where their testimony is impactful, is still (like an expert witness in a courtroom) excluded from the decision-making space.

Finally, there is a benefit of partnership not being superseded in this staircase by ideas of citizen control (as with Arnstein). To introduce the idea that staff may become secondary to a dominant student voice could undermine a fragile shared space that staff and students might have worked hard to create. This suggests that the staircase is most valuable for staff and students who are exploring partnership together for the first time and who will value conversations that are based on, as the UK Quality Code for Higher Education puts it, “a mature relationship based on mutual respect between students and staff” (UKSCQA, 2018, p. 2).

CONCLUSIONS

By exploring sparqs’ student partnership staircase in the context of other comparable tools, this article has highlighted the multiple conversations that the staircase can spark. Beyond the individual questions at each level, the whole staircase can present important questions for strategic approaches to student engagement in quality. For example, can participants agree on the balance of all four roles? Which students should perform at each level? Does a student require to be at one step before they progress higher? Is the partner role durable, or time-limited to projects or terms of office? What staff approaches maximise students’ input at each level?

As stated, the staircase is many years old and an established feature in sparqs' work. This longevity means that evolving and divergent narratives have accompanied the staircase depending on context and the varying experiences and specialisms of sparqs staff. As a simple tool one might argue that the staircase lacks the scope for deeper analysis found in the comparable tools explored earlier. Nor does it capture the latest research into other roles, such as the producer, co-creator, or change agent (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019). Nor does the staircase directly mention specific roles students might play in quality, such as representative, committee member, governor, or reviewer. Finally, it does not explicitly discuss higher levels than partnership which, as already conceded, are challenging but important.

Staff and students may, however, find this staircase a useful prism for a first look at engagement in quality. It creates a discussion which, sparqs' experience suggests, is easy to begin and hard to stop. If those interacting with the tool critique it and create alternative roles to explore, then the staircase will achieve its objective of sparking ideas. After all, partnership is, if nothing else, a conversation.

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NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

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