



# Evaluating Impact



# Enhancement Themes

Scotland has a unique and well-developed quality enhancement framework (QEF), of which the Enhancement Themes are a fundamental element. The Enhancement Themes are a programme of activity involving the whole higher education sector in Scotland that aim to improve the student learning experience. They involve institutions, staff and students working collaboratively to share practice and generate new ideas for learning and teaching to improve strategy, policy and practice.

## The **Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience**

Enhancement Theme ran from 2017 to 2020. It encouraged individuals, groups, and institutions to examine how different forms of evidence can be better generated, interpreted, shared and applied to improve learning, teaching and the student experience of higher education. As well as the work carried out in institutions, there were several sector-wide projects alongside a number of ‘collaborative clusters’ that allowed groups of institutions to work together on areas of shared interest.



## A more evidence-informed culture

The Theme directly contributed to a more evidence-informed culture within Scottish higher education. Data and evidence are requested and discussed more than previously, and data experts are engaged in conversations with other colleagues.

“ We found that the wider availability of data is leading to an appetite for more data! This is good news because it shows that staff and students across the institution are becoming more literate and are thinking of ways they can contextualise (and query) the data they access. ”

*University of Dundee*

## Who is this booklet for?

Are you interested in enhancing the student experience, and evaluating the impact of this work? Then this booklet is for you, whether you are:

- a student, student representative or sabbatical officer
- a member of academic or professional services support staff
- a senior higher education manager
- working for a higher education sector body
- working out with Scotland in higher education

“ The legacy of this Theme will be the way evidence is used to inform decision-making and activity in the University and across the sector. The institutional work on the projects we have undertaken will continue and develop. ”

*University of Stirling*

# Theme activities



## Institutional activity

Varied and extensive programmes of work aligning with institutional priorities and [reported annually](#)



## Collaborative clusters

[Distance and sense of belonging - online tutor toolkit development](#)

Led by Queen Margaret University

[Creative disciplines](#)

Led by Glasgow School of Art, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and the University of Edinburgh

[Developing graduate support in Scotland](#)

Led by the University of Dundee

[Widening participation with lecture recording](#)

Led by the University of Edinburgh

[Learning analytics policy and practice](#)

Led by the University of Strathclyde

[Enhancing programme leadership](#)

Edinburgh Napier University and Glasgow Caledonian University

[Student mental wellbeing](#)

Led by Glasgow Caledonian University

[Beyond the metrics: The Intangibles](#)

Led by Abertay University



## Sector level

- [Upskilling webinar series](#)
- [Use of data and evidence in retention and progression](#)
- [Progression and retention data in annual monitoring processes](#)
- [Responding to the student voice](#)
- [Learning analytics discussion papers](#)
- [Students](#) and [staff](#) using evidence



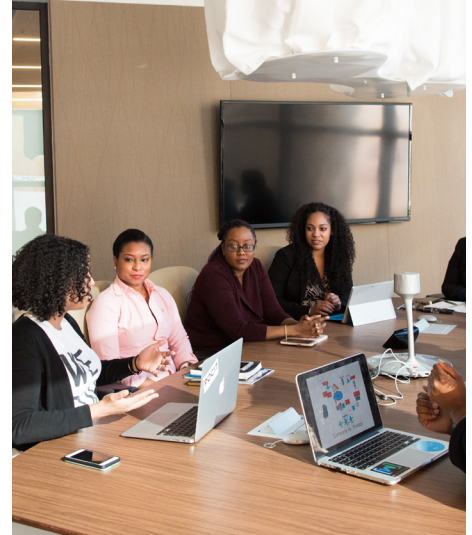
## Sector level - higher education planners

- [HE Data Landscape resource](#)
- [National Student Survey \(NSS\) analysis](#)

# Examples of achievements at institution level

## Data for monitoring

At Scotland's Rural College, the provision of data to staff for annual monitoring has led to more dialogue about evidence and improving the student experience, moving it towards an 'evidence-informed approach which is powerful and transformative'.



