

FOCUS ON: Professional Services Partnerships

Summary of Student Reflections



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Introduction

QAA Scotland's (QAAS) [Focus On](#) projects aim to help higher education institutions and students' associations with work in their key priority areas. This document is one of the outputs of the 2021-22 Focus On project: [Professional Services Partnerships](#). Focus On topics are identified from ELIR outcomes and agreed with the sector through the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC).

Following a sector scoping exercise, two project strands were identified:

- **Understanding methodologies and approaches to professional service review (PSR).**
- **Exploring, facilitating, and communicating professional service partnerships.**

The project has been undertaken in three phases:

Phase 1 - The production of a [report](#) exploring the methodologies and approaches to professional services review (PSR).

Phase 2 - Student reflections on PSR and partnerships, and the impact these have had on student experience.

Phase 2 involved a student focus group on PSR and partnerships. This document summarises the conversations from that focus group and highlights the key themes that emerged. On reviewing these conversations and themes, QAAS developed a set of reflective questions for HE practitioners and students to consider as they review professional services within their own context. These reflective questions, grouped by topic, are presented in this report, after each summary of responses by the focus group to the related topic. Additionally, these reflective questions have been collated into a single document which will be published on the QAA website alongside this report.

Phase 3 - An event bringing together institutional teams from across the range of professional services to explore how they might approach future partnership projects and/or professional services review. The event enabled sharing of some of the recorded content from the Phase 2 focus group which is available, together with a summary of the event, on the [QAAS website](#).

Methodology

A focus group was held to ask students a series of questions to establish (in their own words) their understanding and perspectives of professional services at their institutions. The focus group was held online on 21 February 2022 and was facilitated by our Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme Student Lead Ondrej Kucerak, Vice-President for Education, Aberdeen University Students' Association.

Students were given the questions beforehand to enable them to think about their responses. However, they were asked not to research terms they were unfamiliar with prior to the focus group, to ensure an authentic response. Ondrej Kucerak, acting as facilitator, was at liberty to expand on the questions during the meeting to illicit as full a response from participants as possible.

The focus group questions were:

- 1 What do you understand by the term 'professional services'? Would students who are not Representatives understand this term?
- 2 How do these services impact your experience? Has engagement declined during the pandemic?
- 3 Are you aware that your university (institution) is required to undertake a review of professional services? Have you, or others you know of, ever been involved?
- 4 How were/are your views sought (questionnaire/focus group)? Was the feedback loop closed, i.e. did you find out what happened as a result of your feedback?
- 5 Do you believe professional services work effectively in partnership? How do they?
- 6 What could be done better? How can professional services be enhanced, and activities be communicated better? What works well?



Participants

Following a short recruitment campaign conducted jointly by sparqs (Student Partnerships in Quality) and QAAS, nine students were recruited (in addition to the facilitator) from a range of Scottish institutions, at different levels of study, and a mix of Student Representatives (Representatives) and non-representatives.

QAAS would like to thank the 6 students who were able to participate in the focus group (the Group), for their considered and insightful commentary, and to Ondrej Kucerak for his skill at facilitating the conversation.

- Ondrej Kucerak, Facilitator, Vice-President for Education, Aberdeen University Students' Association
- Rory Harkness, Edinburgh Napier University - undergraduate
- Anam Abbas, University of Edinburgh - previously a Representative - postgraduate
- Amandeep Kainth, University of Glasgow - Representative - undergraduate
- Kevin Leomo, University of Glasgow - Representative - postgraduate
- Branislav Engler, University of Aberdeen - undergraduate
- Kasia Sadowy, University of Stirling - Representative – undergraduate.

All participants gave their permission for QAAS to publish this summary and outcomes from the focus group.



Summary of responses and reflective questions

Q1. What do you understand by the term 'professional services'? Would students who are not Representatives understand this term?

There were varied responses from the Group - some thought it was a discrete service to enhance professionalism of students or that it referred to staff who were non-academic, but generally were not familiar with the specific term. Generally, the Group could name the individual services that comprise 'professional services'.

The Group agreed it was unlikely that students who were not Representatives would be familiar with this term.

Reflective questions

- 1 When working in partnership with students on professional services projects, do students understand 'professional services' as a collective term and what services fall under that term?
- 2 When communicating with students about the work of 'professional services' to students, who is the 'student' audience – Student Representatives or non-representatives?
- 3 Are new Student Representatives familiar with the term, could they explain it to their peers?
- 4 Are your new students aware of how non-academic services are described?
- 5 Are students aware of how professional services can support their experience either as a singular service, or collectively, in partnership to offer tailored support?

Q2. How do these services impact your experience? Has engagement declined during the pandemic?

The Group were mostly positive about their personal experiences with professional services and the impact on their student experience, stating that they found it reassuring to know support was there if required. There was some reflection on the time it can take for an individual to receive support once a service has been approached and how this can be impacted significantly by the actions of one member of staff. However, it was noted that when support was secured it was invaluable. Careers support was highlighted as being particularly beneficial by several students.

The Group expressed there was a decrease in engagement with professional services post-COVID-19. It was recognised that institutions have tried to deliver the same level of service online, but ultimately it was felt that in-person and face-face interactions helped with effective engagement with these services.

Reflective questions

- 1 How easy is it for students accessing services to understand what they have to do and how long it will take?
- 2 How do your students engage with professional services in a post-COVID climate?
- 3 Do you celebrate successful services? How do teams learn about the successes and good practice of others, and how is this communicated?

Q3. Are you aware that your university (institution) is required to undertake a review of professional services? Have you, or others you know of, ever been involved?