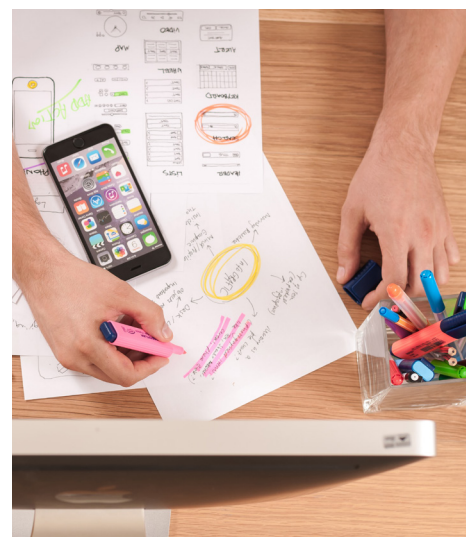
## Strategic planning

The University of St Andrews has prepared its strategic plan using evidence in data gathered from its work areas, using this to enhance the student experience in a more holistic way.



## Dashboard data

At Queen Margaret University, the development of a dashboard simplified the data available to staff, with data limited to just five items: age, gender, geographical, module attendance, attainment to date.



## Engaging with data

Edinburgh Napier University found that the 'Top Tips for Engaging with Data in Annual Monitoring' offer practical and useful advice for its review of the annual monitoring process.

## Annual monitoring

To promote greater reflection, Abertay University built the use of evidence into many institutional processes, including institution-led reviews and annual monitoring. Divisional-level reports were introduced into the annual monitoring process, enabling Divisional Heads to gain greater understanding of the data available.

# Examples of achievements at programme level

## Programme leaders

A strand of development activities for programme leaders has been embedded into Strathclyde University's Teaching Excellence Programme, an academic staff development pathway.



## Lecture recording

The University of Edinburgh's collaborative cluster focusing on widening participation and lecture recording influenced practice elsewhere - for instance, at the University of Aberdeen and at Abertay University.



## Online learning

The University of the Highlands and Islands has co-developed the 'Sense of Belonging in Online Distance Learning' toolkit, now a reference point within the sector.

## Data dashboard

The University of the West of Scotland has used the HE Data Landscape resource to support data dashboard developments.



## Data production

At the University of Dundee, the provision of data on progression and attainment to support annual module and programme monitoring has been systematised and standardised.

# Examples of achievements in student support

## Wellbeing

Scotland's Rural College has been able to use information and evidence from the Student Mental Wellbeing collaborative cluster rather than relying on anecdotes or informal observations.



## Academic advising

At Glasgow Caledonian University, a workshop on academic advising informed changes to the academic advising policy including more use of timetabled advising slots and signposting students to other services.

## Students at risk

The University of Glasgow's 'Student Engagement Early Warning System' was invaluable when students were no longer on campus, making it more difficult to spot students who might need additional support. The focus on a range of touchpoints and sharing the information with staff, helped to identify students at risk of withdrawing.



## Mental health

The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland evaluated mental health support mechanisms, identifying issues such as the prevalence of 'performance anxiety', and gaps in provision to support mental health, which informed the development of a strategy to meet the increasing need for support in this area.



## Knowledge exchange workshops

At the Open University in Scotland, shared evidence encouraged internal dialogue, discussion and improvements in well-attended knowledge exchange workshops on 'Wellbeing in the Curriculum', and 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion'.

# Examples of achievements in student engagement

## Responding to student voice cards

At the Robert Gordon University, the student representation system has been overhauled: ‘The cards helped us see what we don’t do well and celebrate our achievements...the cards really helped with this process’.



## Student representatives

The development of comprehensive handover documents at the University of Edinburgh will improve the quality of the student representative handover process, ensuring greater communication between officers about their roles and the use of evidence.



## Using evidence

The University of Glasgow created a ‘representation tool kit’ - a one-stop-shop for class representatives about the role.

## Course feedback

Guidance was given by the University of Aberdeen on how to personalise messaging to students, how to work with class reps to get mid-course feedback and to avoid survey fatigue and how to close the feedback loop.



## Student representatives

Glasgow School of Art used the Creative Disciplines collaborative cluster toolkit to help build greater confidence among staff and students in creating enriched impact statements regarding the value of a creative practices education at the School.

# In-depth case studies

The full report includes descriptions of four in-depth case studies with examples illustrating how the Theme has impacted on the student experience.

- Access to higher education - University of St Andrews
- Community and belonging - Edinburgh Napier University
- Assessment review - University of the Highlands and Islands
- Improving retention - Heriot-Watt University

To illustrate the case studies, one of these four is presented here in more detail.