The Group agreed that whilst they didn't know specifically about a PSR in their institution, it would 'make sense' to review processes and procedures relating to professional services. None of the Group had been involved specifically in a PSR. When the question was expanded to ask if any of the Group had been part of a review of an individual service or department, two students replied positively, but it was not clear to them if this was part of the institution's approach to undertaking reviews of professional services.

When asked which students should be involved in a PSR, there was strong support for Representatives and perhaps Sabbatical Officers. However, it was noted that having a non-representative student involved would be of benefit but there was an acknowledgement that identifying appropriate non-Representatives isn't necessarily straightforward.

Reflective questions

- 1 How do you identify which students are to be involved in reviewing services either as part of PSR or for other reasons (such as a collaborative project, etc)?
- 2 Are you actively seeking a variety of opinions regarding professional services through your Student Representatives or similar or directly through the student body?
- 3 Are your students/Student Representatives clear as to why and for what purpose their feedback on professional services is sought?

Q4. How were/are your views sought (questionnaire/focus group)? Was the feedback loop closed, i.e. did you find out what happened as a result of your feedback?

The Group identified a range of advantages and disadvantages over the use of questionnaires and focus groups. The Group noted that questionnaires and surveys can appeal to students who wish to remain anonymous. Additionally, questionnaires and surveys can appeal to users with a strong opinion at either end of the spectrum and so may not

provide the “average user” perspective. One student mentioned that feedback surveys were sent out after a significant delay which is unhelpful for the students. Some students noted the personal approach within focus groups enables dialogue to expand on topics in the conversation. However, the in-person approach can also put off some students from engaging. Another issue raised was that strong personalities within focus groups can tend to drive consensus, if the focus groups are not appropriately facilitated.

There was a general consensus that closing the feedback loop is very important; noting that learning of outcomes from student feedback can encourage students to continue to provide feedback when asked. Conversely, a lack of feedback can disincentivise students from providing their views in the future. The point was made about closing the feedback loop even if changes weren't made and providing a rationale for the decision.

The Group were positive about institutions communicating outcomes from a PSR via a 'You Said We Did' mechanism. There was a useful suggestion of using the outcomes of PSR to remind students about what services are offered by an institution and communicating the outcomes of PSR might incentivise future student engagement with reviews.

Reflective questions

- 1 Do you use a broad range of methods to solicit student feedback and engage students with PSR?
- 2 If you use feedback questionnaires to monitor and evaluate services, are they sent out in a timely manner?
- 3 Are your focus groups chaired effectively? Are dominant voices managed to ensure you enable all participants to express their opinion? Do you offer training or briefings to focus group chairs and participants?
- 4 How are approaches and/or opportunities to seek student engagement publicised as part of your institution's commitment to enhancing professional services?
- 5 Do you offer any form of recognition to those students who have contributed?
- 6 How do you communicate the outcomes of PSR to students indicating where changes have/have not been made as a direct result of feedback?



Q5. Do you believe professional services work effectively in partnership? How do they?

Generally, the Group were complimentary about how professional services work together, acknowledging it is apparent they strive to create a good experience for students.

A 'hub' approach where students can access a range of services from one place was seen as very useful. Generally, the 'flow' through hub services, i.e. the ease by which a student can get to the relevant service or support having made their enquiry at a central hub, was seen to be good. It was noted that students also had a responsibility to seek out information about services and support available to them as well as following-up from initial enquiries, where relevant

There was feedback relating to the fact that advertising and communication of services appeared to be better for undergraduates than postgraduates. The Group made the point that services were highlighted comprehensively during the induction period.

Reflective questions

- 1 When asking students to evaluate services, do you ask them about their experience throughout their student journey or about the individual services or support that have been accessed?
- 2 Is there parity in how different services are advertised and communicated across the student body? How is this evaluated?
- 3 Do staff in central hubs or equivalent have up-to-date training and are your students' association/union advisors part of that training?
- 4 Do your Student Representatives receive training about key services available to students?

Q6. What could be done better? How can professional services be enhanced, and activities be communicated better? What works well?

The Group mentioned different ways in which they or others are involved in enhancement activities. This generally focused on regular meetings and committees.

There was significant commentary centred around regular and timely communication of what services are available, beyond the initial student induction. The Group made the point that despite the comprehensive description of services during induction there is little ongoing communication beyond long lists of services on their VLE, which (in some cases) must be selected and added to their own dashboards. Postgraduates in the Group felt the communication of services available needed improvement for postgraduate students.

Some in the group noted that it would be useful for specific services to be highlighted (either at department level or centrally) at key points during the year, such as transition points and assessment; this would mitigate overloading students with information and pointing them towards what they need. The Group agreed that perhaps a monthly re-introduction to different services five minutes before a lecture could be a useful way forward.

The role of personal tutors and academic staff in signposting appropriate professional services was highlighted. These staff are often the first point of contact for a student if they are unsure of what services or support are available. In these circumstances, if this member of staff is unable to signpost the relevant service, the student may not look further. This raised the importance of personal tutors and academic staff receiving training to enable them to direct students to the correct services and to have an awareness of procedures.

Reflective questions

- 1 When did you last evaluate how students felt about the communications they receive about the services delivered by your professional services?
- 2 When and how do you communicate to students at all levels and modes of study about professional services available to them? Is this communication continuous throughout the year, at key points in the year, or just during induction?
- 3 Who communicates the information to students about different services - academic staff, professional service staff or both? How does the institution ensure that everyone involved in these communications to students is giving the same, up-to-date information? How is the effectiveness of the institution's approach evaluated?
- 4 How are academic staff and personal tutors trained regarding the professional services available to students? When did you last review the effectiveness of this training?
- 5 Is your VLE accessible to those students who may need to avail themselves of these services, such as those with specific learning differences?

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