## Improving retention - Heriot-Watt University

At Heriot-Watt University, Student Success Advisors (SSAs) work with students at risk of leaving the University. One of the key areas of SSA activity is to contact students who are identified as being at risk of leaving the University early. These students often are not engaging in their studies through poor attendance, non-submission of coursework or giving some other cause for concern, and being unresponsive to meeting invitations or emails from their personal tutor. These students are then referred to the SSAs who make contact with them, offer advice and referral to support services and resources as appropriate, and help them re-engage with their studies. This is a key area of joint activity between SSAs and academic schools.

**Short-term benefits:** During the past year, 300 at-risk students sought the support of the SSAs.

**Medium-term outcomes:** Of the 300 students who were supported by SSAs, only 20 of these subsequently withdrew from the University. Where an SSA is able to make contact with an at-risk student, they are unlikely to leave early.

**Longer-term impact:** Over the past year, the SSAs have achieved a global retention rate of 93.3% for these students, which compares well with the rest of the student population and is closer to the institutional benchmark. There is, however, scope for a greater number of referrals to SSAs, particularly at the Edinburgh campus. This would increase the impact of these posts in the future.



# Key findings from the evaluation

## The evaluation model

The evaluation of the work of the Theme used programme theory evaluation tools - an approach which seeks to identify how changes are expected to work, and then tests out whether this happens.



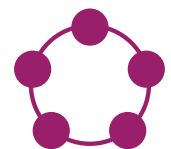
## What has been achieved?

The work of the Theme has made a significant contribution to **creating a culture** within the Scottish higher education sector that **utilises evidence** to enhance the student experience, and this in turn is having an impact on **student experiences and outcomes**. This is demonstrated through **qualitative feedback**, and through some of the **early metrics** available, most notably NSS data, in relation to **specific institutions or projects**. There is sector commitment to continuing this work to extend and **sustain** the impact beyond the life of the Theme.



## How has this been achieved?

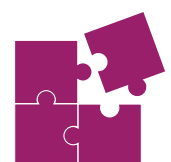
Staff and students have worked collaboratively together and with QAA Scotland to:



- make data more **accessible** to staff groups, student representatives and the general student population - for example, through visual representation, dashboards and tailored resources, videos and guides
- develop **awareness and capacity** of staff and students to access, collect and utilise data and evidence, through small-scale projects and through processes such as subject review
- collect and use new data and evidence to inform institutional and local **decision-making** - for example, in relation to the design and use of teaching space
- adopting an evidence-informed approach to **policy development** on issues such as personal tutoring
- build the use of data into **processes** within the institutions, such as annual monitoring and Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)
- improve the **quality** of the data collected, especially through student surveys, and the engagement with the evidence by academic staff
- develop **evidence-informed practice** impacting on access, transition, community and belonging, retention and student feedback processes
- **evaluate the impact** of interventions and changes.

## Influences on the Theme

The main report identifies and explores the organisational factors which influenced the work of the Theme, including: the importance of alignment with institutional priorities; the value of utilising existing organisational structures; potential uses of funding, including funded projects, student researchers and a dedicated co-ordinator; effective communication and engagement of staff and students; and increased evaluation capacity.



# Exploring the recommendations

We have used the report's recommendations to pose a series of questions to help institutions, sector bodies and higher education sectors outwith Scotland reflect on their current, and potential future, practice.

## Key discussion point

**How can you improve the use of evidence and data to enhance the student experience?**



## Questions for discussion:

- How can you make data and evidence accessible to different groups within your institution? What ways might be used to access and present information?
- To what extent can you improve the embedding of awareness raising, training and dissemination of evidence into meetings and networks? How can you use this to develop the capacity of staff and students to access, collect, and use data and evidence?
- How do you review and revise mechanisms for collecting and utilising data and evidence, especially feedback from students, to improve the quality of data and evidence available?
- In what ways do you promote collaboration within your institution, and beyond, to improve data processes? Which staff are involved and how do you ensure they are the most appropriate? How can you better involve students and their representatives?
- How do you allow sufficient time within any project or activity to measure longer-term achievement and impact, since many activities require staff to make changes that will subsequently enhance the student experience? How can you build this longer time frame into planning and reporting structures?

## Read more

Theme evaluation work in the full report - [Evaluation of the Impact of the Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience Enhancement Theme](#)

Theme's activities and achievements on the [Enhancement Themes website](#)

